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Italy after the April elections

Victory of the right, suicide of the left

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According to many commentators, Italy experienced a veritable earthquake at the elections of April 13 and 14, 2008. But in fact it amounts to a conservative stabilisation rather than an earthquake. This stabilisation closes a political cycle which began in 1991, a period of huge political upheavals marked by the disappearance of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the end of the governmental hegemony of the Christian Democracy (DC) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) following a wave of investigations concerning corruption which took place under the name of “Mani Pulite” (“Clean Hands”), by the repositioning of Italian capitalism on the world scene under the hegemony of US neo-imperialism after the end of the USSR, and finally by the birth of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC, also known as Rifondazione).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/turigliatto4a.jpg>]

Sinistra Critica founding conference

This cycle has ended with a significant strengthening of the conservative and racist right, the weakening of the political project which emerged from the end of the PCI and the policies followed by the majority of its successors (the Left Democrats (DS) and subsequently the Democratic Party), as well as the division of the class-based anti-capitalist left, its exit from parliament and its deep confusion.

Conservative stabilisation

Berlusconi returned to power after a low profile electoral campaign, centred on the faithlessness and bankruptcy of the Prodi government and its alliance. His victory is mainly due to the political poverty of the Union, its leading “democratic” group and to the errors of Bertinotti and the Rifondazione leadership, as well as the limits of the mass movement.

But Berlusconi also won through his own merits, the right wing consciousness that he represents and that allows him to predict a long phase of right wing governments, a political stabilisation that has not been experienced since the time of the old Christian Democracy. The new attitude of the prime minister, moderate and open to the opposition “immediately after the vote of confidence in Parliament, Berlusconi took the initiative to meet Veltroni, the leader of the Democratic Party” shows the power he possesses on the basis of his electoral strengthening: overall the right obtained a million more votes than in 2006. A strength which allows him to reduce to silence a weakened parliamentary opposition which is moreover quite disposed to collaborate with him. Thus the head of government can try to present himself not only as the political representative of his own camp, but as a statesman, capable of leaving his mark on the history of the country.

The strength and merit of Berlusconi is based on the political formula, new and dense, of the centre right “the Popolo della Libert  (People of Liberty, PdL), a new party situated between Forza Italia and the ex-fascist National Alliance, allied in the north with the League led by Bossi (which scored 8.3% in these elections) and in the south with the Movement for Autonomy, a formation which already governs Sicily” which he has built and which he wishes to cement with a social reference block. It is an alliance of different interests, in part popular and present among working class layers, which he amalgamates with a reactionary and in part xenophobic tone.

Against globalisation

The Italian right has thus defined a precise profile which we have characterised as “national-social”. It amounts firstly to an economic programme, drawn up by the new Finance minister, Giulio Tremonti – his book “La paura e la speranza” (“Fear and Hope”) has enjoyed great success – whose central axis is the critique of “mercantilism”, namely the uncontrolled and intolerant role of the market as absolute value in the name of a public intervention to defend the national economy and preserve the standard of living of the weakest. The formula put forward by Tremonti is “long live the market, but if the market doesn’t do it then the state intervenes”. He spells out a new role for national states in the era of dominant globalisation. It amounts to a politics which rests on the fear engendered by international competition among workers in small enterprises, frightened by the wave of cheap Chinese imports and starting to think that the unified Europe is a swindle.

It is not by chance that the public presentation of this economic orientation was concentrated, during the electoral campaign, on the crisis around the sale of the airline Alitalia. Whereas the Prodi government, wishing to respect all the directives of the European Union, was ready to sell it to Air France, Berlusconi stressed the reaffirmation of “Italian” ownership of the company. In sum, this is a moderated neo-nationalism, taking account of the role of the EU – nobody inside the centre right wants to break up the Union – but firm on the preservation of the national role and thus perceived by many workers as more “protective”. The first measures of the Berlusconi government are the abolition of taxation on first housing, the suppression of taxes on overtime – which will worsen conditions for workers, but which is perceived right now as allowing increased purchasing power – and at the same time the announcement of an increase in taxation of the very high wages of the big managers, banks and oil companies. A populism “ben trovato” which chimes in perfectly with the other, more significant, warhorse the right has chosen to straddle: the struggle against illegal immigration and the centrality of law and order.

In recent days we have seen images that we thought we would not witness again: Italian citizens assaulting Roma camps, setting fire to huts and chasing women and children. This happened in Naples, largely at the initiative of the Camorra but with the support of the citizens and above all without a word of real condemnation from the government, or even from the “democratic” opposition (or from the Church of Pope Ratzinger). An obvious sign of the general climate, rooted in fear of the economic crisis, the turn to identity-based politics and the internal weakness of the workers’ movement.

The right is thus gathering around itself a vast front from elements of the working class to small entrepreneurs, from the retired to employees scared of immigration or criminality (which is nonetheless constantly falling in Italy, with a safety rate in the cities, above all Rome, which is very high in comparison with European cities), and among significant sectors of youth, who have had enough of the left and its various articulations.

Defeat of the left

This is the second factor explaining the electoral result, a factor as important as the Berlusconi’s ability to understand the Italian social dynamic. The Italian left (for convenience we include here the part of the ex-PCI which today forms the Democratic Party, although it no longer has anything in common with the left) has essentially committed suicide. Fifteen years after the liquidation of the PCI and after having twice been in government, it has not succeeded in validating its strategy, becoming politically isolated but above all cut off from significant sectors of the workers’ movement, constantly attacked and betrayed in the course of the decades of choices made to support Italian business and the dominant capitalism.

The strategy of occupying the “centre” of the political scene, the neoliberal turn – which the Democratic Left accomplished by leapfrogging social democracy and directly joining the “third way” of Blair and Clinton – have finally led its party, the Democratic Party, heir of the majority of the PCI and Christian Democracy, to “only” 33% of the vote. All studies show that the centre electorate moved more to the right, directly to the PdL of Berlusconi or the Udc of Casini (which originates from a right wing minority of the old DC), formerly allied to Berlusconi and today the

second force in the parliamentary opposition with 5.5% of the vote. Only 2 to 3% of the voters of the left followed the Democratic Party. The decision to defend and represent directly an Italian capitalism in crisis – Italian industry is based primarily on small companies which generally vote for the right – has favoured the right which at the end of the day is more to the taste of the Italian bourgeoisie. The PD has thus found itself without credible allies to return to government. The heirs of the PCI are forced into a new “crossing of the desert”, despite their open shift towards the positions of the Italian bourgeoisie.

The neoliberal strategy of the PD has thus above all favoured the right, allowing it the terrain of representation of the most regressive popular interests and moods, whereas for its part it governed with its eyes fixed on banking policy (there is not a single leader of a big Italian bank who is not linked in some way to the PD), favouring Fiat or the Confindustria (the Italian employers organisation) and dismantling local public services. With such a policy and a left linked to the power of the big Italian enterprises, it is logical that a significant part of the popular vote shifted to the right, as witnessed by the success of the Northern League. Moreover, in government the centre-left has made every tactical error possible. No measure, no decree symbolically innovative or breaking with a gangrenous social situation; the support given by Veltroni to Berlusconi, when the latter was in political difficulties; an internal battle where all blows were allowed; no taking into account of what appears today as the privileged theme of public opinion: the privileges of parliamentarians, the high salaries, the waste of public administration.

The centre left could rest only on a sort of “neo-frontism”, a sacred union against the right, without social content and which ended up actually favouring the right.

In this context the choice of the class conscious left, and in particular the PRC, proved disastrous. The results of these elections oblige us to note the end of Communist Refoundation. An end that we predicted as Sinistra critica last year, in declaring our exit from the PRC and the birth of our political movement. An end marked by various factors: the inability to carry out the historic mission of the PRC, namely the refoundation of a class based and alternative Communist Party opposed to the PD; an internal political caste encrusted in an institutional perspective, with the proliferation of careerism and the struggle for positions; the arrogance and narcissism of a leading group, Bertinotti at the head, believing power justified everything. But in the end what weighed most in this case was a strategic error: the idea that it was possible to build a class based Communist force in alliance with Italian capital. Bertinotti called this possibility “the dynamic compromise”, a picturesque variant of the “historic compromise” which ended like its predecessor in defeat for the party which defended it.

In government the PRC was wrong on everything: it voted for the war; it organised a big demonstration against insecure work only to then vote for the measures of the government against which it had just demonstrated; it expelled Turigliatto [1] demonstrating thus that it was more royalist than the king; it took the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies and thus took responsibility for the politics of the majority, which a left electorate sincerely attached to class values and interests could not forgive. But it has above all committed the error of thinking that supporting the government was a possible strategy, that the Italian centre left was “permeable” to the social movements and that its nature rendered plausible a project of “Grand reform” of the country. All these errors were signalled in their time by those who, like us, had a correct reading of the relationship of forces between the classes, understanding the stagnation of the struggles in the big factories and workplaces – it is enough to follow the renewals of the main collective contracts – and explained it exhaustively.

Rifondazione closed its cycle with the illusion of associating the two opposed parties, the government and the social opposition, through an unrealistic compromise, and believing that the electoral reward would be sufficient to replace a non-existent social base, that nobody inside the leading group had attempted to build during the past fifteen years, since they were too concerned with ensuring an electoral place of honour.

We are thus faced today with a situation of great regression, above all at the activist level because of a widespread

demoralisation. The immediate responses from the main people responsible for the catastrophe confirm this analysis. The PRC is preparing its congress amidst internal tensions, with some "faithful to Bertinotti" proposing its transcendence to found a "rainbow" left which would take up on its own account the organic alliance with the Democratic Party, while others "the former Democrazia Proletaria [2] and the former followers of Cossutta [3]" clinging to the organisational defence of the PRC without however advancing another strategic project. It is then a settlement of accounts among the apparatus, in which the stakes are the logo and cash of the party.

At the same time the PdCI "the party founded by Cossutta when Bertinotti had broken with the first Prodi government, led today by Diliberto" propose an identity based project, "unity of all Communists", without strategy or political project other than the deployment of red flags and the shaking of hammers and sickles. And all wish to stick with the same leaders who have been there for the last fifteen years and who are responsible for the current collapse. Even the new internal opposition in the PRC is led by the sole Rifondazione minister inside the last Prodi government, who now emerges as an opponent of Bertinotti.

This situation of retreat is fed by a stagnation of social struggles (with the exception of areas of revolt on the environmental front and the battle against ecological devastation) and a rapid realignment of the big union federations "the CGIL, CISL and UIL" on the collaborationist line of the Democratic Party. The confederated unions have integrated the "social agreement" that they have immediately re-proposed to the new right wing government. So a new Government-Union-Confindustria agreement is trailed. It should limit the prerogatives of national collective bargaining "that is negotiation centralised at the level of the branches" to the profit of enterprise level agreements. It should also link all pay increases to productivity increases. The Berlusconi government needs this agreement to definitively seal its legitimacy, because until now the unions have practiced "social agreements" only with centre-left governments and the previous Berlusconi government had been confronted with big workers' struggles.

However the most significant sector of the workforce, that of the metalworkers, continues to oppose this schema. The FIOM-CGIL could thus go into opposition, which for the first time in the history of rank and file trades unionism has put a unitary platform and a common plan of action on the agenda.

Alternative lefts

So there are signals of a counter tendency which constitutes a point of support for a genuinely class based left proposing a clearly anti-capitalist strategy.

Although it has only existed for three months autonomously, Sinistra critica contested these elections. The exit from the PRC had concentrated its energy for nearly a year, which was necessary to allow everyone to take part in a deep and rich discussion. The decision to contest the elections was only taken on February 17, 50 days before the vote. The symbol of the campaign was presented on February 19: so it was a very rapid operation which only the great unity of the leading group and the determination of all the activists of this new organisation rendered possible. The declared and explicit objective was not to immediately represent an alternative to the crisis of Rifondazione "which for us was already apparent before the elections" nor to the Left "rainbow" but only to affirm the existence and vitality of an alternative project, of a basic pole of ideas, of a broad leading group and an activist collective present in different towns and in the main areas of conflict. To generate awareness, in other words, of the youngest of the Italian far left organisations. This objective was attained. It is for this reason that we can declare ourselves satisfied with having obtained 0.5%, or around 170,000 votes, which is obviously not enough to represent an alternative to the crisis of the PRC, but which allows Sinistra critica to exist, strengthen and contribute to the construction of a new class based and anti-capitalist left. During the electoral campaign Sinistra critica practically doubled the number of towns where it has a presence. Analyses of the electoral results indicate that everywhere Sinistra critica had a presence and an organised activity our results exceeded 1%, with sometimes 2 and even 3% of the vote.

The overall result of the class based and anti-capitalist left is strengthened by that obtained by the Communist Workers' Party (PCL), led by Marco Ferrando. This party, also emerging from the internal opposition in the PRC, was set up a year before Sinistra critica and has since then tried to fine tune its political propaganda, above all televised, which has had an impact on its electoral result (0.6%, or around 200,000 votes). The PCL had stressed a political language and attitude very marked by the "Communist" tradition. That represented both its strength and its limits, given its very "closed", self-proclamatory, position, de facto separated from the sites of social conflict. It is not by chance that the PCL rejected the offer of an electoral agreement with Sinistra critica, because it preferred to use these elections for its own independent construction in seeking an electorate "similar, working class and adult", disappointed by the historic parties of the left and desiring to demonstrate, even if only through a symbolic gesture, a form of protest. The type of vote that the PCL received in the former working class bastions of the PCI, where the PRC and PdCI obtained good results in the past, witness to the success of this attempt.

An analysis published by the daily newspaper "Repubblica" illustrates the "qualitative" differences in the votes received by Sinistra critica and the PCL. The votes for the latter came to a great degree from the PdCI and only a smaller percentage from the PRC or the Verdi (Greens). The votes for Sinistra critica however came above all from the PRC, but also significantly from the PdCI and Verdi, and these are above all female and young voters. They are also to a great extent "activist" votes, coming from a part of the vanguard involved in the unions and social movements, the votes of those who wished to signal a left commitment, a will to protest against the course of the two Communist parties in the Prodi government.

The forum of the social opposition

How can we relaunch a class based left? Immediately there are no organisational formulae or regroupments which allow us to metabolise the defeat. A new class left cannot be built from above, simply by throwing off the old ruling groups who failed, although that is necessary. What is necessary is above all a collective practice and a real social opposition, which cannot be only a front or solely propagandist, but which should have the capacity to work in depth. The protest demonstrations in response to the obscurantist and xenophobic tide spreading in Italy are certainly an element of that. But we have above all need of a project of building a social base and a political programme which can meet the challenge of the global crisis of western capitalist society.

That cannot be resolved by a formula or political schema, or by improvised alliances. As Sinistra critica we intend to work around two axes, on two coordinates.

First, we will continue the construction of our political project and thus of our organisation, without however self-proclaiming ourselves as a party. We wish then to build a national headquarters, set up a central office made up of staff who are not full timers but will work on the principle of rotation and on a part time basis, and begin to organise in early July our first national event in Rome. At the same time we want to organise for our first real national congress in early 2009, which will also serve for the formal launch of the European election campaign. In this sense the commitment of Sinistra critica inside the European anti-capitalist left project is decisive and we seek its organisational strengthening.

But the second coordinate is as important as the first, if not more important. This involves building a "unitary front" capable of resisting the multitude of attacks from the right, around a programme of social opposition and a project of building a social base, above all in the workplaces, to rebuild the "bastions" of social resistance. For that the importance of a new class conscious trade union will be determinant.

We think that this necessitates a resumption of cooperation between the forces which have not abandoned opposition even when the government was centre left – the alliance of June 9, 2007 which allowed the big mobilisation against Bush's visit – and which has kept a rigorous anchoring in the aspirations of the modern

proletariat. The themes are those imposed by the capitalist offensive in Europe: workers' resistance, the defence of public services, the struggle against xenophobia, and the defence of the environment. On all these terrains a European dimension would be needed and while the Italian situation seems so obscure and dangerous it is to be hoped that many Eurosceptics will understand how much a workers' movement capable of transcending national frontiers is vital.

In this goal we propose the constitution of a Forum of Social Opposition inside of which we can rebuild a strategic debate on the identity of an anti-capitalist left starting from its main characteristic: unwillingness to govern capitalism and willingness to overthrow it.

In sum we face a long task, which should be constant and determined. Sinistra critica was born out of a historic defeat and it should be capable of preserving the energies of some thousands of activists. These energies will be precious in the new phase. We did not expect to find ourselves in such a context. We are however there and we will play with conviction the role that has just fallen upon us.

[1] 1. 3. PRC Senator and Fourth International supporter Franco Turigliatto was expelled from the party for not voting for the financing of the Italian army of occupation in Afghanistan

[2] 2. 5. A current which traces its roots to a far left grouping of the 1970s

[3] 3. Armando Cossutta, a historic leader of the PCI who left the PRC to form the Party of Italian Communists (PdCI), before resigning from the latter in 2007