

Communist Refoundation: Italian Stalinism's new "experiment" with electoral opportunism

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If a lesson can be drawn from the recent administrative elections in Italy, it is that opportunism is alive and well in the remnants of the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

In a move that the Communist Refoundation Party (*Partito Comunista Rifondazione* - PRC) leadership is calling "a new experiment," it has backed the Olive Tree candidates in the 12 recently completed races for provincial presidencies, with a view toward a coordinated campaign to replace the "House of Freedoms" national government in 2006.

After four years of (accurately) characterising the leadership of the Olive Tree alliance—a bloc of "left" and "centrist" parties that governed Italy during the latter half of the 1990s—as neo-liberal, Fausto Bertinotti's party has now judged them to be worthy partners.

This "turn" is not entirely surprising; as a recent WSWW interview with a PRC official made clear, the party would even stoop to coordinating with Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI) if short-term gains were possible. However, that the party is once again attempting to promote illusions in the centre-left bloc is worthy of a closer analysis.

The Olive Tree alliance comprises the largest ex-Stalinist party, known as "Left Democrats"; the centrist "*La Margherita*"; the "Federation of Greens"; the 'progressive' Christian Democratic "Democratic Union for Europe"; the "European Republicans"; the "Italian Communists"; and the "Italian Democratic Socialists."

In addition to the PRC, the group known as "Italy of Values," headed by "good governance" activist Antonio Di Pietro, also ran with the Olive Tree alliance. The additional support brought to Olive Tree by these groups made it possible for them to win 7 of the 12 provincial presidencies, more than half of the mayoral races in larger cities, as well as the Regional Presidency of Friuli Venezia-Giulia—the latter was considered a stronghold of "House of Freedoms" member *Lega Nord* (Northern

League).

One of the most significant electoral results was in the Province of Rome. Here the Olive Tree candidate (and member of the *Margherita* party) Enrico Gasbarra managed to take the presidency from "House of Freedoms" candidate Silvano Moffa. While the centre-right had controlled the province since 1998, the addition of the PRC and "Italy of Values" made it possible to win a majority in 21 of 22 precincts, including those wealthy areas in which the "left" had failed to win a majority in the entire history of the republic.

In addition to the provincial presidencies, voters also selected from individual party lists—using a proportional method to allocate seats—for both provincial and city councils, while 495 cities and towns held mayoral elections.

"List voting," such as occurs in multi-member districts (in this case, provincial and municipal councils) have an analytical significance, because they allow each individual party to measure its strength in relation to other parties.

Throughout Italy in these elections, Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia* lost a large portion of votes compared to 2001. For example, in the province of Rome, FI dropped from 23 percent to just 13 percent of the overall vote.

A gainer among its coalition partners, and at the coalition's direct expense, was the centrist Union of Christian Democracy, which garnered the highest percentage of the vote among all "House of Liberties" parties in Sicily, outdistancing *Forza Italia* in five of the eight Sicilian provinces where elections were held.

Several factors came into play to produce these results. First, there is the growing popular sentiment against the Berlusconi regime, which defied public opposition to the illegal war in Iraq and joined the "coalition of the willing." The recent sentencing of Berlusconi's business collaborators to substantial prison terms, for crimes in

which Berlusconi himself was surely involved, has not helped matters.

And, although its own overall portion of the list vote was unchanged from previous elections (just above 6 percent), the swing of the PRC to the Olive Tree camp provided the margin of victory.

Given the Olive Tree's track record during the last decade, which featured attacks on workers' rights and an attempt to slash the pension system, Bertinotti cannot simply argue that those he had previously labeled neo-liberals were right after all. In a country with over 50 years of struggle for fair pay, job protection and better conditions for those in need, these arguments are opposed by a large section of the population and would mean the liquidation of the PRC.

Instead, the PRC is forced to frame its latest adventure in the vaguest of terms. The online journal *Il Manifesto* quoted Giusto Catania, PRC secretary for Sicily, as stating that the bloc ran on a platform of "progressive democracy," while Bertinotti, in an interview with *La Repubblica* published May 30, argued that the Olive Tree group had had to rethink its previous neo-liberal approach. In his words, the new coalition speaks of "solidarity, the fight against poverty, and not about efficiency and privatisation."

According to Bertinotti, the period of "desistance" (i.e., the period from 1996 to 2001 when the PRC alternatively played the roles of disruptive opposition and spoiler) is over: "It was an unsuccessful, unrepeatable experiment. Now it is time for a new experiment."

Echoing the words of long-time PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer (who, in what is known as the "Historic Compromise," openly sought a coalition with the ruling Christian Democracy party in the early 1970s), the head of the PRC now says that he sees many opportunities to form alliances not only with the Greens, Italian Communists (PdCI), the Social Democrats and the left wing of the DS, but also with "progressive" Catholics.

In his interview with *La Repubblica*, Bertinotti claimed that a key factor in the PRC's decision to align with the Olive Tree group was the latter's opening to the anti-war movement.

Another area in which Bertinotti must argue that the Olive Tree has "come around" is in relation to workers' rights. During their time in government, the centre-left not only made several business-friendly decisions regarding workers' safety; they also favoured a repeal of Article 18 of the Constitution, which guarantees each worker in a company with greater than 15 employees protection

against unfair dismissal.

In a move that some (such as political scientist Giovanni Sartori) believe was a stunt to cause problems for the PRC's political rivals within the Olive Tree group (such as former leader of the Stalinist labour federation CGIL, Sergio Cofferati), the PRC helped organise a petition for a referendum that would extend the scope of Article 18 to all businesses regardless of size.

The referendum occurred on June 15 and 16. Although over 87 percent of the 12 million who turned out supported the extension of rights, the vote was invalidated because only 25.7 percent of the eligible electorate voted. The fact that the majority of the Olive Tree bloc opposed this referendum was simply brushed aside by Bertinotti, in favour of a focus on "solidarity."

A further complication is that the "House of Freedoms" government is planning to introduce the "Marco Biagi Law," the labour market liberalisation program named for the slain legal scholar and Olive Tree supporter who designed it. The law is intended to destroy the rights of workers in companies with fewer than 15 employees—currently the largest employment sector in Italy. These workers would not only be subject to arbitrary dismissal; the law would also make it possible for a business to run *entirely* on temporary labour.

Il Manifesto also reports that the "House of Freedoms" government is working on another provision that would create an exemption from Article 18 for any company that began with fewer than 15 employees but then grew or combined into a larger enterprise.



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