

Discord in Rifondazione over confidence in Prodi

Anti-capitalist left versus governmental left

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“Market friendly former Marxists”? This was the question the British weekly The Economist posed a few months ago concerning the composition of the Prodi government, made up of politicians originating from the old Italian Communist Party (PCI) and, to a lesser extent, Christian Democracy. Their fears have been dissipated in the last few months of legislature, with the deregulation of professional sectors and the general budgets of 2007, praised by the European Commission and the IMF.

The provisional balance sheet of 200 days of the Prodi government could not be more discouraging. ‘Deregulation’, withdrawal from Iraq according to “technical timetables” (the troops are still there), voting of war credits for the “peace mission” in Afghanistan, shipment of troops to the Lebanon, arms sales to ‘democratic’ China.

The jewel in the crown has been the budget for 2007, fulfilling the Maastricht orthodoxy through cuts in spending on health, education (schools, universities and research), municipal services, increases in military expenditure and so on. A policy which is incapable of destroying the material and cultural bases of ‘Berlusconismo’: increasing deregulation of labour, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and institutionalised racism.

This situation has certainly been helped by the change in orientation of the leading group of Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation - RC), once the spearhead of the European alternative left and nowadays trustworthy partner in the Unione, the government coalition which supports the ultra-neoliberal Romano Prodi.

This profound cleavage dates from the critical and negative balance sheet of the 2003 referendum on article 18 of the statute of labour (extension of union rights to companies with less than 15 workers) that was defeated because the turnout failed to reach the necessary threshold. This ended the priority orientation of RC towards the construction of the movements, after the “red bienio” of social mobilization between the G8 in Genoa in 2001 and the mobilizations against the war on February 15, 2003.

It was during this period that the 5th Congress of the party approved a critique of Stalinism (though not of the bureaucracy that is its material support) and decided on the investment of its political capital in the movements. At this time the famous “15 theses for the construction of a European alternative left” by Fausto Bertinotti, now president of the chamber of deputies, were drawn up. After the setback of the referendum, the hypothesis of a coalition government with the centre-left to electorally defeat Berlusconi won the day.

The 6th Congress of RC in 2005 formally adopted this political direction, towards the constitution of the Unione and the Prodi government mark 2. From this congress the idea of the “Great Reform”

also emerged, a coordination with those sectors of the “good bourgeoisie” ready to go “beyond neoliberalism” in “reducing the damage” of neoliberal policies to workers.

A project that has an important limit: “the Italian bourgeoisie does not have margins of redistribution or if it has, it prefers, nevertheless, a restructuring of “labour costs” and the cost of collective hiring, a revision of pension costs in favour of the development of pension funds and a plan of extreme deregulation. Reforms which are indispensable to keep up with the rest of European capitalism and international competition.

The Prodi government constitutes a privileged instrument for this project because it involves the unions in the theme of coordination and, thanks to the turn of the PRC, guarantees the absence of the only party that until now was committed to social struggle”.

In this political conjuncture, Sinistra Critica (SC - Critical Left) has emerged around the magazine *Erre-Bandiera Rossa* (Fourth International), presenting an alternative motion to that of the majority at the 6th congress of RC in March 2005 which obtained 6.5% of the votes. The activists who make up this current had united in October 1998 with the PRC majority of Fausto Bertinotti, agreeing that the PRC should not support the 1998 budget of the preceding Prodi government.

Integration in the majority took place at the congress of 2002. A radically different interpretation of the results of the 2003 referendum (11 million votes in favour of the extension of article 18) in a context of great opposition from the main political, union and media forces of the left, marked the first confrontation between this current and the majority of RC. SC resumed its autonomy in 2005 when Bertinotti made a turn towards the centre-left coalition and the “Great Reform”.

The 3rd Congress of Giovani Comunisti, the youth organization of the PRC, held last September saw an increase in the internal influence of SC in the party, up to 10%, thanks to the opposition of SC in the Congress and Senate against the war credits in Afghanistan (unlike the rest of the party) and thanks also to a partial cycle of mobilizations that has opened against labour deregulation (the Stop Precarietà! action on November 4), against big infrastructure projects - No Tav against the high speed rail link between France and Italy going through the Susa Valley, No MOSE [1] against the proposed sea barrier in Venice, No ponte (against the bridge to Sicily) - and against Prodi’s budget for 2007 (November 17) supported by RC.

The recent SC meeting in Riccione (October 2007) attracted more than 300 people from every region of Italy. The concluding motion of the meeting indicated an exit strategy from Rifondazione faced with the hypothesis of the party of the European left, a strategic project promoted by most of RC of a left government destined “to reduce the damage” and to maintain the “lesser evil”.

The elaboration of a programmatic manifesto “Anticapitalista! A critical left for the 21st century” for the next meeting in January will seal the formal constitution of the association Sinistra Critica at a national level to give an alternative political way out from the crisis that traverses the Italian left and above all the RC.

Appendix: The left and the 2007 budget

The Cannavó/Giordano debate on the motion of confidence in the Prodi government

Debate on first reading in the Chamber of Deputies on the motion of confidence in the Prodi Government with respect to the state budget for 2007.

Chamber President Fausto Bertinotti asked deputy Cannavò to speak in a personal capacity on his voting intentions.

Salvatore Cannavò (PRC-Sinistra Critica).

"Mr President, representatives of the government, I don't like expressing my dissent on the handling of the budget, dissent that has nothing to do with that expressed by the Right, eager for severe anti-social policies. My dissent goes in the opposite direction." The budget, beyond being sacrificed to the logic of "restructuring" and the Stability Pact, is distinguished by an enormous transfer of resources to the private sector, with a consolidated neoliberal logic. Fiscal rebalancing is neutralized by measures like the additional rate of personal income tax, an increase in indirect taxes, the introduction of the health ticket and cuts in funding for the city councils.

"In addition, that we await an increase in military expenditure, in a context of hard "re-cleaning", honestly seems to us scandalous. I will not vote in favour of this draft budget law and I will not vote for the confidence motion, not participating in the voting." I hope that this signal of alarm is received with a view to the discussion in the Senate. Among the people of the left, there is a widespread feeling of disappointment and disillusion, as was perceived yesterday [the November 17 actions against cuts in social expenditure in education, health, and so on] and November 4 [national demonstration against labour deregulation]. I believe that it is my duty to represent in this assembly, although in insufficient form, a part of these mobilizations. This is also a way to reduce the damage from an economic policy that remains distant from the hopes of those who voted Berlusconi out. "

Following this statement of voting intentions Franco Giordano, Secretary General of Rifondazione Comunista said that "Cannavò has chosen a trajectory incompatible with Communist Rifondazione". (18/11/2006) According to Giordano, Salvatore Cannavò, announcing his vote against the budget, "evidently chooses individually a way different from that compatible with Communist Rifondazione".

Replying Salvatore Cannavò said, "I am not incompatible with the PRC - I am coherent. (...) I dissent from the handling, so I will not participate in the voting. I do not feel incompatible with the party. Mine is not a gesture of rupture with Rifondazione, this is not the intention. It is a gesture that I think should maintain a coherent thread: in here as a representation of a part of the left that does not want this budget. With limitations and without presumptions I want to make this symbolic gesture".

NOTES

[1] The MOSE (Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico or Electromechanical Experimental Module) project is a flood barrier system, which uses adjustable metal plates that are raised from the sea floor to prevent water from entering the Venice lagoon when high tides are forecast. Considered too expensive, only moderately effective, and having a significant impact on the lagoon ecosystem, it is still heavily opposed by Italian environmentalists and many Venetians.

P.S.

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