

Italy, PRC Fifth congress: Refounding Rifondazione

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At its fifth congress since its foundation in 1991, Italy's Party of Communist Refoundation confirmed its specific, indeed unique, character in the history of the Italian workers' movement. It would today be difficult to find its equivalent not only among the parties of the European left, but also among those parties which identify with the working class and socialism in Europe and other continents.

The choice of slogan for this congress - Refoundation - could at first blush appear as a tiresome cliché. In fact, it amounted to an admission and indicated a goal: refoundation had not yet taken place and it was necessary to undertake it now.

In 1991, when the party was born, it was necessary to reaffirm a primordial demand: to continue the struggle of the workers' movement under the banner of Communism. However, in spite of the good intentions expressed in the new party's adoption of its name, and in spite of the analyses and concepts introduced in the texts of the four congresses from 1991 to 1999, a refoundation in the widest sense of the word did not take place at the level of theoretical and strategic definitions. Still less did it take place at the level of the political practice and consciousness of a good part of its membership.

The PRC's subsequent political choices and divisions have been a striking confirmation of this.

The party's first major crisis came in early 1995 when, after the fall of the first centre-right government, the problem was posed of an eventual participation in the heterogeneous coalition led by Lamberto Dini, a former Berlusconi minister. On this occasion the party lost a majority of its parliamentarians and its national secretary Sergio Garavini, who had been elected at the founding congress. After the 1996 elections, the party descended into sterilising support for the Prodi government - something it paid for heavily in electoral setbacks in the following years. Then, in autumn 1998, Bertinotti, observing the drift of the centre-left coalition, proposed that the PRC abandon the parliamentary majority. Armando Cossutta, the president of the party, then took the initiative of a second split, even more important than the first. It was a further confirmation that an overall reflection on the strategy of the workers' movement in an anti-capitalist dynamic had not yet taken place. Neither had a reflection taken place on the nature of Stalinism and the problem of the transition to socialism.

Fausto Bertinotti should be given credit for understanding that the party risked finding itself in a dead end, foundering, indeed suffering an irreversible erosion. He decided to open a campaign against Stalinism and at the same time stimulate a strategic reflection on the basis of an up-to-date analysis of the fundamental traits and the dynamic of capitalism in an epoch of globalisation. In principle, it could legitimately be said: the very fact that a campaign against Stalinism is launched more than 70 years after the struggle of the first Communist oppositionists to the bureaucratisation of the Soviet Union, is revealing of the prolonged drift of the workers' movement, in Italy and

elsewhere. Nevertheless, as they say, better late than never.

Bertinotti's initiative is all the more praiseworthy in that it happened in a context where, at the international level, the reaffirmation of an anti-capitalist, socialist perspective remains difficult despite the growing contradictions of the system and the rise of new oppositional movements.

We will not go back over the themes raised in the texts submitted for debate at the congress. [1] We should recall that last November the National Political Committee (NPC) had adopted by a large majority, draft theses to which a historic minority had opposed an alternative overall text. [2] But the new reality had been the emergence inside the outgoing majority of a significant differentiation leading to the presentation of four amendments by a notable minority of the NPC, the national leadership and two members of the Secretariat. These amendments concerned the question of imperialism (the minorities reject the argument of the theses that the classical notion of imperialism should be transcended); the characterisation of the movement against neo-liberal globalisation and the relationship between the party and the movements (the minority argue that the majority blurred the centrality of the capital-labour conflict and slid towards a dilution of the party in the movement); the assessment of the history of the Communist movement (according to the minority, the majority's verdict was over-negative); the self-reform of the party (the minority held, in the view of the majority, an over-traditionalist approach). [3]

It would be abusive to characterise the partisans of these amendments as 'Stalinist' or 'neo-Stalinist'; Stalinists in the strict sense only represent a completely marginal fringe of the party. We could more pertinently qualify them as 'continuists', for they identify above all with the traditions and conceptions of the old PCI. It is on this subject that the majority text has often been the target of criticisms. More generally, those who defended of the amendments adopted different attitudes in the debate, with oscillations in the course of a single meeting; they have sometimes tried to minimise their divergences with the majority; at other times they have vehemently denounced the supposedly liquidationist tendencies of the latter. [4]

Stalinism and communism incompatible

At the national congress the different alignments did not change. It should nonetheless be stressed that Bertinotti has sharpened his critique of Stalinism, and advocated innovation still more vigorously. Replying to Claudio Grassi, a member of the outgoing Secretariat and a supporter of the amendments, he affirmed that Stalinism was incompatible with Communism. He also rejected the theory of socialism in one country and, in relation to the criticisms of Stalin made at the 20th congress of the CPSU, he recalled that other currents had opposed Stalinism much earlier. [5]

The election of the new NPC was marked by two difficulties: its size had to be reduced from more than 350 to 135 members - a completely rational reduction, but problematic - while respecting the statutory quota of at least 40% women. There was another complication: while the proportional distribution of seats between supporters of the majority text and partisans of the alternative was obvious enough, things were much more complicated concerning the representation of those who had put forward amendments. Finally, the list was adopted thanks to some draconian measures - like the exclusion of parliamentarians (although the presidents of the two groups will be permanently seated at all levels) - with 350 votes for, 120 against, and 12 abstentions (out of 549 who were able to vote). Bertinotti was re-elected secretary by the NPC, with 105 votes against 13 for Ferrando, candidate of the alternative text, and two abstentions. [6]

The majority who supported Bertinotti enjoyed an undoubted political success, which should also have international repercussions. Nevertheless, it would be a great error to underestimate the gap

between the adoption of a line by a congress and its translation into practice. Bertinotti himself stressed once again the persistent and grave weaknesses of the party. In addition, it is a negative note that, for such an important event, only a little over 30% of members attended their local congresses to vote. Moreover, our own direct experience allows us to note the extent to which the majority which supports Bertinotti is heterogeneous, leaving aside differences which have long been out in the open. So the majority is far from relaxed: all the more so in that this majority current only enjoys a relative majority in two of the four most important cities (Milan and Turin).

The renewal of the PRC embarked upon at the congress can only be realised on two conditions. The first only depends partially on us: this is, that the so-called movement against neo-liberal globalisation maintains itself, indeed develops, under its current forms or under other forms, which today seems very possible. The second condition is that the composition of the party changes substantially through the influx of the new generations. Recently the PRC has recruited many youth: in the near future, these new recruits must acquire a determinant specific weight, and mature in and gain experience from the mass movements. What is more, it is crucial that the youth are immunised against the insidious poisons produced by the perverse mechanisms of functioning which have subsisted, despite everything during the preparatory congresses and in the national congress itself. This is the key political-organisational question, which is in the last analysis decisive.

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* From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] See IV 336, December 2001, which contains [extracts from Fausto Bertinotti's report](#) opening the debate for this congress (the general line of this report was adopted by the majority of delegates) and [extracts from the resolution](#) adopted at this congress.

[2] This minority was also present at the 4th congress. At the 3rd congress it was part of a bigger minority, which also involved, supporters of the magazine Bandiera Rossa (Fourth International), based on rejection of support for the Prodi government.

Liberazione summed up thus the intervention of its main spokesperson: "Marco Ferrando put forward a clear rejection of any opening of the PRC to the centre-left. In his view the Olive Tree is only a different form of political organisation of the bourgeoisie. Only the emancipation of the movement from the Olive Tree could defeat Berlusconi: concrete results would only be obtained through radical struggle. The experience of Argentina refutes the categories of the anti-globalisation movement, which should not be presented as a myth. It is not about demanding the Tobin tax or advocating non-violence, but of starting from the counter power of the masses. An Olive Tree government would only be a new neoliberal government: the only government in which the Communists could participate is a government based on the workers and their power."

This current, which has chosen to marginalize itself in relation to the process of historic transformation in the PRC, allies a sectarian vision of the anti-globalisation movement with accusations against the PRC majority based on an assessment of the Olive Tree that this majority

in fact shares. Its draft resolution obtained 13.7% of votes.

[3] A much more restrained minority, concentrated mainly in Lombardy, presented amendments advocating a more flexible attitude to the Left Democrats (DS). In some cases, these amendments were also voted for by the partisans of the four amendments mentioned.

[4] A ruling according to which votes on the alternative texts could only be expressed at the level of local branches whereas the amendments could be presented also at the provincial level and at the national congress led to some rather disreputable operations: some did not present the amendments in the branches and were elected as majority supporters and then voted for the amendments at the provincial level, in some cases overturning the majority.

[5] The report which appeared in the PRC daily *Liberazione* left out these passages. This was not deliberate, but it remains the case that those who were not present do not know what was said.

[6] The calculation of votes for the amendments was complicated in that if as a rule the delegates supported them in their entirety, in other cases there were delegates who voted one, two or three amendments and not all four. In the vote for the NPC it should be said that the partisans of the alternative text voted for, their candidates having been included on the list on a basis of strict proportionality. The alternative text won 13.7% against a little more than 15% in 1999 (4,330 votes against 5,300) and the majority text 87.28% (of which around 25% were in favour of the 'continuist' amendments).