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Italy

New turn for PRC

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In June 2003, Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC or "Rifondazione") general secretary, Fausto Bertinotti, announced a veritable reversal of the political line followed until then. The members of the National Political Committee of the PRC were surprised to discover the news on the front pages of the newspapers shortly before the meeting of this body.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359211.jpg>]

The turn came immediately after the announcement of the results of the referendum by popular initiative of which the PRC had been the main promoter. [1]

At the centre of the new orientation was rapprochement with the political forces of the centre-left, not only to strengthen the opposition to Berlusconi's neoliberal government, but also with the declared objective of reaching a programmatic agreement for the elections of 2006 and the affirmation of the PRC's willingness to participate, with its own ministers, in a government resulting from an eventual victory of the "enlarged" centre-left, which would be led by the current President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi.

The particularly reactionary and authoritarian nature of the Berlusconi government obviously renders necessary a PRC offensive towards other forces of the political opposition to persuade them to support the many social struggles, sectoral strikes and widespread discontent which are shaking the country and which mean that already - well before 2006 - the demand is raised for the overthrow of Berlusconi and an end to his policies of social massacre and war alongside the US. The strength and radicalism of the social movements, especially the movement for global justice, make this offensive on the social terrain possible, in particular after the big referendum battle which, although it ended in defeat, gained more than 10 million "yes" votes and unified a variety of movements and struggles, leading to a genuine crisis for the government. But the PRC instead tried to direct this force onto the terrain of institutional politics, through negotiations behind closed doors with the Olive Tree [2] offering readiness to participate in government without even formulating demands on the content of a real political alternative.

Unacceptable positions

Currently there is any number of declarations from the forces of the moderate left and the Catholic centre that make up the Olive Tree. These are obviously very different from the positions of the PRC. Some examples:

In December 2003 urban transport workers, who have had no wage rise in two years, led a campaign of strikes which was largely supported by the traveling public, in spite of new anti-strike legislation. Francesco Rutelli, leader of the Margherita (the dominant party in the Olive Tree), added his voice to those of the government in condemning this "wildcat strike";

Rutelli also said he was ready to discuss with the government on the pensions reform it has just proposed, which has been condemned by all the trade union confederations (although with differing levels of criticism);

The Margherita's deputies voted for a new law on medically-assisted procreation whose central axis is the recognition of the embryo as a "person" with legal status, which constitutes a basis for the abolition of the right to abortion;

Finally, while the world and Italian movements prepared for the anti-war demonstrations of March 20, The Margherita and the DS abstained on a vote in Parliament on the renewal of the Italian military presence in Iraq, affirming their readiness to keep the troops in the country alongside the US providing UN authority could be reestablished. This led to a serious rupture with the peace movement, which is demanding the immediate withdrawal of Italian troops.

Gains

To understand the current debate within the PRC and the political turn that the proposals of Bertinotti and the majority of the leading group represent, it is necessary to review some of the history of this party.

Born eleven years ago, primarily as a party of those elements within the Italian Communist Party (PCI) which had refused to follow its transformation into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), then the Left Democrats (DS), the PRC attempted a difficult “exit stage left” from the crisis of Stalinism. The combined passage of its break with the Prodi government in 1999 and its involvement in the movement for global justice made it an original political subject, open to the movements. In recent years Rifondazione represented a point of reference for important sectors of working and young people, while preserving in some significant regions the old popular implantation of the PCI. For all these reasons it appeared, at various moments of its history, as the instrument of a possible revolutionary recomposition, breaking with the reformist strategic heritage of the PCI and the legacies of Togliatti, [\[3\]](#) and undertaking a coherent anti-capitalist conception and practice.

The very concept (and the name) of communist refoundation indicate this capacity - difficult because it demanded of a good part of the activists and the leadership the ability to review their history critically - was reflected in the tasks of the party for a whole period. The task of refoundation, which the leading group of the party presented repeatedly as an objective to be attained, remains until now at the stage of theoretical perspective, with the party displaying neither the capacity, nor even the will, to really continue an organic process of strategic, political and organizational renewal. The PRC has thus always practiced a balancing act between “new” research that was not clearly defined, and the concrete persistence of old bureaucratic and reformist traditions. At every crucial political moment - particularly when the question of the government and its relationship with the social-liberal formations was posed in an acute way - there have been important splits to the right of the leading group, reinforcing the hopes of activists and sympathizers, in particular the young, of a qualitative leap.

The last congress in spring 2002 saw the most serious attempt aiming at redefining the political and strategic profile of the PRC, renewing the process of refoundation and rupture with the past.

At the centre of this project one could observe the following elements:

- the desire to break any link with Stalinism and the societies it created and even with any condescension towards these phenomena;
- the displacement of the centre of gravity of the party from institutional politics to social politics (challenging the old conceptions of Togliatti);
- the search for a path which would, through conflicts, movement, the development of a participatory democracy from below, allow the definition of a new project of rupture with capitalism and transition towards an alternative society; the introduction of the theses adopted thus proposed placing revolution on the agenda;

- the choice of the mass movement up to the end as a characteristic and innovative trait of the party as opposed to the old bureaucratic and manipulative party conceptions;
- the choice of differentiation and a partial rupture with the traditionally more conservative elements of the party.

Limits of the PRC

The impact of these theses was limited though the evolution and dynamic of subsequent events amplified it. In the last analysis, this related to unresolved ambiguities in the leading group itself. First was the difficulty in breaking completely and definitively with reformist conceptions. In particular:

- the break with Stalinism remained too general, a point of moralism, not based on a grasp of the true nature of the bureaucratic regime or the choices and the path of the anti-Stalinist currents;
- the analysis of contemporary capitalism and understanding of State was vague, if not completely erroneous, which led to successive political errors when the raw reality of the facts brought to light socio-political dynamics extremely different from the interpretations suggested;
- the break with Togliattism remained hazy, finally unclarified and unexplained to the militants present at the congress;
- the indefinite character of the strategic aspects of the hypothesis of social centrality in the construction of an alternative to capitalism, the revolutionary strategy of rupture with the system, the construction of another system of power and the self-organization of the working masses; this authorized the reemergence of the deadly combination of institutionalised reformism and gradualism;
- spontaneist and movementist features, masked behind the justified rejection of the manipulative role of the party within the movements, strongly weighed on the activity of the PRC and prevented the development of the activity of its militants in the construction of the movements; that finally provided polemical arguments to the conservative component of the party, eager to blame the tactics that had been adopted.

But in spite of these weaknesses, the real change in orientation, which has characterized the initiative of the PRC for some months, could only astonish and disorientate its militants. The abrupt turn decided on at the top and imposed by the central leading group despite the hostility of significant sectors of the party, represents in fact a rupture not only with the orientation of the congress but even with the cultural and political bases built over the past four years by the PRC.

It is a major reversal, a break with the radical tradition, which will lead to a modification of the nature of the party itself.

Whatever the conclusion of the next election - will a governmental agreement between the PRC and the Olive Tree really emerge? And, more significantly, will such an alliance succeed in beating Berlusconi? - the party will pay a heavy price.

In the first case, if the leadership pushes to the limits the consequences of its choices, the social rationale of the party

will be undermined. If, on the other hand, the dynamics of the class struggle or some particular political event interpose themselves and prevent its realization, the party will also suffer the side effects of this.

The scenario of an acute internal conflict and a crisis of the party is thus starting to unfold.

Objective difficulties

It is certainly possible to interpret this turn as the fruit of the difficulty encountered by the mass movement in making its fight "effective", scoring victories and changing a deeply unfavourable social relationship of forces. It is the fruit also of disillusionment, given that the development of the movement does not lead automatically to the strengthening of the party itself and the construction of a new alternative, broader than Rifondazione - in spite of its strong involvement in the movement, the PRC did not manage to increase its electorate significantly at the last elections. The electoral "stagnation" of spring 2003, like the defeat of the referendum in June of the same year, played a particular role.

By proposing a governmental alliance, Bertinotti tried to mask the difficulties of the party while placing it at the centre of political debate. On the media level the operation succeeded. But this was at the price of confusion inside the party. Significant sectors of the party - and not only those most traditionally related to the history of the PCI (which, at the time of the last congress, opposed the line of the majority through a series of amendments to the theses) - found themselves "naturally" at the side of Bertinotti, whereas other sectors, in particular in the middle leaders related to the mass movement, were very critical and disorientated, leading to disengagement or an activity limited to the social terrain. Within the youth organization, strongly involved in the movement, the new line produced more negative effects: a centrifugal dynamic and/or disenchantment.

But beyond the objective causes which opened the way to this turn, an explanation must be sought at the political level: faced with major political events the leading group, starting with the secretary himself, remained prisoners to reformist conceptions, which reappear every time the problem of a political outcome is posed by the class struggle. These conceptions go hand in hand with the bureaucratic practices of an apparatus that, although of modest size, has updated its moderate conservative dynamic. The alignment of the leading cadres of the National Political Committee (NPC) was impressive. It expresses a conformist conception of the party. The role played on this occasion by the old component originating in Democrazia Proletaria [\[4\]](#) was particularly negative.

Our orientation

Throughout the history of the PRC, the political current around Bandiera Rossa has tried to create the conditions for a real insertion of its militants in the activity of the party, seeking to stimulate class initiative and social implantation. Rifondazione appeared to us as the unique occasion and instrument by which we could move towards the recomposition of a new revolutionary political subject, through a complex process involving clashes, ruptures, experiments, openings and realignments.

We did not envisage a linear evolution towards a finished anti-capitalist force, but a contradictory process. Thus, during a whole phase, we had tried to build a broad and plural left within the party, with some successes at given times, but without these initiatives managing to become consolidated and offer a homogeneous strategic orientation.

The split of Cossutta's supporters in 1998 and the decision to break with the Prodi government, on the one hand and

the eruption on the political scene of the movement for global justice on the other, led to a leftwards evolution of the party, as seen at the last congress. For this reason we from the very start decided to support the process that began in 1998 and we supported the line emerging from the congress, pushing it ahead and to seeking to transcend its limitations. We invested our forces in the leading group, in a working relationship with the comrades of the majority, conscious that this was the scenario most favourable for the construction of a revolutionary party, but conscious also that advance was by no means ensured and that contradictions persisted.

The social movements

The change in political line of the PRC impacts directly on the movement of the movements, simply because the party had integrated itself into the "people of Genoa". This movement, confronted with its own difficulties of passage to a new stage of its history, thus sees these difficulties increased because of the PRC. It is undeniable, even if one cannot speak of an offensive, that the strong potential of anti-neoliberal resistance is always present. During the last few months we have thus seen the development of the partly victorious combat against nuclear waste; innumerable strikes in transport; the resumption of trade-union mobilizations on pensions; the resistance of the FIOM (the metalworkers' federation). Partial struggles and resistances exist in other sectors, like the movement for democracy and freedom of information. There is the pacifist sentiment shown in the Perugia-Assisi peace march as well as innumerable international solidarity initiatives. All things considered, objective conditions - the harshness of neoliberal policies, unbearable character of the sacrifices demanded, anti-Berlusconi impatience, the war - maintain intact the conditions which saw an explosion of movements in the period 2000-2002.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/359231.jpg>]

However these are struggles and movements rather than victories and there are still real problems at the levels of direct democratic representation and social self-organization. Because of the particular characteristics of the Italian movement - the Genoa days (2001) "filled" a political vacuum on the opposition and since then, the Italian movement has a "political" dimension more than a "social" one - there is a temptation to interpret the opposition to the Berlusconi government in strongly political terms. The turn of the PRC thus meet a certain assent in the leading groups of the associations and the movements which had set up the Italian social forums - such as the ARCI, Lilliput and even a part of the FIOM - and still more so within the biggest Italian trade-union confederation, the CGIL. On the other hand a strong opposition came from the more radical sectors, such as the COBAS unions or the social movement of the Disobbedienti. But this assent from certain frameworks of the social movement gave the illusion that the political proposal of an alliance with the centre-left, from the governmental point of view, would be an orientation making it possible for the movements to overcome their difficulty in obtaining tangible results. But far from increasing the efficacy of the movements - which initially depends on their capacity to determine their objectives in an autonomous way, to obtain independent structures and bodies of struggle - the result has been a dispersal of energies.

Where is the PRC going?

The turn of the PRC goes hand in hand with the will of the leadership to build with the principal European Communist Parties a "Party of the European left". This aims to build an alternative political subject on the continental scale. But it does so in an impromptu way and with aspirations which are primarily electoralist, while calling into question the work done aiming at building relationships with the anti-capitalist left, founded on the relationship built with the LCR of France, and by reproducing the kind of alliance resulting from the tradition of the "Cominform", between the traditional Communist Parties.

But above all it is an alliance of parties ready to make governmental agreements with the neoliberal left. The founding proclamation of this "Party of the European left" thus says nothing on the project of European constitution, accepts the possibility of an armed Europe and presents a moderate profile moderated on the question of the Stability Pact. The current phase within the PRC is thus largely new and full of unknowns. Our political current is honestly engaged in the construction of this party, without abandoning its political-historical inheritance, conscious that the agglomeration of different histories and experiences will require a thorough clarification.

Unfortunately the facts support this conviction. We are today forced to differentiate ourselves from the majority of the party and to take on the elaboration of a clearly alternative orientation, founded on the best features of the party in recent years, starting from the intervention within the movement. It will not be easy: the dynamics of the class struggle in Italy and the weight of the opposition vis-à-vis one of the most odious governments in Europe render this orientation - that of the united front against the right and the determination to build a coherent anti-capitalist left - particularly difficult. But it is the only way that deserves to be supported.

[1] This referendum aimed at extending protection against unfair dismissal to workers in small companies (less than 15 employees). See "[Defeat of the referendum](#)", IV 353, September 2003

[2] The Olive Tree is the electoral coalition of the centre-left, around social democratic forces (Democratic Left, DS, resulting from the social-democratization of the majority of the ex-PCI) and the Christian Democrats (Margherita...).

[3] Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964) was one of the founders of the PCI and became its leader after the arrest of Antonio Gramsci in 1926. He was a minister from June 1945 to May 1947. He published the works of Gramsci, giving them a reformist interpretation. After the 20th Congress of the CPSU (1956) he distanced the PCI from the Kremlin.

[4] Democrazia proletaria (DP) was a far left organization that joined the PRC at the time of its foundation. The militants of the Revolutionary Communist League, Italian section of the Fourth International, after having acted in coalition with DP for several years, had joined it while remaining a tendency and continuing the publication of their monthly magazine "Bandiera Rossa". The two groups joined the PRC simultaneously, but with different conceptions of the party to be built.