

Italy : An “invertebrate left” approaches the European elections

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Even though it is not without contradictions, the balance sheet of one year of the Berlusconi government is already quite heavy. Two laws voted between the summer and the autumn of 2008 have radically modified the system of primary education and cut the financing of universities, the goal being the definitive commoditisation of the education system as a whole. The action of the government has encouraged lack of safety in workplaces, precarious work and exploitation, thus contributing to the deterioration of working conditions. Civil servants have been the target of a real media and political campaign, accusing them of being lazy and privileged people and aiming to put in question the national collective bargaining agreement.

But it is especially the immigrants who are paying the highest price for the policies of the government, which is trying to maintain its electoral base and manage the economic crisis through transforming class conflict into ethnic and cultural conflict.

On February 4 last the Senate voted a set of measures concerning “security”, which introduces the crime of clandestine immigration, the possibility for town halls to establish “rounds” (organized groups of citizens who are supposed to control certain areas and to assist the police in their work), the obligation for doctors and medical personnel to denounce irregular immigrants who ask for medical treatment. All this is really in fact a type of institutional racism that meshes in with the racism and the xenophobia which are spreading more and more in society, as the economic crisis makes its effects felt.

It should be noted that the action of the government is based on a whole series of laws, on immigration, work and the education system which had been approved by the preceding Berlusconi government and which were neither repealed nor even modified by the social-liberal government of Prodi. On the contrary, the centre-left even made the law on immigration worse.

Obviously the economic crisis affected the action of the government. By means of a strong campaign in the media, Berlusconi is simply trying to minimize the extent of the crisis with regard to Italy, continuing to affirm, against all the evidence and all the latest statistics provided, for example, by the OECD, that “the Italian economy is in good health”. He goes so far as to maintain that the measures adopted faced with the crisis were just a form of social charity, while the banks and the companies received their financings punctually without compensation.

The crisis which is starting to have effects on people’s living conditions, as well as the strong student movement of last autumn, have partially affected the popular consensus that the government had. Since January its popularity has dropped below 50 per cent, reaching 44 per cent in March, while confidence in Berlusconi as Prime Minister remains above 50 per cent (52 per cent), compared to the triumphal 62 per cent of last October.

In spite of that, the government has shown itself to be capable of maintaining a fairly stable electoral base, as the municipal and regional elections over the last few months have demonstrated , in particular the regional election in Sardinia, a region previously governed by the centre-left, in which

the Right won.

Through the Berlusconi government, Italy has become the laboratory of an authoritarian liberalism, with partially populist features. It represents an attempt to respond to the crisis of the capitalist system by means of measures that are strongly liberal from an economic standpoint, combined with the reduction of democratic freedoms, civil and trade-union rights and the creation of a common sense impregnated with xenophobia, confidence in a charismatic leader and renouncement of collective action.

From this point of view, the founding congress of the big new party of the Right, People of Freedoms (PDL), resulting from the fusion between Forza Italia (Berlusconi's party) and Alleanza Nazionale (the ex-fascist party, whose leader is Gianfranco Fini, currently President of the Chamber of Deputies) represented a step forward in the project of the Right. Even though during this congress Gianfranco Fini tried to play the role of the representative of a more moderate liberal line, sending a discreet signal to the political centre and aiming to maintain a certain independence of the state with respect to the Catholic Church, the line which was approved by the thousands of delegates was that of a Right that is strongly reactionary and closely related to the figure of its leader, Berlusconi.

The ability that has been demonstrated by the government, and in particular by its leader, to maintain a stable electoral base, is directly proportional to the inability of the Left, as a whole, to offer a credible alternative and is obviously the result of the disarray and disillusionment caused by the experience of the Prodi government and the participation in government of what is called the radical Left.

During the last year, the Democratic Party led by Walter Veltroni has, in fact, conducted a suicidal policy of "soft" opposition, which led it to not even support the four-hour general strike launched by the CGIL (the principal Italian trade-union confederation) last December 12. The Democratic Party chose to adopt a position of equidistance between the three major trade-union organizations (CGIL, CISL and UIL).

This political line only encouraged the Right and worsened the loss of electoral consensus. After the umpteenth defeat of the party at the polls, in Sardinia, Walter Veltroni finally decided to resign. The new secretary of the PD, Dario Franceschini, adopted a vocabulary of stronger and more aggressive opposition compared to his predecessor, but which does not correspond to a change of political line.

On the contrary, the CGIL remains at the present time the only force of reformist opposition, still partially capable of mobilizing, as the big manifestation on April 4 demonstrated. The CGIL is obliged, from time to time and in spite of itself, to radicalize its opposition because of the continual attacks of the government, which aims to isolate it by refusing any dialogue. The result is that in the opinion polls taken in March the PD did not manage to go beyond 25 per cent of voting intentions for the European elections, while the voting intentions for the PDL reached 38.6 per cent.

In this context what is called the radical Left remains weak, fragmented and incapable of proposing a credible alternative, based on a break with the preceding policy of alliance with social-liberalism.

The defeat at the polls last year and the exclusion from the Parliament of all the parties of the so-called radical Left had sealed the failure of the project of building a new political force, the Rainbow Left, to which Fausto Bertinotti aspired. He took as his example the model of Die Linke in Germany. At the last congress of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), in July 2008, the line of Bertinotti's current, represented by Vendola (at present Governor of the Puglia region), obtained a relative majority, with 47.3 per cent of the votes, but lost control of the party in the face of an agreement between all its other currents, which gathered around Paolo Ferrero, current secretary of

the party and ex-minister of the Prodi government.

Ferrero, indeed, proposed a line of partial self-criticism in relation to the experience of governmental participation, criticism of the excessive institutionalization of the party and defence of its communist identity. It was a line, however, which did not challenge the political and organisational presuppositions that had led to governmental participation and which remains strongly ambiguous with regard to the relationship with social-liberalism, as is demonstrated by the participation of the PRC in a whole series of municipal and regional administrations alongside the Democratic Party. Furthermore, the fact that the new secretary of the party is an ex-minister, and indeed the only minister that the PRC had in the Prodi government, is certainly not a sign of a break or at least of discontinuity with the past.

The differences within the PRC finally led, on the weekend of January 24-25, to the Vendola current splitting off. During a national conference at Chianciano he announced the creation of the Movement for the Left, thus deciding to leave the Party. The extent of this split is not completely clear. The only certain figures concern the number of members of the National Political Committee who decided to take part in establishing this new political movement : 90 members of the CPN, out of a total of 281, decided to leave the party, which means that 47 members who had supported Vendola's current decided to remain, sharing the political positions expressed by their platform at the congress, but not the decision to split. It is probable that approximately a quarter of the members of the party decided to leave, in other words much less than the 47 per cent who had supported the platform at the congress.

The Movement for the Left does in fact propose to continue the project that was begun with the construction of the Rainbow Left last year, but with an even more moderate aspect. It is a project which abandons any reference to the history of communism, in its various forms, and undertakes a political recomposition which aims to put together a reformist force aiming to represent the left wing of social-liberalism. It will therefore be a force whose project and whose very existence are closely tied in with its relationship with the Democratic Party. It is on this line that the Movement for the Left has launched a new list in the European elections, called Left and Freedom, bringing together the Democratic Left (an organization resulting from a split in the Left Democrats, at the time of their fusion with Prodi's Christian Democratic party, Margherita, and its transformation into the Democratic Party), the Greens and the Socialist Party.

On the other side, the PRC also launched a broader list, involving the Party of Italian Communists (PdCI) and two small organizations : United Consumers and Socialism 2000 (an organization that also came from the Left Democrats at the time of the creation of the Democratic Party). It is a list which is based especially on the defence of an identity, aiming, in the future, to relaunch a project which refers to communism, but... in its Togliattian version [\[1\]](#), as demonstrated by the debate on the occasion of the anniversary of the founding of the Italian Communist party (PCI) which has taken place over the last few weeks in the pages of *Liberazione*, the daily newspaper of the PRC.

For both this list and for Left and Freedom the first difficulty which arises is to get over the barrier of 4 per cent, the minimum in order to have any MEPs, established for these elections by the right-wing government, in agreement with PD. Neither of the two projects has begun a debate around the mistaken analyses and erroneous choices which have led to the present disaster of the Italian radical Left.

Neither of them discusses the need to rebuild starting with a clear break from past choices, nor how to once again give credibility to the forces of the anti-liberal left, which have lost the confidence of their social base because of their participation in the Prodi government. This is an attitude that is not only suicidal, but also politically irresponsible, because another defeat of the Left at the next

elections will only serve to reinforce the disarray and disillusionment, thus contributing to the reinforcement of the Right.

It is an attitude that is well adapted, to borrow an expression used by Perry Anderson in a recent article on the Italian situation, to an “invertebrate left”, a product of the history of the Italian Communist Party. That is why Sinistra critica (Critical Left) had proposed two months ago to start a process of discussion for the European elections, with the aim of having a common anti-liberal list on the basis of some clear points : independence with respect to social-liberalism, starting from the discussion of the experiences of participation in the municipal and regional administrations ; a new symbol to testify to the will to signal a discontinuity with respect to the recent past ; a list of candidates made up of activists of social struggles and the social movements, with a visible presence of immigrants. In the course of several weeks of discussions with the PRC and the other interested organizations none of these proposals was accepted.

This attitude obliged Sinistra Critica to decide not to take part in the formation of a list which presents neither elements of a clear break with the recent past, nor elements of a durable strategy for the rebuilding of the anticapitalist left. Sinistra Critica will thus not have a list in the European elections, which does not at all mean that it will not conduct its political campaign, in collaboration with the European anticapitalist Left. It will on the other hand take part in the municipal elections, presenting anticapitalist lists on a line of a clear break with social-liberalism and support for struggles and for the social movements.

There is a positive element in this sombre Italian political landscape : the campaign for the establishment of a minimum wage, launched at the initiative of Sinistra critica, has succeeded in collecting 70,000 signatures. We now have to continue to exert pressure and to organize initiatives to oblige the Parliament to discuss this bill. Because we are convinced that it is not through questionable operations of alliance with various forces, which are quite simply aimed at institutional survival, that we can rebuild the anticapitalist left in Italy.

As in France, it is necessary to have a new project, a new programme, and new organizations rooted in struggles and able to go beyond the ambiguities of the past.

P.-S.

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* Cinzia Arruzza, a member of Sinistra critica (Critical Left), which split from the Party of Communist Refounding after it expelled Senator Franco Turigliatto who had refused to vote for the Prodi government’s budget for the war in Afghanistan) is a member of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Notes

[1] Palmiro Togliatti was secretary of the PCI from 1927 to 1964, as well as being a leading functionary of the Communist International in its Stalinist period