

ASPECTS OF ITALIAN COMMUNISM

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WHETHER looked at from the point of view of politics, trade unionism or international affairs, the Italian Labour movement, has shown itself in the recent past, as the most militant and lively Labour movement in the capitalist world. Three facts above all have underlined its vitality; firstly, the huge gains which the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.) achieved in the General Election of April 1963; secondly, the continuation and sharpening of great mass struggles and the gains made by a million metal workers; finally, the role played by the P.C.I. in the elaboration of a strategy of struggle within the Common Market, and also its role in the international Communist movement.

I

In gaining a million votes and obtaining 25.3 per cent of the votes cast (the total P.C.I. vote was 7.7 million), the P.C.I. undoubtedly benefited from the dislocation of the Italian social structure produced by a period of extremely rapid economic change. A few figures show the extent of this change: since 1958, *four million* country dwellers have migrated to the towns; *one million* people have migrated from the underdeveloped South to the industrial North, mainly Milan and Turin; *one anda halfmillion women* have left their homes to enter paid employment.

However, these objective circumstances are not sufficient to explain the gains of the P.C.I. for it made gains in the areas of unprecedented prosperity of the North as well as in the areas of small-scale agriculture of the Centre, in the old semi-feudal and underdeveloped regions of the South, as well as in the new southern areas of development. The most remarkable aspect of the electoral advances of the P.C.I. is that it appears to have succeeded in providing a political and economic rallying point for groups with such diverse hopes.

Moreover, these gains occurred after the first eighteen months of the Centre-Left experiment, whose avowed purpose was, and remains, the isolation of the communists, and the demonstration, by way of reform, of the pointlessness of communist opposition and the capacity of neo-capitalism to resolve the fundamental problems of Italian society. The Italian Socialist Party (P.S.I.), which was associated with the Centre-Left experiment and with its propaganda, had ceaselessly emphasized, in its electoral campaign, that the communists were now "outside the game" and that the P.S.I. by playing a part, even without actual

participation, in the Centre-Left experiment, had obtained more in ten months than had been gained in the previous ten years. Consequently, a vote for the P.S.I. was "useful" while a vote for the P.C.I. was "wasted."¹

The elections of April 1963 thus became an important test. The Italian voters were asked to choose between the "revolutionary reforms" which the P.C.I. urged them to fight for, and the "reformist reforms" which the Centre and Left parties (Christian Democrats, Radicals, Social-Democrats and Socialists) promised to bestow upon them. They were also asked to choose between a Communist Party threatened with isolation, and a Socialist Party which proposed to become a government party and thus to gain access to the levers of State power, with all that this was deemed to entail by way of immediate and effective, even though limited, reforms.

The result was quite clear: the P.S.I. lost some ground in the percentage of votes cast, while the P.C.I. obtained the votes of disillusioned socialists, of young voters, and of many Catholics who had at last been allowed a free political choice by Pope John XXIII.

In order to understand the ideological attraction of Italian Communism, it is first of all necessary to appreciate that the P.C.I. is not a revolutionary party in the sectarian sense in which the word is often used. Nor is it involved in the demagogic exploitation of any and every type of discontent; it does not promise immediate revolutionary change and it does not claim that revolution would automatically resolve all problems, nor does it consider that the socialist régimes of Eastern Europe are appropriate models for Italy. On the contrary, it believes that structural reforms are the necessary path to the socialist transformation of society; that this transformation cannot be other than gradual and will only come as a result of prolonged struggle; that advances towards socialism are possible before the workers' conquest of the State, and that this conquest will only come about if the Communist movement is capable of co-operating with the Catholic masses, and provide them with the prospect of a socialist humanism in tune with their more or less conscious aspirations. The success of the P.C.I. cannot thus be interpreted as a cry of protest; rather, it bears witness to the attraction exercised on the Italian people by a party which offers it a new society, *qualitatively* different from the old, while the parties of the Centre-Left offer a larger *quantity* of material possessions.

The P.C.I. has always been the least Stalinist of the European Communist parties. It was the best prepared to draw the consequences of "de-dogmatization" and the end of monolithic Communism. It saw early the need of diverse methods of struggle and decided that the "democratic road to socialism" was the most appropriate to Italy. "Democratic road" must not be taken to mean only, or even mainly, the parliamentary road; but rather that the struggle for socialism

involves a struggle for the extension and deepening of democracy; and, conversely, that the struggle for democracy, in a society of monopoly State capitalism, can only be carried on in a socialist perspective.²

The originality of the P.C.I. is that it does not consider the struggle for democracy as only a tactical expedient. Even leaders of the non-communist Left who publicly profess anti-Communism admit in private the reality of the P.C.I.'s attachment to democracy. This attachment has found proof in the fact that the P.C.I. has declared itself in favour of a form of socialism which guarantees political pluralism; the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the form of socialist power is replaced by the concept of the hegemony of the working class. Also, the alliances entered into by the working class are viewed, in accordance with Gramsci's notion of "historic bloc", not as tactical conveniences but as genuine collaboration. This is described as "collaboration with new social groups, not only with rural wage-earners, but also with an important segment of the middle layers of producers, with technicians and intellectuals. . . . The existence of different parties in a socialist society corresponds to a new situation, in which different social groups . . . collaborate, each according to its own tendencies, in order to bring about a society based on labour, the end of capitalist exploitation, social justice and peace. It is only by accepting and elaborating these concepts that guarantees will be provided that the building of socialism will be a democratic process and a strengthening of democracy. . . ."³

The democratic guarantees which the P.C.I. offers help to explain the attraction it has for vast numbers of Italian intellectuals and a part of the middle class. But a different explanation is required for the fact that the bulk of Italian workers place more hope in an opposition party than in a socialist party which promises to "bring them to power" simply by association with the Government. The explanation lies in the fact that mass struggles since the war, led or influenced by the P.C.I., have more than once constituted a genuine popular counter-power, capable of blocking, or reversing, political or economic decisions and of dictating to the State measures which it had at first declared to be unacceptable. These struggles have deeply affected the character of economic and social development; and they have also convinced the workers that their power was greater when they fought themselves for their own objectives than when they relied upon even socialist members of unreliable and heterogeneous government coalitions.

The P.C.I. and the C.G.I.L. (the main trade union confederation, with a leadership shared between Communists and Socialists, and including a powerful farmers' union do not limit themselves to agitation over specific grievances. In regard to each question and conflict raised by economic or technical change, or the policies of monopolies and the State, the Italian Labour movement has managed to mobilize the masses for demands that combine three distinct though closely interrelated

aims: the immediate interests of the workers; the insistence on very concrete democratic (and therefore anti-capitalist) solutions to specific problems; and the demand for structural reforms in the direction of greater democratic control or workers' self-management. The struggle over these demands is thus made to reflect a "coherent and comprehensive political purpose," and is also made to suggest, on the basis of concrete needs, "a genuine alternative to Italian capitalism."⁴

In recent years, mass pressure has been organized for a genuine agrarian reform which would place regional organs of agricultural development under the democratic control of the producers; for the location or the development of new industries in underdeveloped regions; for the reconversion or reorganization of depressed industries; for the control by the unions of the classification of skills; for the extension of trade union power in the enterprises themselves; for a socialist housing policy and the municipalization of building land; for the socialisation of urban transport; and for many other such demands.

The strategy of the Italian Labour movement must thus be seen as involving a two-pronged attack: with regard to the immediate and specific problems of working-class life, it acts at the local or regional level, and at the place of work; it seeks to impose new solutions and to limit, by strike action or other forms of struggle, the freedom of decision of both employers and the State; and it also seeks to strengthen the opportunities of initiative and control by the workers. At the same time, the political struggle in representative assemblies offers an effective outlet, at the national and State level, to the popular forces, whose local representatives can develop considerable political weight, even though these representatives are in **opposition**.⁵

The reality of this popular power, which is the genuine personification of alternative policies, has often been demonstrated. **Amendola** does not exaggerate when he writes⁶ that the working class has constantly played a leading role in the development of Italy, and that it has shown its fitness to be the ruling class. It is mass struggles which have, among other things, forced the State to invest in underdeveloped or depressed regions, to develop the **engineering** industry, to reorganize and reconvert large enterprises due to close, to retain and retrain workers due to be dismissed, to create a vast metallurgical complex in **Taranto**, and to industrialize the mining region of Sardinia. It was the metalworkers' union in the C.G.I.L. which prepared the first scheme for the reorganization and reconversion of the shipyards, and the first plan for a series of steelworks.

This strategy of the P.C.I. is carried out from *within* the capitalist system, and not as a frontal attack against it, such frontal attack being in any case impossible in practice. It has limited objectives, among them the progressive conquest by the workers of the "centres of power," rather than the overthrow of the capitalist state by armed insurrection.

This strategy has produced the accusation, from the Chinese **Com-**

munist Party and others, of revisionism and social reformism. In answer to that accusation, the P.C.I. asserts that its strategy is faithful to the Marxist method, and that it is the only possible one in the Italian context, and also, up to a point, in the context of other European industrial societies which have democratic institutions.

As a matter of fact, the structural reforms for which the P.C.I. fights are in no sense conceived as a means of organizing and improving capitalist society. Italian Marxists, including not only communists but the left of the P.S.I., believe that it is necessary to put forward "intermediate objectives" which foreshadow socialist solutions and which are so clearly right that their necessity appears obvious to the masses of the people. Thus, the great struggle for a genuine agrarian reform, or for specific programmes of regional development, have mobilized not only Communist and Socialist but also Catholic workers. These intermediate solutions, though they can be achieved within capitalism, tend none the less to remove further areas of activity from capitalist enterprise and they could also help to reduce the latter's influence on State enterprise; they could also ensure that public enterprise was run according to economic and human criteria far wider than the criterion of maximum profit, and that democratic control should replace autocratic or technocratic control.' On such a view, intermediate solutions, far from helping capitalism, are so many blows against it: they affect its internal balance; they create zones of activity which infringe the criterion of profitability; they limit the field of operation of private capital; they sharpen and underline the conflict between the general interest and the interest of the monopolies. As a result, they also prepare the ground for new advances, make possible the invasion of new centres of power, and open the possibility of a complete conquest of power by the working classes.

II

From 1956 onwards, after several dismal years marked by apathy and defeat, the C.G.I.L. worked out a new strategy. It realized that it could no longer focus its struggle upon general claims in regard to wages and conditions. This was due to the extreme diversification of working conditions and of levels of wages, depending on particular conditions in firms or sectors of industry. Furthermore, an unrelenting war against the unions had greatly reduced the number of militant workers.

In order to regain its influence the C.G.I.L. was therefore driven to change its methods and aims, to concern itself with new and qualitative needs, particularly of young workers. In addition to its traditional preoccupations, it had to take account of a whole process of alienation arising from the relations of production in modern large scale industry.

The C.G.I.L. set off inquiries and discussions in the factories. It found widespread discontent, particularly among young workers, against the

oppressive and arbitrary attitude of employers, on such matters as conditions of apprenticeship, the determination of work speeds, payment for piece-work, the organization of production, etc. The C.G.I.L. therefore decided to decentralize its objectives and to encourage union branches in the factories to formulate specific demands on the basis of local conditions. It was only after these local grievances and demands had been brought to light that it felt able to formulate a general strategy whose major aims and policies encompassed a great diversity of demands.

The first application on a really major scale of its strategy was the strike of about a million engineering workers, which ended in February 1963, after forty-two days of strike spread out over nine months, according to an "on and off" policy previously used by electrical workers. This policy, designed to demoralize the employers and to give the workers an awareness of their power while enabling them to continue their fight indefinitely, entails working in the morning and striking in the afternoon (or vice versa) for an indefinite period of time; alternatively, as did the electricians, one hour's work is followed by one hour of strike followed by another hour of work and so on. The workers thus earn half their salary but completely disorganize production and inflict greater losses upon the employers than would be the case if the factories closed down completely. (The total number of working hours lost amounted to 350 million.)

The purpose of the strike, whose principal theoreticians were Vittorio Foa and Bruno Trentin,⁹ was twofold: firstly, there were immediate general economic demands, such as a general increase in basic wages (increases of sixteen per cent, and then again of ten to twelve per cent were won), equal pay for equal work (young women workers got an increase of up to forty per cent), and the reduction in working time without loss of wages (a reduction of three hours a week was obtained); secondly, demands were put forward for an increase in the workers' power: e.g. the recognition of the union as the sole representative of the workers, the extension of the rights and powers of the union in the factories, including the right to influence the running of the factory.

The employers expressed willingness to negotiate on the first set of demands as early as September 1962: their hope was that they would thus be able to break the strike, by seeming to give way over the specific economic demands which had been put forward. This manoeuvre completely failed: the workers continued to fight for the second set of demands despite the immediate wage increases which were offered by many employers. Indeed, a general four-hour strike of all wage-earners (6 million workers) was successfully launched in support of these demands on 8 February 1963. The employers then capitulated.

The national agreement for the metal industry, signed on 18 February 1963, greatly extended the union's powers. In particular, it brought within the province of the union all the main aspects of the relations of

work, with powers of negotiation and control. This includes such matters as the classification of skills, work speeds, rates of pay for piece-work, and the organization of production. By this means, the union gets the chance, even if it is still a limited chance, "consciously to influence the rapidity and extent of technical changes, and the rhythm, extent and direction of investment"; furthermore, it acquires an element of control in the training and promotion of workers, in the division of labour, in the distribution of work within the enterprise. A first step is thus made towards the control by the workers of their own labour, the labour they sell; they thus acquire the power, even though it is still a limited power, to "determine themselves the quantitative and qualitative nature and character of their work"; a breach is thus made in the arbitrary character of the relations of production.⁹

The national agreement also initiates the periodic negotiation of a "productivity bonus," which represents eight to twenty per cent of the annual wage, and which allows the union "to control periodically variations in productivity, to consider the technological changes taking place in the enterprises, to make these changes enter into negotiations over productivity bonuses, and to make its influence felt in all the decisions which affect wage rates." The union thus becomes able to invade the decision-making domain of capitalist enterprise, and to make the union's views felt "on the major problems of development and economic policy, on the question of structural reform of the economy and on the institutional reforms which this demands."¹⁰

This "counter-power" is still, for the most part, in its early stage of development; but it can be made to constitute a means to the achievement of "democratic planning," antagonistic to the criterion of private profit and to the kind of capitalist planning which subordinates wages to productivity and profit.

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the trade union movement is undoubtedly jeopardized by the P.S.I.'s participation in a coalition government. The great trade union struggles of 1962-63 were characterized by the united action of the three trade union bodies—the C.G.I.L., which is by far the most powerful trade union organization, the C.S.I.L. (Catholic), and the U.I.L. (Social-Democrat). Socialist participation in a government where socialists play a subordinate role can only create tensions within the C.G.I.L. and also between the latter and the two other unions, particularly if the P.S.I. accepts the policy of "stabilisation" and "wage restraint" which is advocated by the other parties in the coalition.¹¹

III

The P.C.I. overcame more rapidly than most other European communist parties the crisis engendered by the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. It was the first to draw the lessons of the crisis for

the world Communist movement. As a result, it was also better prepared to face the new crisis provoked in the Communist movement by the Sino-Soviet conflict and the *détente* between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Even before the 20th Congress, the P.C.I. had felt that the monolithic direction of the Communist movement was no longer appropriate. Revolution cannot be exported. Victory cannot be won by outside intervention. The strategy of each Communist Party must therefore be autonomous and adapted to national circumstances. It must rest, in the struggle for socialism, on broad alliances. These alliances are of course made easier by the end of the Cold War; they will be made easier still by the end of bloc politics. Everything which contributes to an easing of international tensions and the dissolution of military blocs contributes to national autonomy, and also therefore to the freedom of action of the socialist forces and to the possibility of a peaceful advance towards socialism.

Against Chinese attacks on its supposed revisionism, and also against those who think of the countries of the socialist bloc as the only genuine carriers of the world revolution, the P.C.I. has maintained that none of the forces which fight for revolution, on three different fronts and at three historically and economically different levels, can be subordinated one to the other; nor should any one of them be considered more important than the other: "We believe it is a mistake," the P.C.I. has said, "to subordinate the fate and the development of the colonial revolutions to the victory of the metropolitan working classes; we also believe it is a mistake to expect the victory of socialism in the world from the sole economic advances of the socialist camp. But we find equally wrong the view according to which the movements of national liberation are the axis on which the world revolution revolves. . . . A strategy based on the notion that imperialism may be defeated by the sole erosion of its colonial positions is a faulty strategy, which fails to attack imperialism at the root."¹²

The P.C.I. therefore advocates for the international Communist movement a discriminating and decentralized strategy, which respects the full autonomy of the national movements and only brings them together at the level of common principles and common perspectives, of proletarian solidarity and internationalism. "The only unity which is meaningful, realistic and necessary," the P.C.I. has also said, "is *unity on the basis of diversity and of autonomy*. . . . This means that each party is only responsible before its own people for its own policy and for the contribution it makes to the general direction and advance of the whole movement; and that it cannot feel that it shares direct responsibility for every attitude and every action of the other parties."¹³

As a result, the P.C.I. has not simply aligned itself behind the U.S.S.R. in its dispute with China. It has on occasion found it necessary to criticize the way in which the debate has been carried on, and also,

for instance, the fact that ideological differences between parties have been allowed to affect relations between socialist states.

Even earlier, the P.C.I. had already adopted positions different from those of the Soviet and other Communist parties—for instance in relation to the Common Market. Neither in relation to particular areas (e.g. Western Europe) nor in relation to the world as a whole, does the P.C.I. consider as appropriate strategies rigidly integrated from above. On the other hand, it does believe that the co-ordination of national strategies and collaboration with other parties (communist or not) by way of bilateral consultations is necessary, particularly in Western Europe where the search for a democratic alternative to capitalist integration must encompass all socialist forces.

On the international as well as on the domestic plane, the end of monolithic Stalinism and the diversification of the methods of struggle should make possible a policy of dialogue and broad alliances. There no longer exists a valid reason, for European socialist forces, to refuse collaboration, both on a trade union and political plane, with Italian Communism, for the purpose of building a Europe free from military blocs and moving towards its own specific and original form of socialism.

(Translated by Charles Posner)

NOTES

1. The P.S.I. was divided into three tendencies. Their respective strength was reflected in the composition of the 101-member Central Committee. The Central Committee elected at the 35th Congress of the Party at the end of October 1963, included forty-two representatives of the left, led by Basso, Foa and Vecchietti, sixteen representatives of the group led by Riccardo Lombardi, and forty-two for the right, led by Pietro Nenni.
The great majority of trade union leaders (C.G.I.L.) belonged to the left wing. Santi, the socialist General Secretary of the C.G.I.L. belongs to the Lombardi group.
2. See the *Theses* of the 10th Congress of the P.C.I. (December 1962), particularly Part IV, 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Alfredo Reichlin, *Rinascita*, 12 October 1963.
5. Italy lends itself to this strategy because of the nature of its Constitution and of the number of *centres of power*: regional assemblies and authorities, which only exist however in a few peripheral regions, such as Sicily, despite the fact that the Constitution makes provision for them; regional organisms of industrial and agricultural development; co-operative organisations backed by the State; city councils; state enterprises. The democratic control of these *centres of power* would allow the working classes the exercise of a large degree of power *vis-à-vis* private capitalism and even the State. The popularity of the theory of "dual power" and the view the P.C.I. holds on the democratic conquest of power by the workers are to a large extent based upon the belief in the effective use of these *centres of power*.
6. Giorgio Amendola, "Lutte des Classes et Développement Economique depuis la Libération" in *Tendenze del Capitalismo Italiano* (Rome, 1962), French translation in *Temps Modernes*, no. 196-7.

7. The numerous industrial enterprises controlled by the Italian State are run without much co-ordination, according to strict capitalist orthodoxy, and so as to serve the needs of private enterprise.
8. Foa is a secretary of the C.G.I.L. and a former member of the Central Committee of the P.S.I.; Trentin is general secretary of the F.I.O.M., the metal workers' union affiliated to the C.G.I.L., and he is also a member of the Central Committee of the P.C.I.
9. See B. Trentin, "Politica Sindicale e autonomia del Sindacato," in *Politica ed Economia*, January-February 1962. This is a basic document for the understanding of Italian trade union strategy. There is a French translation in *Sociologie du Travail* (Paris), 2/1962; see also V. Foa, *Problemi del Socialismo*, 3/63 and 6/63, and "Politica Salariale e Sviluppo Economico," in *Economia e Sindacato*, 1/61.
10. B. Trentin, *op. cit.*
11. In January 1964, the left-wing of the P.S.I. broke away from their Party, whose right and centre wings had deprived them of all influence in policy decisions. They founded a new Party, the P.S.I.U.P., to which 25 members of Parliament and 8 senators have adhered. Their secretary is Vecchietti.
12. Declaration of the Central Committee of the P.C.I., 24 October 1963, published in *L. Unita*, 26 October 1963.
13. *Zbid.*