

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4755>



Italy

What is the Communia Network?

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

Publication date: Saturday 5 November 2016

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The Communia Network political project in Italy is very much connected to a profound reflection about the crisis of the class struggle left and also what has been defined, somewhat provocatively, as “the end of the workers’ movement”.

When we speak of the end of the workers’ movement it does not mean that we deny the existence of class struggle or ignore actual struggles and resistance that can be harsh and significant. In our document, “Resistance and the alternative”, we insist a great deal on the volatility that still permeates the world situation and the large number of hard struggles that are still going on. But it is obvious to anybody that the political and strategic perspectives of this resistance is directionless, people fight with their heads down, in the here and now (*hic and nunc*) without looking ahead – apart from those that invoke the catastrophic visions promoted by religious, conservative or reactionary forces.

The crucial analysis is precisely this – there is a lot less of the social, political and cultural processes which allowed, particularly after the Second World War, the emergence of the working class as a political protagonist that was not reducible only to the left parties. A protagonism favoured by the existence of the USSR, the strength of the Communist and Social Democratic parties and an exponential growth of the trade unions which, at least in Europe, led to a profound change in the relationship between the social classes.

The negative process goes back a long way. It started slowly in the 1970s and 1980s but then in the first decade of the new century it accelerated with the utter failure of new social and political projects. For example the strength of the anti-globalisation movement was reined in and then disintegrated during the test of government in countries like Brazil and Italy. Trade union structures were not up to the job of organising the new proletariat and the divisions between often counterposed sectors of the working class were sharpened. The environmental movement was integrated into the mainstream left and lost its autonomy.

Significant evidence of this change of historical period is seen in the “Arab Spring” which did not get much support on the left. This was mainly because of the progressive demolition of the forces making up the old workers’ movement and the inability of the radical left groups to recognise the originality of mobilisations which did not fit into their social and geopolitical schema. These movements ended up politically in lesser or greater forms of religious fundamentalism.

The defeat of the communist movement with the decisive watershed of 1989, the transformation of social democracy into a variant of capital and the errors of those who should have been able to form an alternative to the dissolution are the basic causes of a crisis. The failure of the Rifondazione Comunista project to build something out of the defeats in Italy is discussed in more detail in the book *La Rifondazione Mancata* - (A Failed Refoundation – a key chapter [A Failed Refoundation](#) is translated in the Socialist Resistance book, *New Parties of the Left* available [here](#)).

The crisis inevitably affected the trade unions. They were divided, lacked an international perspective and were victims of their errors, particularly the distance that had developed between them and people’s real working conditions. Consequently they were ravaged by a political offensive that was also generated by the economic crisis.

The analogy with the 19th Century

What is the Communia Network?

The defeat of the workers' movement has been devastating, worse than people think or want to admit. It is made worse by another big crisis – that of representative and parliamentary democracy. It is caused by the logic of an economy, which in the name of productivity, competition and the drive for the maximum profit, needs to streamline decision-making and lessen debate. Matteo Renzi is a product of this process along with the call for strong leaders, the rise of new populisms and as always the “need” for collective scapegoats.

The current period can in this way be compared, with all the usual caveats, to the second half of the nineteenth century, to the dawn of the workers' movement: today like in those days the fundamental problem is not just to rebuild forms of representation – a class struggle left – but to bring together the essential ingredients that can form a new movement organising workers and non-workers.

It is a question of beginning again and therefore taking up the methods that led to the formation of the old workers' movement. We need to rebuild solidarity, starting from mutual aid or assistance, not as a surrogate for a welfare system in crisis but as a thread that can stitch together the social fractures. Something can rebuild the struggle, not as a “represented” or media-focussed conflict but as a series of small, accumulated victories. We need to restore an international dimension adequate to today's globalisation.

When we talk about the end of the workers' movement it is clear that we are also saying that the archetype of the wage worker, who at one time was defined as proletarian, has not only numerically increased but has fragmented in many different forms. The old archetype is no longer easily identified because today's production process and the present configuration of capital prevents any assimilation between a worker on a short term contract, a contract for a particular project or even less a permanent one.

Consequently one's identity as a worker splits into two or even three according to the context. A job saved becomes a success for a worker but perhaps a waste of money for a citizen. Working people very quickly become consumers or clients and no longer identify as workers. Even less do people recognise, or they find it very hard, an immigrant as part of a common working class. A job can be detrimental to a need to protect the environment and contradictions can cut across not only whole communities but also generations and families.

So we are in a period of rebuilding a “class” movement by:

- building a network of mutual aid;
- developing elementary forms of trade unionism;
- organising emblematic and/or symbolic experiences of self-management;
- finding ways of supporting political and social self-organisation;
- conducting political experiments which are not at all the same as the “miraculous” birth of new parties.

Parties have lost their old functions and roles – at least in terms of representing those left behind. This is not because the party form has become definitively redundant – it is something that will always emerge – but because they are still orbiting around the light of a burnt out star. It is not just due to the defeats on the field of battle but also derives from the deep heart of its own credibility. So it is not enough to shake up the old ingredients – which are often the old leaders – to make a new more digestible drink. The process will be much longer and more radical because it has to work at the roots of social behaviour, in the reconstruction of a sense of belonging to a coalition of forces that

demands their rights. The errors and wrong choices made by the movement in the twentieth century have laid waste to a large part of the world in which working people live and the recovery will take time. And confidence. This can only mean confidence in their own strength and capacity to build stable links and believe in the effectiveness of their coalition of interests.

Exemplary experiences

An innovative dimension of this process can and must be through exemplary experiences. The end of the old workers' movement brings with it the end of its models. The "German model", where the class is structured nationally in a powerful way with big trade unions, big parties and massive structures of social organisation, is redundant. Today it is more effective to base ourselves on exemplary experiences, which through their material reality, enables a new narrative to become credible.

Comunia Network is building itself through these experiences, these experiments and reflecting on the lessons they bring.

Rimaflow

It is not an accident that a real experience was at the origin of the Communia project. Rimaflow is now well known internationally, at least among those people who are active in "recuperating" factories and the anti-capitalist struggle. The Maflow dispute (Maflow was the name of the old factory which was closed in 2012) did not end with the usual defeat. The Polish owners had emptied the buildings and made 300 workers redundant but dozens of them decided to occupy the factory. They reconverted it from the auto industry sector to the reuse and recycling of electrical and electronic appliances and in just four years they created a citadel of the alternative economy.

The Occupy Maflow Association took the name of the mass movements of the time against the dominant neo-liberal social and economic policies – from Occupy Wall Street to the Indignad@s, including the Arab Spring, the Gezy Park battle and the struggles of students and workers against the blackmail of the debt and the dictatorship of the markets. It coordinated all the activities taking place inside RiMaflow (Rinascita della Maflow = renaissance of Maflow). Rimaflow is also the name of the cooperative that organises the re-use and recycling of the products. The workers are the founding members of the cooperative.

The experience of the Occupy Maflow Association and the RiMaflow Cooperative subsequently led to the setting up of a Mutual Aid Society (Casa del Mutuo Soccorso) and after that to the formation of a national network called [FuoriMercato](#) (Outside the Market).

The Occupy Maflow Association takes its inspiration from the working class mutual aid societies and other experiences made at the beginnings of the workers' movement and it links up primarily with similar experiences of self-management in Italy and internationally. The support of Joao Pedro Stedile in 2015, who assigned to Rimaflow the role of representing the Movimento Sem Terra in Milan, is significant. The exemplary experience of mutual aid can help to rebuild a modern conception of the trade union based on its origins, on class solidarity and the importance of the membership against apparatuses and institutionalisation.

Ri-Make

Alongside Rimaflo in Milan the Ri-Make centre has emerged which is a centre of mutual assistance for:

“workers who have precarious jobs and are super exploited; women, migrants, LBGTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, transsexual, queer and intersexual) who suffer from society and whose bodies pay the price for the worse austerity policies; and finally all those who are caught up in an unsustainable attack on their environment, an attack which produces speculation, pollution and uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources”.

Solidaria-Netzanet

Another important exemplary experience comes from Bari where in 2014 the Solidaria association and the Netzanet project began with setting up of a whole production stream for tomato sauce and other products on the basis of zero exploitation. The Puglia region has the highest density of super-exploited migrant workers, especially in the agricultural sector and in the harvest of tomatoes. Major struggles and dramatic disputes have marked this area of Italy and it was through this dynamic that the Communia comrades decided to launch a project based on a group of political refugees and Italian young people who in 2008 had come together in the struggles of migrants around the Cara and Cie in Bari. This project has resulted in the production of Sfrutta zero (zero exploitation) tomato sauce that is known throughout Italy. They are contacted by the local and national media every time there is scandal tied to the gangmasters or others in the exploitation of migrant workers. Therefore this is an experience that in addition to being a way of producing an income is also an inspiration and model for mobilising around the rights of workers and the discriminatory policies of the European Union.

In 2016 the Puglia group carried out the occupation of a big villa in Bari where Bred&Roses was established. It is a Mutual Aid society with plans for recycling, study areas for students, a distribution hub for [Fuorimercato](#) ethically sourced, sustainable products, a community tailor workshop and the organisation of cultural and artistic events.

Communia in Rome

In Rome the occupations of the Bastianelli foundry, that was ended by force in 2014, and then of the Piaggio workplace in San Lorenzo, led to the establishment of the Communia centre which was based on three different activities:

- the Sharewood project – a space made available to students from La Sapienza University and used by hundreds of students;
- the Karalo tailors that is run by a group of Nigerian immigrants;
- a distribution point for Fuorimercato.

Roma Communia, like all the other local branches of Communia, has never turned inwards and focussed only on its “mutual aid society” but has played a role in many community struggles in Rome. It has built up, together with other social or proto-political movements, a citizens’ network called DecideRoma, which is becoming more and more a protagonist in the city. A similar experience has happened in Naples with the Massa Critica citizens’ network. It has

become a key partner of the “real” left mayor of Naples, Luigi De Magistris, who was elected for a second term in 2016.

Terra Nostra (= Our Land)

It was no surprise that Massa Critica was one the most important guests at the 2016 CommuniaFest (=Festival) which was held in the Neapolitan hinterland, in Casoria, where a new Communia network project started in 2015 – Terra Nostra. A four hectare plot was occupied on the fringes of the working class neighbourhoods of the city. It had been totally abandoned and the plans, according to the Casoria comrades, are for it to become a proper park, an area of community cultivation, a space for local people to grow fruit and vegetables.

Various initiatives of mutual assistance, of the Fuormercato project and of alternative trade unionism has taken place in other parts of Italy, in Bologna, Verona, Versilia, Mantova, Salerno, Livorno and Genova. What they have in common is what we have outlined above – developing mutual assistance as a means in which we can rebuild class confidence and solidarity. The local branches of mutual assistance are rather like the Peoples’ Centres (Case del Popolo) where the first statutes of working class mutual aid were drawn up in the past. Times are different today and so is the context and mutual aid now requires a necessary dose of the digital world. But the mechanisms underpinning mutual societies are the same. You need an extraordinary commitment to get involved in a struggle, supporting those who are on their own in various circumstances and providing a network of collective protection. This is what a social trade union is all about and the community coalitions provide the seedbed for their emergence, obviously on condition that the people involved understand and take up the challenge.

Fuorimercato (Beyond the Market)

The first example of a positive growth of these experiences that is going well beyond the Communia Network itself came out of the link-up between Rimaflow and a peasant community in Calabria, SOS Rosarno. This is an area well known for the super-exploitation of migrants who mainly pick oranges – a number of whom were killed by the local population years ago during a struggle for their rights. It was this coordination – just as happened with the development of Solidaria-Netzanet in Bari – that led to the Fuorimercato network. It was born from the lived experience of those who had launched an alternative economic activity within a framework of an anti-capitalist political project. At the founding conference held on 4 June in the Terra Nostra base in Casoria groups came from: Val di Susa, Turin, Verona, Mantova, Florence, Rome, Bari, Lecce, Potenza, Naples, Salerno, Rosarno, Palermo and Trapani. Fuorimercato wants to establish an economic activity that is sustainable both from the ecological and social point of view. The aim is to structure a network that brings together the broadest possible range of abilities and competence that are consistent with the ideas behind it – recognising the economic value of everyone through remuneration or, preferably, exchange.

The Communianet.org site

Given this project of networking and extending concrete experiences are outside our own political tradition, we have developed our internet site as a place for political, theoretical and organisational discussion of the varied experiences. We produce collective editorials on the political situation as well as publishing theoretical pieces and translations of articles reflecting international politics and the political interventions we are interested in.

What is the Communia Network?

Our network meets nationally and here we discuss the various projects but also our common campaigns and the political line of the Network on the political situation. Our site is our political network, with the aim that, even in this period of rebuilding of the the workers' movement and leftist politics, an organisation is still necessary.