

# After the European elections: the view from Italy

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Important recent events give us the chance to look at the current political conditions in Italy, particularly with respect to the character and prospects of the Italian left. On June 13 the election to the European Parliament took place. The results were generally assessed as a significant, though not catastrophic, loss for the Italian left. The main leftist force in Italy is the Left Democrats (DS). Its political genealogy can be traced back through a number of splits and transformations to the old and now defunct Italian Communist Party (PCI). The DS constitutes the backbone and political lead of the current governmental coalition composed of center-left forces. Massimo D'Alema serves as both the head of the government and as the most prominent leader of the DS. His party received a disappointing 17.1 percent of the European election.

Its main opposition is Forza Italia (FI), a center-right party created and led by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. FI received 26.1 percent of the votes, making it the most sizable Italian presence in the European Parliament. The election has also seen the rise of two new and already strong political formations in the Lista Bonino and Asinello, respectively with 9.6 and 7.5 percent of the votes.

A far more dramatic event preceded the elections. On May 20 the Red Brigades killed Massimo D'Antona, a professor who was involved with the government as an adviser in matters of labor relations. The resurgence of "red terrorism," particularly as it targets figures that orbit around the leftist government, shocked the country.

The publication of the government's "document of economic planning" (Dpef), along with its reform of the health care system in the last week, constitutes another important event. These two initiatives have triggered a strong protest on the part of the trade unions in a context where the entire system of public transportation was already being disrupted by strikes. The expressed goal of those initiatives is to rectify an economic situation that appears grim. Italy has in fact a high rate of unemployment (12.1 percent in June of this year) and is still struggling to achieve the economic objectives imposed by the European Union.

A number of self-professed leftist parties now exist, each with its own political history and character that can only be briefly sketched here. The success of the Lista Bonino was built through the energy and reputation of the Partito Radicale, a formation that now exists only ambiguously in a transnational form. This small but feisty group of activists is historically important because of its countless and often

progressive struggles. In particular, the Radicals were at the forefront of the campaign to legalize divorce and abortion in the early 1970s in Italy. Now integrated in a new political climate, they are flirting with the post-fascist National Alliance party, (AN) demanding electoral reforms that would eliminate public financing of parties—and thereby pave the way for a more perfect form of plutocracy?—and have essentially aligned themselves with libertarian positions.

The Verdi (Green Party) is part of the center-left governmental coalition. It is part, that is, of the same government that provided crucial military support and political cover for the imperialist war in the ex-Yugoslavia. While this mark of shame taints the whole of the "left" government, this is particularly significant in the case of the Verdi because of its tradition of vociferous pacifism in the late Cold War, now abandoned in favor of the new NATO's smart bombs and ethnic cleansing—perhaps seen by the organization as an environmentally sounder approach.

Rifondazione Comunista, (RC) to its credit, has not endorsed the war. The party represents the continuation of the PCI's Stalinist tradition. While RC chose to abandon the governmental coalition—triggering a crisis that brought the DS and D'Alema to the head of the government—it suffered a split in the process. A faction chose to remain with the center-left government and found its own party, the Italian Communists (IC). To give a sense of RC's politics and prospects, here are the conclusions that Fausto Bertinotti, its secretary, drew from its recent mild electoral setback: "The point is that the link between class and electoral preference no longer exists. We did not realize the occurrence of such a break. We thought that the connection between social condition and electoral preference, which dominated the entire post-World War II era until last Sunday, was still in place. That link is now completely severed" (*Il Manifesto*, 16 June 1999).

The former Stalinist DS prides itself on being a reformist force, a moderately leftist presence now at the head of the country. A month after the assassination of D'Antona, Mr. Bassolino—who is, like many among the DS ranks, an ex-Communist and held until recently the position of minister of labor in the D'Alema government—reflected on its significance in an article published in the *L'Unità* newspaper. "In D'Antona", wrote the ex-minister, "was identified a person engaged in the construction of real reformism ... for all of us [he] is a symbol."

What kind of reformism is Bassolino here referring to? Is it the kind of reformism that animated the history and initiatives of the Italian Communist Party; one that, with all its faults, indeed resulted in a number of important victories for the working conditions, wages, and rights of the Italian working class? No, even such a limited perspective has now vanished from the political horizon of these

leftists. Cesare Salvi, the new minister of labor, in a statement that captures the orientation of the Italian, and indeed European left since the early 1990s, affirmed the end of “the old solutions, of the old social-democratic recipes” and the necessity “to provide innovative responses” (*L'Unità*, 22 June 1999).

Bassolino spelled out the political character of these responses, indicating just what kind of “new” reformism his party is committed to: “a new balance between the right to strike and rights of citizenship, the reform of labor market and contractual flexibility.” This nebulous formulation hides two very simple objectives: the rolling back of the right to strike, and the suspension or elimination of a number of workplace regulations regarding wages, the hiring and firing of workers and the contractual terms of employment.

“Flexibility,” the euphemistic mantra repeated incessantly by government figures along with appeals about the necessity of making Italian capital more competitive globally means, quite simply, a reduced cost of labor that is brought about through the curtailing of the wages and rights of workers. No amount of rhetorical mystification can alter the objective character of these “reforms.” They consist of severe cuts in social spending that range from the health care system to pensions, and a program of extensive privatizations that is still under way.

The Dpef, the preliminary document indicating the coming initiatives by the government in regards to political economy, represents the latest articulation of this supply-side\*, trickle-down politics. The document consists of fiscal and budgetary cuts. The latter amount to 16,000 billion Lire, targeting especially the pension system. The Dpef received the gleeful blessings of the organizations that articulate the position of industrial and commercial capital: Confindustria, Confcommercio, and Confesercenti. Even the national trade unions, whose leftist political character is certainly debatable, felt compelled to react to the Dpef with such hostility as to raise the specter of a general strike.

While defending the Dpef as a fair and equitable set of economic measures, D'Alema was quick to mention international pressures that weigh on his government: “Unfortunately, in order to respect the ‘stability pact,’ it is imperative to reach by the year 2000 the goal of a 1.5 percent deficit-GNP ratio” (*L'Unità*, 25 June 1999). This pact binds European governments to a reduction in deficit in order to remain part, politically and monetarily, of the European Union.

Italy suffers from the imposition of both global and regional political constraints. On June 23, in fact, the IMF reiterated its own demands to the Italian government. These demands also target a smaller budget deficit-GNP ratio, though they make clearer and more explicit the fact that this goal must be achieved by slashing social spending.

Italy suffers from a situation that is typical of Western countries. Renewed “reformist,” often ex-Stalinist forces are presiding over the rollback of historical conquests that were made under the banner of their own political ancestors. The dismantling of the welfare state and the slashing of social spending are being accomplished as a result of whatever remaining credit these forces have in the eyes of the working class. These initiatives are presented with the already tired rhetoric of new and innovative formulas for the solution of the social problem.

Parties such as these have come to power in Italy, Germany, France, England, and the US, with the support and votes of some sections of the working class, in a political climate of chaotic and almost millennial tones, amidst claims of the “end of history” and the triumph of capitalism as the final expression of human progress. It is

simply inconceivable that the kind of politics carried out by these forces—one that exalts and renews the memory and spirit of Reagan and Thatcher, the two otherwise decrepit champions of Western neoliberalism—can continue to pass for what it is not. The alignment of these forces with free—or at least much freer—market policies, paired with a shameless “left” rhetoric that often degenerates in self-parody, opens the possibility for the resurgence of a revolutionary consciousness in the working class.

There is however another political dead weight burdening the shoulders of the masses that needs to be shaken off. The reformist “left” is flanked in Europe in fact by a number of unrepentant and quasi-repentant Stalinist parties. Discredited by decades of association with Stalinism and shaken by the fall of the Soviet Union, these forces now lack credibility. Even more importantly, they seem hopelessly disoriented as they attempt to explain and come to terms with the sudden turn taken by history. Quite simply, their historical roots—often consisting of the most uncritical and slavish assent to the line and posturing of Moscow, as in the case of the French Communist Party—have been now more than ever exposed as too crooked and lifeless to nurture any sort of revolutionary and genuinely Marxist alternative.

It should be noted that, unlike the French, the Italian Communists displayed since the beginning a certain inclination toward independence from Moscow. This inclination, however, resulted not in a critique of Stalinism from a Marxist perspective, but in a sort of disenchanted reformism. Even the pretenses of a revolutionary perspective were in fact abandoned by the PCI, certainly before the turn to Berlinguer's “Eurocommunism” in the late 1970s, and possibly even before Togliatti's formulation of “Policentrism.”

Facing right-wing forces that range from the open racism and chauvinism of Le Pen to Berlusconi's elevation of the ethos and esthetics of profiteering to a cultural and political norm and threatened by the rise, yet again, of imperialism's bloody hand, the necessity for independent political action on the part of the working class is now, more than ever, urgent and possible. Its prospects are promising to the extent that in the political space where this has to occur now exists a vacuum. The space that was previously occupied by the eroding forces of reformism and Stalinism—forces that appear to have now lost both sense and pretense—can now be reclaimed by the European working class. Such a mighty social force can accomplish its task by rediscovering and arming itself with the genuinely revolutionary, internationalist, and hence Marxist outlook of Trotsky's political legacy as expressed through the International Committee of the Fourth International.

\*This characterization would not even be denied by many “leftists.” Lanfranco Turci, for instance, openly describes Tony Blair's “Third Way” as “leftist supply-side politics,” and exhorts his Italian comrades to follow it. (*L'Unità*, 25 June 1999)



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