

The collapse of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy

The price of opportunism

By Peter Schwarz
25 April 2008

The debacle of the Rainbow Left in the recent Italian parliamentary elections will go down in political textbooks as a prime example of the price of opportunism. The Rainbow electoral alliance consisting of four separate parties lost three quarters of its electoral support within the space of just two years.

In the election held in 2006, Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), the Italian Communist Party (PdCI) and the Greens were able to win together a total of around 4 million votes. In the election held on April 14 and 15 of this year, the same parties and the Democratic Left, a split-off from the former Left Democrats, won a total of just 1.1 million votes—insufficient for any representation in the Italian parliament. This means that for the first time since the downfall of fascism, there is no longer a party that associates itself with the communist tradition in the Italian parliament.

In the two years separating the two ballots, the components of the Rainbow Left were active partners in the government of Romano Prodi, supporting policies that in every respect were directed against the interests of ordinary people.

Prodi reduced Italy's current budget deficit from 4.6 percent of gross domestic product to 1.9 percent with a rigid savings programme. He was applauded by Italian and European financial circles while the working class paid the bill in the form of declining real wages and a rise in retirement age.

In foreign policy, Prodi left Italian troops stationed in Afghanistan, sent additional Italian soldiers into Lebanon, backed the expansion of the American military base in Vicenza in the face of huge public opposition and drastically increased military spending.

Prodi also intensified attacks on basic democratic rights. His government passed a law that authorised the Italian security forces to deport any foreigner assessed to be a danger to public security. The decree is so vaguely worded as to award virtually arbitrary powers to the forces of the state.

All these measures were supported by the Rainbow Left with the argument that this was the only way to prevent Silvio Berlusconi from returning to power. While the most right-wing elements in the Prodi government dictated policy, the so-called "left" buckled down and stabbed their own supporters in the back.

Claudio Grassi, who represented Rifondazione in the Senate, recently conceded: "Out of loyalty and to prevent the fall of the government, the left voted in favour of all those measures, which it did not support, while the forces in the centre frequently imposed their policy (even if it had not been agreed in the programme)."

The massive rejection of the Rainbow Left by the electorate is its

reward for such unbridled opportunism, for its spinelessness and readiness to dump election promises in favour of a well-paid government post. The attitude of Fausto Bertinotti, who moved two years ago from the leadership of Rifondazione into the third-ranked public office in Italy, the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies, is typical in this respect.

Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, the leader of the Greens who resigned from his post following the election debacle, was forced to admit: "We paid a heavy price for our participation in the Prodi government. We were enmeshed in the institutional bureaucracy, and the voters punished us accordingly."

Initial analyses of the election result show that around half of those who formerly voted for the Rainbow Left parties stayed at home in the April election and did not vote. This group is largely responsible for the decrease in voter turnout, which dropped from 83 to 80 percent. Forty percent of former Rainbow supporters voted in favour of Walter Veltroni's Democratic Party, with just 5 percent switching to support the right-wing camp led by Silvio Berlusconi.

The decline in support for the Rainbow Left was especially high within working class layers. This is confirmed by a glimpse at the traditionally left Mirafiori suburb in the northern city of Turin. Many employees of the Fiat auto company live in this suburb. In 1996, the parties that formed the Rainbow Left won 5,865 votes; in 2006, 3,657; and in this year's election, just 1,124.

A speaker for an oppositional current in Rifondazione, Leonardo Masella, concluded: "In the numerous reports and background articles of the last few days many workers have made absolutely clear that they wanted to punish the leadership of Rifondazione Comunista and its leading candidate Fausto Bertinotti, who they feel has betrayed them."

While, in the immediate sense, the right wing led by Silvio Berlusconi was able to profit from the collapse of the Rainbow Left and emerged with a solid majority, this collapse also reflects an important political change among workers and young people. They have had enough of pseudo-leftist parties and politicians, who make radical speeches and inflated promises in their election campaigns only to conduct disgraceful betrayals once in office.

They no longer believe it is possible to change things within the framework of the existing institutions and parties and are seeking a perspective that allows them to intervene in political life as an independent force. This will become more manifest in the coming class conflicts that will inevitably result from the country's social crisis and the impact of the international financial crisis.

Italy's ruling elite and its more left-wing representatives are concerned about such a prospect. Since the overthrow of Mussolini they have relied on the Communist Party (PCI) to keep the working class under control. After the downfall of the fascist dictator, the Italian bourgeoisie was only able to restore its rule with the support of the PCI. PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti joined the Italian government between 1944 and 1946. He was responsible for disarming the Resistenza, the anti-fascist resistance, and in his capacity as minister of justice pushed through a sweeping amnesty for crimes committed by the fascist dictatorship.

During the Cold War, the PCI was forced into opposition, but when a wave of militant strikes and youth rebellions rocked the country in the late 1960s, the party vigorously opposed this movement and later sought (unsuccessfully) to form a coalition—a “historical compromise”—with the ruling Christian Democrats.

Today, former cadres of the PCI form the backbone of the Democratic Party, which sees the American Democratic Party as its role model and has dropped even the vaguest pretensions to socialist politics. The role of the old PCI—combining bourgeois politics with “communist” symbolism—was assumed by Rifondazione Comunista, which emerged in 1991 from a wing of the PCI and has absorbed large parts of the petty-bourgeois radical left into its ranks.

The election debacle has unleashed a bitter debate over the future of Rifondazione. Its long-time leader Fausto Bertinotti is in a minority. He intended to form a new party out of the Rainbow Alliance, ditching all links to the communist heritage. Last weekend, his proposal was voted down at a meeting of the party's national political committee, with 70 members voting for and 98 against him.

Bertinotti had already resigned from his party posts on the evening of the election. His resignation has since been followed by that of the party's secretary, Franco Giordano, and the entire national secretariat. Until a party congress takes place in the summer, the minister of social solidarity in Prodi's government, Paolo Ferrero, has been selected as provisional head of the party. The fact that Ferrero leads the opposition against Bertinotti speaks volumes about its political nature. As the only member of Rifondazione to hold a ministerial post in the Prodi government, Ferrero shares full responsibility for that government's policies.

In an interview with *l'Unità*, the paper of the Democratic Party, Ferrero nevertheless rejects any personal responsibility for his party's disastrous result in the election. Instead, he said that the strategy of participating in government had collapsed because “the forces of the moderate left”—i.e., the left democrats—did not stick to their programme and the trade unions had insufficiently defended their own interests. By trade unions, Ferrero means first and foremost its members—thereby blaming the working class for his own failures.

Also opposed to the dissolution of Rifondazione into a “rainbow” party are more than a hundred intellectuals who signed an appeal drafted by philosophy professor Domenico Losurdo. This group wants to revive the traditions of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party, which has played such a vital role for the Italian ruling class in the past.

The appeal calls for the “reconstruction of a strong and unified communist party corresponding to the demands of the times,” based on a unification of Rifondazione with the Italian Communists (PdCI). The latter group, led by veteran Stalinist Armando Cossutta, had broken away from Rifondazione 10 years earlier. In an interview with the German newspaper *Junge Welt*, Losurdo expressed his alarm over the fact that “three Trotskyist lists” had stood for election and “intercepted votes.” For his part, Losurdo sees himself in the tradition

of Togliatti.

Some of the groups, which have operated as a left cover for Rifondazione over many years, have already quit the sinking ship prior to the elections. Two of them, the Communist Workers Party (PCdL) and the Critical Left (Sinistra critica), put up their own lists of candidates in the election. In total they received nearly 400,000 votes—i.e., a third of the vote for the Rainbow Left.

The Critical Left is led by members of the Pabloite United Secretariat, whose long-time leader in Italy, Livio Maitan, was a member of the executive committee of Rifondazione for 10 years and, until his death in 2004, served as one of Bertinotti's closest advisors. Several members of this tendency were elected to parliament in 2006 on the Rifondazione ticket and supported the government. Only in December of last year, in the wake of growing conflicts with the leadership of Rifondazione, did they constitute the Critical Left as an independent organisation.

Like their affiliated French organisation, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), the Critical Left is intent on establishing a party to prevent a new generation from turning towards revolutionary Marxism. It strictly refuses to draw any lessons from the debacle of Rifondazione and its own role as its left cover. By so doing, the Critical Left is preparing for the next calamity.

In his introductory report to the founding conference of the Critical Left, Salvatore Cannavò complacently declared that “A cycle is complete and an experience is coming to an end”—as if there were nothing to be learned from this experience. He stated in all seriousness that Rifondazione had represented the interests of the working class for more than 10 years and only stopped playing an anti-capitalist role when it entered government two years ago. Cannavò sits in the Chamber of Deputies for Rifondazione and is a leading member of the United Secretariat.

The PCdL, which was set up in 2006, is as equally implausible as the Critical Left. Its leader, Marco Ferrando, has gone through a host of organisations, including for some time the United Secretariat, and was a member of Rifondazione for 15 years before breaking with the party in 2006. Like the Critical Left, he is intent on filling the political vacuum resulting from the collapse of Rifondazione to prevent the development of any real political alternative.

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