

Livio Maitan, 1923-2004: a critical assessment

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On September 16, Livio Maitan died in Rome at the age of 81. He was—next to Michel Pablo (1911-1996), Ernest Mandel (1923-1995) and Pierre Frank (1906-1984)—the best-known representative of the United Secretariat. He was a member of its leadership for 53 years and played a significant role in developing its political line.

The author of these lines is a member of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was founded in 1953 to defend orthodox Trotskyism against the revisionist politics introduced by Pablo into the Fourth International. Since then, the International Committee has been a resolute opponent, on every important political question, of the tendency led by Pablo, Mandel and Maitan, out of which the United Secretariat developed.

The death of the last prominent leader of the United Secretariat, who personally experienced the split of 1953, provides an opportunity to draw a political balance sheet. In doing so, it is not a matter of questioning Maitan's personal integrity or his socialist convictions. Rather, it concerns drawing important lessons from historical experiences that are essential for developing a political orientation in today's situation.

Maitan's life exemplifies the logical trajectory of the political conceptions that the United Secretariat defended for more than half a century. At the heart of such conceptions was the notion that the socialist reorganisation of society did not require the independent political movement of the international working class, conscious of its historical tasks, but rather could be implemented by other social and political forces, which would move to the left under the pressure of objective events.

The Pabloites held the view that "blunt instruments" not based on the working class—Stalinist parties, Maoist peasant armies, petty-bourgeois guerrillas—could move, under the pressure of objective events, in a revolutionary direction and prepare the way for socialism. The logical conclusion that flowed from such a standpoint was the liquidation of the Fourth International or—insofar as the United Secretariat formally maintained an organisation of that name—a completely new definition of its political tasks.

The Fourth International was founded in 1938 through the initiative of Leon Trotsky because only this party would ensure the continuation of Marxism and prepare the working class for future class struggles. In the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the Stalinist-dominated Third International joined, once and for all, the camp of counterrevolution. In the Soviet Union itself, the defence of the bureaucracy's privileges and the suppression of workers' democracy became the most important barriers to economic and cultural development. Internationally, the Kremlin used the Communist Parties around the world as pawns in their diplomatic manoeuvres with the imperialist powers, a policy that led to disastrous defeats in Germany in 1933 and in Spain in 1938.

Trotsky never lost the conviction, even during the worst defeats of the working class, that the objective contradictions of the capitalist order would again lead to explosive class struggles. The founding of the Fourth International was necessary to prepare for these battles. Its membership may have been numerically small, but it embodied the lessons and experiences of decades of class struggle. Trotsky categorically ruled out a

return by the social democratic and Stalinist parties to a revolutionary course. Even though they had many workers within their ranks, these parties had been transformed into tools of other social interests and forces.

Most of the prognoses and positions espoused by the United Secretariat since 1953 can today, in light of historical experiences, be subjected to conclusive evaluation. Not one of the political and social forces that they appraised as a new revolutionary vanguard and replacement for an independent movement of the working class has fulfilled any of their expectations.

Pablo predicted that, under the pressure of the masses, Stalinism would play a revolutionary role and that the road to socialism would pass through decades of deformed workers states, such as those created after the Second World War in Eastern Europe. This prognosis has been refuted by the collapse of these states and that of the Soviet Union itself. The Stalinist bureaucracy has proven to be—as Trotsky predicted—the gravedigger of the October Revolution.

Mao's peasant armies, which the Pabloites celebrated as the archetype for the Third World and as the unconscious executors of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, have not prepared the way for a socialist future but on the contrary, a brutal form of capitalism. Mao's heirs today supervise the exploitation of the Chinese working class by transnational corporations, imposing wages and working conditions that are worse than anywhere else in the world.

While the United Secretariat idealised the national liberation movements and their prescription of "armed struggle," none of them have achieved any real degree of independence from imperialism. All of them have confirmed Trotsky's prognosis, in the negative, that in countries with a belated capitalist development, "the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses." (1)

The political conceptions of the United Secretariat were not only mistaken, they played a huge role around the world in disorienting youth and workers, who were looking for an alternative to capitalism during the massive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

As the United Secretariat's hopes, based on Stalinism and the petty-bourgeois nationalists, were finally proven to be illusory, the organisation swung further to the right and retreated into the sphere of the capitalist state. It is significant that Maitan spent the last 13 years of his political life within the ranks of a party that served to prop up the centre-left governments of Romano Prodi and Massimo D'Alema. From 1991 to 2001 he sat in the executive of *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation), one of the successor organisations to the Italian Communist Party.

In his last international appearance, at the 15th World Congress of the United Secretariat in February 2003, he congratulated a Brazilian member of the United Secretariat, who serves as a minister in the bourgeois government of President Inácio "Lula" da Silva.

Maitan joins the Fourth International

Livio Maitan was born in 1923 in Venice, a half year after Mussolini took power. He grew up in fascist Italy and completed a degree in

classical literature at the University of Padova. In the last years of the war, he joined the socialist resistance against the Nazi occupation and was eventually forced to flee to Switzerland, where he experienced the end of the war in an internment camp. He later became an organiser of the socialist youth movement. In 1947, during a socialist congress in Paris, he met Ernest Mandel and joined the Fourth International.

This was the period in which Trotsky's conceptions began to be called into question by sections of the Fourth International's leadership. By the time Maitan entered the leading body of the Fourth International in 1951, Pablo, its secretary at the time, had thoroughly formulated his revisionist standpoint, which two years later led to a split within the Trotskyist movement. It was in this year that Pablo's document "Where Are We Going?" was published. In it, Pablo stated that social reality "consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world" and that "the overwhelming majority of the forces opposing capitalism right now are to be found under the leadership or influence of the Soviet bureaucracy." (2)

This conception, formulated as the Cold War was just starting, ignored the working class and replaced the class struggle raging in both camps with the conflict between the Soviet Union and US imperialism. Pablo believed that the socialist revolution would begin in the form of a war between the Soviet Union and the United States, in which the Soviet bureaucracy would play a leading role at the head of "the forces opposing capitalism." Under these conditions, nothing remained for the Fourth International to do except to enter the Stalinist parties—"the integration into the real mass movement," as Pablo put it.

In 1953, the Socialist Workers Party in the United States published its "Open Letter," rejecting the positions of Pablo and calling for the founding of the International Committee, which the British and the majority of the French section, among others, joined.

During this conflict, Maitan stood on the side of Pablo, Mandel and Frank, the leader of the French minority, and remained an active member of the United Secretariat throughout the rest of his life. He published numerous books—about Antonio Gramsci, Leon Trotsky, the Italian Communist Party, the Chinese Revolution, the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the end of the Soviet Union—of which only a few were translated into other languages. He also wrote regularly for the publications of the United Secretariat and made a name for himself as the translator of Trotsky's works into Italian.

In Italy, Maitan was the public face of the Italian section of the United Secretariat for half a century.

Maitan and the Italian Communist Party

The adaptation of the Pabloites to Stalinism had particularly far-reaching consequences in Italy. In no other advanced industrial country, apart from France, did the Stalinist Communist Party achieve such extensive influence as in Italy.

This was bound up with its peculiar history. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) spent a large part of its existence in illegality and in struggle against the Mussolini regime. Well-known leaders such as Antonio Gramsci fell victim to fascism. In the *Resistenza*, the resistance movement, which developed against the German occupation and the leftovers of Mussolini's state after the invasion of the Allies, the PCI was the leading force. This helped it develop strong roots within the population. It was the dominant force above all in many regions in northern Italy and in Toscana, where numerous families lost members in the struggle carried out by the *Resistenza*. The party leadership, however, under Palmiro Togliatti consisted of loyal servants to Moscow. Many leaders survived fascism in exile in the Soviet Union and were deeply implicated in the worst of Stalin's crimes.

In conformity with Stalin's line, the PCI unconditionally defended bourgeois rule after the fall of Mussolini. In the spring of 1944, only a few months after the fall of the dictator and Italy's official surrender, the PCI joined the government of Marshal Pietro Badoglio and thereby prevented

a radical break with the fascist past and a revolutionary reorganisation of political life. Thanks to the PCI, the political and social elite, which for 20 years had based its rule on Mussolini's dictatorship, was able to survive his fall undamaged.

The PCI belonged to all the national coalition governments that changed quickly up until May 1947. The start of the Cold War, however, prevented further participation in government. Washington was not prepared to accept a communist minister who had direct links to Moscow in a pillar of NATO. It was to be another 50 years until the PCI—then transformed into the Left Democrats (DS)—was to take over a ministerial post in Rome.

Nevertheless, during these 50 years, the PCI remained a decisive prop of the bourgeois order in Italy. Indeed, one can say without exaggeration that the PCI was its backbone. It was the only political party in the country that had a mass base of support and a widely rooted, central organisational structure. The Christian Democrats, the permanent party of government, consisted of several quarrelling cliques, and its electoral results were largely due to the influence of the Catholic Church. The smaller parties—the Socialists, Social Democrats, radicals and liberals—were not much more than representatives of various lobbying groups.

The PCI played a political role in Italy similar to that of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) in Germany and the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. In the period of the post-war boom, it mediated the conflict between the classes. Italy, predominantly agrarian and poor—with the exception of the industrial belt in the north—went through a process of rapid industrialisation resulting in a significant rise in living standards. For the first time, families could afford a television, a car, a holiday, and much more, which had not previously been possible. During this period, the proportion of votes for the PCI rose constantly, from around 20 percent in the first post-war election to 34 percent in the mid-1970s, at the peak of the economic boom. Thereafter, with mounting social problems, it lost votes from election to election.

A revolutionary, socialist strategy during the post-war period would have concentrated on preparing the working class for the inevitable break from the PCI. Propaganda and tactical initiatives would have worked to expose the PCI—i.e., to make the working class conscious of the irreconcilable contradiction between its long-term interests and the politics of the PCI and to develop a politically conscious cadre on this basis. The starting point for such a strategy would have been an understanding of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism.

Maitan stood for a completely different perspective. He viewed the PCI not as a prop for the capitalist order, but rather as an instrument through which a revolutionary movement of the working class would develop. In a 200-page book about the theory and politics of the PCI, first published in 1959 and reissued in 1969, he wrote:

"The PCI is the political-organisational form in which the post-war movement of workers and peasant masses in post-war Italy is manifested. In other words, it is within this organisation and through its mediation that the decisive social forces, which are fighting for a radical reorganisation of the structure of present society, express themselves. Insofar as the PCI wants to continue and retain the mass influence that it enjoys, the leadership must—albeit in a deformed form—articulate the reality of the class struggle in which it is immersed."

This, according to Maitan, was "the important social factor that explains the reality of the Communist Party; it explains why the tens of thousands of proletarian cadre remain loyal to it, even when they have long lost illusions in the wisdom and infallibility of the leadership." (3)

Here, reality is turned on its head. Though the PCI was the decisive barrier to an offensive of the working class after the war and could only maintain its influence over the workers' movement due to the social concessions of the post-war period, Maitan claims that workers were loyal to the PCI because it embodied their revolutionary ambitions, because it articulated "the reality of the class struggle".

Of course, Maitan could not completely ignore the support given to the bourgeois state by the PCI and the bureaucratic character of its leadership. So he claimed that the party had a two-sided character: “The contradiction of the PCI is based on the fact that it is no longer a revolutionary party and explicitly rejects the perspective of the revolutionary conquest of power, but that due to its origin and its nature it cannot be, nor become, a truly reformist party.” (4)

Maitan justified the supposed impossibility of the transformation of the PCI into a “truly reformist party” by arguing that its “neo-bureaucratic revisionism does not express the social influence of the bourgeoisie or imperialism in the workers movement, but rather the influence of the bureaucratic caste in the USSR, this conservative *but still anti-capitalist* force.” (5) This conception was in direct opposition to that of Trotsky. Trotsky insisted that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a “tool of the world bourgeoisie in the workers movement” (6) and as such played, in the Soviet Union and in the international arena, not an anti-capitalist but a counterrevolutionary role.

The political conclusions flowing from Maitan’s conception of the PCI run like a thread through the entire work of the Italian Pabloites.

As early as 1951, members of Maitan’s organisation, the *Gruppi Comunisti Rivoluzionari* (GCR), followed Pablo’s recommendations and joined the PCI. Although a small organisational nucleus and the *Bandiera Rossa* newspaper were still maintained, the great majority of the members worked up until 1969 within the ranks of the Stalinists. And in the PCI they could not work openly. “We lived in the PCI like hermits because we didn’t express our difference of opinions. We waited, until the situation matured,” a member at the time told a historian. (7)

The fact that a large part of the Italian working class was influenced by the PCI meant that work inside it could not be rejected out of hand. It was under similar circumstances that the British Trotskyists under Gerry Healy successfully worked within the Labour Party between 1947 and 1959. However, the entryism practised by the British Trotskyists was guided by a completely different perspective than that of the GCR under Livio Maitan. The former held absolutely no doubts about the counterrevolutionary character of the Labour Party. Their work was accordingly oriented toward preparing the working class for the inevitable break from this party. They fought a bitter struggle against the party bureaucracy and on this basis were able to develop a Marxist cadre—with success. In 1963, the Labour Party’s youth movement, the Young Socialists, joined the British Trotskyist movement, the Socialist Labour League.

Maitan’s Pabloist perspective led to completely different results. If the PCI was “the political-organisational form” in which “the movement of the worker and peasant masses is manifested,” and if it was forced “to articulate the reality of the class struggle” so that it would not lose their influence, then the task of the Trotskyists was not to break workers from the PCI but to work loyally within its ranks. Such a perspective made the GCR nothing more than a left cover for Stalinism. Although they criticised the party leadership on different issues, in essence they supported it and promoted the illusion that it would develop in a revolutionary direction.

At the same time, this orientation cut the Italian working class off from the perspective of the Fourth International. In Italy, where there has never existed a section of the International Committee, the fact that Livio Maitan, the most well-known Trotskyist, supported the PCI turned away workers and youth who were in sharp conflict with the PCI during the 1960s and 1970s. The radicalisation during these years did not benefit the Fourth International, but ran into the channels of Maoism and anarchism or finished in the dead end of “armed struggle” and terrorism. The latter, at the end of the 1970s, assumed considerable proportions and precipitated a deep crisis within the Italian left.

Maitan contributed to this development in two ways. First, he

persevered with the idea of remaining loyal to the PCI—even in 1968, as the majority of his own organisation held a different position, resulting in a split in the GCR. On the other hand, as a leading representative of the United Secretariat, Maitan fostered illusions in Maoism and the “armed struggle,” which were instrumental in disorienting the militant movement of those years.

Castro, Che Guevara and the armed struggle

While the United Secretariat expected that in Eastern Europe and the Western industrialised countries a new socialist offensive would come from the ranks of the Stalinist parties, in the developing countries and Latin America it placed its hopes in petty-bourgeois nationalists. What was common to both assumptions was the exclusion of any independent mobilisation of the working class under the leadership of the Fourth International, leaving the initiative to other social forces.

In China, the Pabloites glorified the peasant armies of Mao Zedong. Pablo personally put himself at the disposal of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in the 1950s, and after its victory, he joined the first Algerian government of Ahmed Ben Bella, coordinating relations with the national movements in Africa and throughout the world.

In 1959, when Fidel Castro’s guerrilla forces drove the Batista dictatorship out of Cuba, the Pabloites became enthusiastic supporters of the Cuban revolution. The claim that a workers state had been created in Cuba formed the basis for the reunification of the Pabloites with the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which had taken the initiative in establishing the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953.

The assertion that the nationalisation measures carried out by the Castro regime had transformed Cuba into a workers state represented a complete break with the Marxist view of socialism. If petty-bourgeois guerrilla leaders, who predominantly relied upon the peasantry, could establish a workers state without the existence of even the most basic organs of workers’ power, then the independent and conscious role in the socialist revolution traditionally attributed to the working class by Marxism was wrong.

Moreover, the Pabloites ignored the international character of the socialist revolution, upon which Trotsky had always placed the greatest emphasis. Regarded historically, socialism represents a higher stage of development of human society than capitalism. The latter has already developed the productive forces beyond the framework of the national state, and a socialist society cannot possibly turn back what has already been achieved. For this reason, the Stalinist theory of building “socialism in a single country” is completely false.

From this Marxist and internationalist standpoint, the nationalisation measures carried out by the Castro regime, which did not differ substantially from similar measures implemented by other nationalist governments at the time, were of secondary importance. The more important question was whether the Cuban revolution provided a starting point for the development of the international socialist revolution. In this regard, the consequences of the Cuban events were devastating.

The Pabloites were not content simply to praise Castro’s Cuba as a workers state. The Cuban model of a guerrilla struggle led from the countryside was transposed to all of Latin America—with terribly destructive consequences for the Trotskyist movement. When Che Guevara moved from Cuba to Bolivia in 1965, to launch a guerrilla struggle there, the United Secretariat assured him of its full support, and its Bolivian section proclaimed its readiness to join the guerrillas. At a Latin American solidarity conference that took place in Cuba in 1967, the

United Secretariat was represented by Joseph Hansen of the American SWP, who proclaimed the “indispensable role of the armed struggle on the path to socialism.” (8)

In 1969, the 9th World Congress of the United Secretariat proclaimed unambiguously: “The fundamental and only realistic perspective for Latin America is an armed struggle, which could last many years. For this reason, technical preparation must be seen not only as an aspect of revolutionary work, but as the fundamental aspect.... For a whole period, the guerrilla struggle will form the fundamental axis, even if at first the initiative apparently comes from outside or takes place one-sidedly (as was the case with Che’s Bolivian guerrillas).” (9)

This conception sacrificed Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution to a glorification of armed struggle, and supplanted the proletariat with the Kalashnikov and the hand grenade as the revolutionary factor. As bloodthirsty and radical as this perspective sounded, it was only an expression of the Pabloites’ deep pessimism and contempt for the working class—and this was at a time when the working class was growing rapidly throughout Latin America, becoming radicalised in the process.

Anyone taking the perspective of the United Secretariat seriously would have had to turn his back on the cities and support the guerrilla struggle in the countryside, and those who did paid a heavy price. Isolated from the urban working class and confronted with a powerful army, many young people who had turned to the United Secretariat in good faith easily fell prey to the military.

At the beginning of the 1970s in Argentina, the press of the United Secretariat applauded the spectacular armed actions of the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT-ERP), recognising this group as its official section before it drifted over to Maoism. In the end, the PRT-ERP was completely destroyed by the military.

Livio Maitan played an important role in the development and dissemination of this political line. In the United Secretariat he was regarded as a specialist on Latin America and China, and was directly involved in the elaboration of party resolutions on these areas.

According to the Chinese Pabloite Peng Shuzi, who did not agree with the United Secretariat on this question, Maitan was the author of a document that justified the executive committee of the United Secretariat swinging behind the guerrilla strategy in 1968. (10) At the 1969 World Congress, Maitan and Mandel were the most active proponents of the guerrilla strategy, which nevertheless was rejected by almost one third of the delegates.

In 1997, Maitan published an article on the 30th anniversary of Che Guevara’s death in *Inprecor*, the official organ of the United Secretariat, which uncritically summarised the organisation’s view at that time. The article was a hymn of praise to Che Guevara. In the form of various quotations from official United Secretariat publications, he was presented as a “socialist par excellence,” who was imbued with “the international character of the socialist revolution,” and became a “symbol of the new generation of revolutionaries.” (11)

1968 and its consequences

Maitan’s support for the guerrilla struggle in Latin America found a direct reaction in Italy. It contributed significantly to the political confusion that dominated the left in the 1970s and led to the emergence of a multitude of Maoist and anarchist groups and organisations espousing the armed struggle, which at times had tens of thousands of supporters.

In Italy, the radicalisation of the youth and the working class that had begun in the middle of the 1960s and that continued in the 1970s resulted in fierce conflicts with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which had turned sharply to the right. In 1972, Enrico Berlinguer took over the leadership of the party. At first, his “Eurocommunist” course—signalled by a sharper demarcation from Moscow and rapprochement with social democracy—was enthusiastically supported by the United Secretariat. However, the right-wing content of this policy was unmistakable.

Berlinguer aimed at a “historical compromise” with the Christian Democrats and entry into government. From 1976 to 1979, the PCI parliamentary group supported the government camp, although the party was not represented in the cabinet.

The fact that the most well-known Italian “Trotskyist” put his hopes on a “renewal” of the PCI, while at the same time promoting the illusions in Mao and Che Guevara that were widespread in the protest movement, cut off the new generation then entering politics from the true, Marxist perspectives of the Fourth International.

Maitan’s own organisation, the *Gruppi Comunisti Rivoluzionari* (GCR), never attained significant influence. Its membership never rose above 200, and it stood independently in elections only once in its entire history, in 1980.

Nevertheless, Maitan’s influence should not be underestimated. Over the course of decades, thousands of members passed through the GCR. Many of those who played a prominent role in the confused radical groups of the 1970s had passed through Maitan’s school at one time or another. In the 1990s, most of them would find themselves together with Maitan again under the umbrella of *Rifondazione Comunista*.

In 1968, at the high point of the student revolt, Maitan temporarily lost control of his organisation. The majority of the GCR wanted to end political work inside the PCI and dissolve the organisation into the spontaneous movement. They not only rejected the orientation to the PCI, but also the claim to Trotskyism in any organised form. At the congress of the GCR, one majority speaker justified this liquidationist course by saying, “The Trotskyist heritage is now the common inheritance of all revolutionaries and its defence cannot be the *raison d’être* of an organisation.” (12)

Maitan was not prepared to immediately give up work within the PCI, but confessed to his opponents that he would, if necessary, orient himself differently. Answering his opponents at the congress, he said that the organisation should not be made a fetish and the priority should be “action towards the new avant-garde.” He added: “On the day when a revolutionary tendency develops in Italy that is larger than ours and is able to lead the mass movement, we will use criteria that we consider correct. We will not argue about primogeniture and can contribute to the success of such a movement.... But such a situation does not exist.” (13)

The positions of both Maitan and his opponents excluded the development of an independent movement of the working class under the banner the Fourth International. The split revolved around the tactical question of whether the time was right to jump off the PCI bandwagon and swing behind the petty-bourgeois protest movement.

The majority later gave birth to the group *Avanguardia Operaia*, which openly proclaimed adherence to Maoism. It justified its rejection of the Fourth International by saying the FI stood in the way of a growing together of the Trotskyists “with the objectively left-wing currents, such as Maoism and Castroism.”

Another section of the majority turned towards the *Il Manifesto* group, which had been formed in 1969 by dissident PCI leaders, mainly intellectuals, and which advocated a mixture of past PCI views, in the tradition of Palmiro Togliatti, conceptions of the Frankfurt School, and Maoist positions. Today, the only thing that remains of this group is a daily newspaper of the same name.

Supported by the minority, Maitan refounded the GCR, which soon abandoned work inside the PCI and strove to link up with newly forming radical groups. In 1969, the 9th Congress of the United Secretariat had decided the appropriate orientation was “to the new avant-garde with mass influence.” This same congress expressed its support for the armed struggle in Latin America. Maitan proposed a resolution on the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Initially, Maitan also strove for closer cooperation with the PCI dissidents of *Il Manifesto*. “We must give precedence to *Il Manifesto* in

the policy of fostering the growing together of the revolutionary left,” he wrote in 1972. “We have the possibility, and must have, of incorporating ourselves into the dialectic that came about in *Il Manifesto* and which continues to exist. This does not mean that we exclude other forces....” (14)

Later, from the mid-1970s on, he turned towards the organisations that had emerged from the student movement. The PDUP (*Partito di unità proletaria*), *Avanguardia Operaia* and *Lotta Continua* had crystallised out of the multiplicity of these groups as the most influential. They adored Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, and represented a mixture of spontaneist and pseudo-revolutionary views. They promoted strikes and forms of “direct action” and played a highly active role in the political and social disputes of the time. In all, they could count on some 10,000 members and supporters.

The ebbing of social struggles after 1974 threw these groups into a deep crisis. A minority turned to armed struggle and terrorism, which took on a more comprehensive and broader form in Italy than in possibly any other European country, and which further contributed to the disorientation of the working class. The remainder abandoned the radical, activist forms of struggle and turned to more traditional forms of political struggle. In 1976, the three organisations mentioned above stood jointly in the parliamentary elections under the banner *Democrazia Proletaria*.

The GCR fully supported this election campaign. Maitan spoke alongside Adriano Sofri of *Lotta Continua* at election meetings in which thousands participated. But the result was disappointing. The Christian Democrats remained the strongest party, closely followed by the PCI, which obtained the best result in its history. *Democrazia Proletaria* received half a million votes, winning six seats. However, its 1.5 percent share of the vote was far lower than it had expected. *Lotta Continua*, with which the GCR had collaborated closely, dissolved itself shortly after the election.

The absence of a viable perspective for the working class enabled the Italian ruling class and its most important political support, the PCI, to survive the violent class battles between 1968 and 1975, and go over to a counteroffensive. The left organisations fell into despair, which continued throughout the 1980s. *Democrazia Proletaria*, originally conceived as an electoral alliance, continued to exist and became the melting pot for the remnants of the radical organisations.

In 1989, Maitan’s group (renamed *Lega Comunista Rivoluzionaria*, LCR) also joined *Democrazia Proletaria*. Two years later, the entire organisation aligned itself with *Rifondazione Comunista*, which had emerged from the dissolution of the PCI.

From then on, Maitan and his supporters dedicated all of their political energies to the construction of *Rifondazione*, as the French Pabloite Alain Krivine confirms in an obituary of Maitan: “Since 1991, Livio has been elected into the leadership of this new party at each congress. It is correct that the members of the Fourth International have decided to participate completely in its construction ever since its foundation, in accordance with its leadership.... Some of our comrades take up positions of responsibility in the Senate, in party organisations, or in the leadership of the daily paper *Liberazione*.” (15)

A “Trotskyist” in *Rifondazione Comunista*

This is not the place to recap in detail the history of the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC). Instead, I will limit myself to the role of Maitan, who sat on the party’s executive committee for a period of 10 years, was a close confidante and advisor to its chairman Fausto Bertinotti and propagated grotesque illusions over the character and role of the

organisation.

In Maitan’s hymns of praise to *Rifondazione*, published in the press of the United Secretariat, one finds all of the characteristic Pabloite clichés that he had employed earlier in his glorification of Italian Stalinism, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. One searches in vain for a sober analysis of the party’s programme and its role in Italian political life. Instead, Maitan blusters over “contradictions,” “objective dynamics” and the “relations of forces.”

Typical is a balance sheet of the work in the ranks of *Rifondazione*, made this year by Flavia D’Angeli, a member of Maitan’s tendency: “Throughout the history of the PRC, the political current around Bandiera Rossa has tried to create the conditions for a real insertion of its militants in the activity of the party, seeking to stimulate class initiative and social implantation. *Rifondazione* appeared to us as the unique occasion and instrument by which we could move towards the recomposition of a new revolutionary political subject, through a complex process involving clashes, ruptures, experiments, openings and realignments.

“We did not envisage a linear evolution towards a finished anti-capitalist force, but a contradictory process. Thus, during a whole phase, we had tried to build a broad and plural left within the party, with some successes at given times, but without these initiatives managing to become consolidated and offer a homogeneous strategic orientation...

“We invested our forces in the leading group, in a working relationship with the comrades of the majority, conscious that this was the scenario most favourable for the construction of a revolutionary party, but conscious also that advance was by no means ensured and that contradictions persisted.” (16)

Concealed behind all the prattling about “complex and contradictory processes” is the plain fact that, for a period of 13 years, Maitan’s group has supported a political party that served as a left-wing cover for the bourgeois order, a party that has defended bourgeois society during every serious crisis, and in all probability will be directly involved in the next Italian government—in the event of an electoral defeat for the right-wing coalition of Silvio Berlusconi. Any serious examination of the role played by *Rifondazione* reveals that it is neither a “tool” for the “construction of a revolutionary party,” nor an “anti-capitalist force,” but rather an obstacle to the development of an independent socialist orientation by the working class.

The founding of *Rifondazione* goes back to the year 1991. At that time, the Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*—PCI) decided to dispense with its traditional name, its party symbol and everything that formally recalled its communist past and declare its allegiance to social democracy. Two events had precipitated this change in course. The first was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which finally put an end to the traditional links between the PCI and Moscow. The second was the implosion of Italy’s traditional ruling parties, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, in the course of a huge corruption scandal. By ditching its symbolic associations with communism, the renamed Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) was preparing itself to take responsibility in the government in order to rescue a bourgeois system that had been shaken to its roots.

Inside the PCI, there was a wing that saw this shift as going too far to the right. It feared such a move would leave behind a dangerous vacuum on the left. In this way, *Rifondazione Comunista*—the “communist refoundation”—came into being. The new formation included Stalinist hardliners under Armando Cossutta, who had made a name for themselves as faithful adherents to Moscow in the struggle against Berlinguer’s “euro-communism.” The new organization also opened itself up, however, to numerous radical groups that had in part conducted a vigorous agitation against the PCI in the 1970s.

Initially, the expectations of the PDS did not materialise. In elections held in 1994, it was Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* that emerged victorious and

not the PDS. Berlusconi was able to secure a majority because, for the first time in postwar Italian history, he brought neo-fascists into his governing coalition. However, his right-wing government was able to hold on to power only for a few months before its collapse in the wake of mass demonstrations against its economic and welfare policies.

It was at this stage that *Rifondazione* demonstrated its statesmanship for the first time. For over a year, it secured a parliamentary majority for the transitional government headed by Lamberto Dini, a minister under Berlusconi and former head of country's central bank. In the following two years, it supported the centre-left government of Romano Prodi, without directly participating in the government. In this way, *Rifondazione* guaranteed the parliamentary majority necessary to implement drastic welfare and social cuts, consolidate the budget and to qualify Italy for participation in the joint European currency—the euro.

In 1998, *Rifondazione* withdrew its support for Prodi, unleashing a government crisis that ended paradoxically with the PCI's successors heading a government for the first time. PDS leader Massimo d'Alema secured a new majority by opening up the centre-left coalition to the right. *Rifondazione* now no longer participated in the government and was able to take a more oppositional stance. As a result, the veteran Stalinists around Armando Cossutta quit the party and founded their own formation—*Comunisti Italiani*—which continued to support the government.

It goes without saying that Maitan and his supporters celebrated the manoeuvre undertaken by *Rifondazione* as a shift to the left that justified their own political line. "Fausto Bertinotti should be given credit for understanding that the party risked finding itself in a dead end, foundering, indeed suffering an irreversible erosion," Maitan declared. He maintained that Bertinotti had "decided to open a campaign against Stalinism and at the same time stimulate a strategic reflection on the basis of an up-to-date analysis of the fundamental traits and the dynamic of capitalism in an epoch of globalisation." (7)

In reality, the tactical shift of 1998 had nothing in common with a fundamentally new orientation. The majority around Bertinotti had simply understood that that they were in danger of going down with the government as a whole should they continue to slavishly support policies that were so unpopular. This would have stripped *Rifondazione* of its most important function: diverting the growing opposition to government policies into harmless channels.

In the following years, *Rifondazione* increasingly orientated towards and sought to win influence in the protest movement against globalisation. Maitan's tendency enthusiastically supported this turn, even though the representatives of the anti-globalisation movement explicitly reject a socialist perspective. At the same time, the party maintained its orientation towards participation in government. This became clear in June 2003. Immediately after the failure of a referendum over the extension of job protection laws to small-scale factories, which had been initiated by *Rifondazione*, Bertinotti told the press that his party was striving to arrive at a programmatic agreement with the centre-left parties for the next elections and was also prepared to take up ministerial posts in a future centre-left government.

Fausto Bertinotti, who has headed *Rifondazione* since 1994, embodies the opportunist nature of this party. Born in 1940, he was for many years a member of the PCI, but did not belong to its inner leadership circle. He rose to prominence as a union functionary in the northern Italian industrial belt and gained a reputation as a left-wing trade unionist. He is adept at crafting left, even Marxist-sounding formulations, while his policies are of an entirely opportunist nature. Every practical step is assessed according to its immediate consequence. Long-term or principled considerations have no place in the elaboration of his political line. His lip service to socialism is aimed merely at adapting to the moods of his supporters.

Maitan had expended considerable energy in depicting Bertinotti in the most favourable light. He developed a close relationship with the leader

of *Rifondazione*, with whom he undertook extensive political discussions just hours before his death. His hymns of praise for Bertinotti resemble in part the flattery at a feudal court. Four years ago, Maitan reviewed Bertinotti's newly published book "Ideas which do not die." Heaping praise on the book, he wrote, "For our part, we share Bertinotti's judgement: the crucial contradiction currently resides precisely in the fact that it is more than ever necessary to put the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism on the agenda whereas the relationship of forces and the regression of anti-capitalist consciousness constitutes a major obstacle in this sense." (18)

To claim that the leader of *Rifondazione* wants to "put the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism on the agenda," is, in light of his political record, simply absurd. In reality, Bertinotti's party itself is a decisive obstacle towards the development of an anti-capitalist perspective.

Bertinotti has repaid Maitan's support by singing his praises and writing an introduction to the latter's biography, which appeared in 2002.

Maitan has also defended the majority around Bertinotti from criticisms made by the party's left wing. The *Progetto Comunista* current rejects opening up the party to the centre-left alliance and criticizes its adaptation to the anti-globalisation movement from a syndicalist standpoint. The leader of *Progetto Comunista*, Marco Ferrando said that this movement should "not be transformed into a myth." In response, Maitan accused Ferrando of putting forward "a sectarian vision of the anti-globalisation movement." He had decided "to marginalize himself in relation to the process of historic transformation in the PRC." (19)

Irrespective of isolated differences and occasional criticism made by Maitan—always accompanied by numerous excuses—his *Bandiera-Rossa* tendency is an important political prop for *Rifondazione* and Bertinotti. It shields the party and its leadership from criticisms from the left and prevents the working class from developing an independent socialist orientation. Never did Maitan and his supporters warn the working class against the opportunist and unprincipled nature of this organisation. At no point did they prepare the working class to take up a socialist path independently from *Rifondazione*. Just two years ago, Maitan enthused in *International Viewpoint* over the party's "special, indeed unique character in the history of the Italian workers movement." He added, "It would today be difficult to find its equivalent not only among the parties of the European left, but also among those parties which identify with the working class and socialism in Europe and other continents." (20)

This is just eyewash. In reality, there is nothing to differentiate *Rifondazione* from other opportunist parties, which stand with one leg in the extra-parliamentary protest and strike movement, while the second is firmly anchored in official bourgeois political life. The post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany (PDS), the Pabloite *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* or the Communist Party in France, the *Socialist Alliance* in England, and many other groups play a similar role in one form or another. In periods of profound social crisis, they all operate as a left prop for the bourgeois order. It is no accident that all of these organisations maintain links with *Rifondazione*.

Maitan's last international appearance

Alain Krivine, a member of the United Secretariat and leader of the French LCR (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*), confirmed that Maitan had pioneered on an international level the policy of "opening up" to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces.

In his obituary of Maitan Krivine, writes: "With the death of Livio, a chapter has been closed, but thanks to him, another has begun—that of 'opening up'.... Since the '90s, Livio and other leaders of the International had understood the phenomena of the decomposition and reorganisation of the revolutionary workers movement. They knew that this could not take place exclusively through the Fourth International, and that it was necessary to contribute to the new foundation of a programme

and anti-capitalist force which breaks equally with social democracy and Stalinist betrayal. The perspective already began to emerge to assist the reorganisation of anti-capitalist forces, irrespective of their traditions and origin.” (21)

This closes the circle. Maitan carried to its logical conclusion the political orientation chosen by the United Secretariat in 1953. At that time, Pablo rejected the construction of independent sections of the Fourth International with the justification that it was necessary to integrate into the “real mass movement”, i.e., Stalinist Parties, petty-bourgeois nationalist formations and other organisations that had won some influence in the post-war period. With not a single expectation placed upon these organisations fulfilled and with the Soviet Union having collapsed, the United Secretariat seeks to establish links to other forces, “irrespective of their traditions and origin.”

What this means in practice is the complete integration into official bourgeois politics. Amongst the “anti-capitalist” forces Maitan refers to is not only *Rifondazione* in Italy, but also the Brazilian Workers Party (PT), which has governed a country of 175 million people for the past two years. A member of the Brazilian section of the United Secretariat, Miguel Rossetto, heads the country’s Ministry for Agricultural Reform. At the 15th World Congress of the United Secretariat, the last one in which Maitan participated, he made a point of expressly approving such collaboration.

In his opening address he announced: “In principle, we have never suffered from the fatal malady of the workers movement that is parliamentary cretinism.... Thus we are not afraid to stress, as a reflection of our growing influence, the fact that in the last decade we have had parliamentary representatives elected in a series of countries, from Brazil to the Philippines, Denmark to Portugal and to the European Parliament. In Brazil, a comrade like Miguel Rossetto, whose qualities and militant spirit are known, is today a member of the government emerging from the unprecedented popular success represented by the election of Lula. Miguel has assumed a crucial responsibility with the task of accomplishing a radical agrarian reform, capable of generating a more general dynamic of rupture with the system. We will follow and support his fight, supported by all the most advanced sectors of the PT and the MST [Landless Rural Workers Movement] and, stifling an underlying anguish for the extreme difficulty of the enterprise, we express to him in this congress our warmest solidarity.” (22)

Maitan’s prophecy of a “dynamic of rupture with the system” has rapidly revealed itself to be nothing more than a fantasy. Rossetto has assumed official responsibility in a government that has continued in an uninterrupted fashion the neo-liberal policies of its right-wing predecessor. It is a government that has won the trust of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and that has received the highest praise from the International Monetary Fund. It is not even “anti-capitalist” in words. The prestige that President Inácio “Lula” da Silva acquired as a militant trade unionist is being exploited to pacify a working class that would otherwise threaten to rebel. The Pabloites are carrying out a key role in this respect.

If there is one lesson that can be drawn from the life of Maitan, it is that there exists no substitute for the patient construction of an international socialist party that organises the working class independently from bourgeois parties and bureaucratic apparatuses under the banner of the Fourth International. Such a party will become a powerful source of attraction under conditions of a profound crisis of global capitalism expressed in permanent attacks on the rights and welfare of broad layers of the population and in imperialist wars such as the current one in Iraq.

Notes:

- 1) Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, New Park, p.152
- 2) Cited from David North, *The Heritage We Defend*, Labor Publications, Detroit, 1988, p.185. This book contains an extensive exposition of the split of 1953 and the disputes between the United Secretariat and the

International Committee.

- 3) Livio Maitan, *PCI 1945-1969: stalinismo e opportunismo*, Rome 1969, p.195.
- 4) Ibid. p.201.
- 5) Ibid. p.199. (Emphasis added.)
- 6) Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program*, Labor Publications, New York, 1981, p.
- 7) Interview with F.Villani in: Yurii Colombo, *Il movimento trotskista in Italia durante la stagione dei movimenti sociali*, <http://www.giovanetalpa.net/movtrot.htm>
- 8) *Quatrième Internationale*, Nov/Dec. 1967
- 9) “Résolution du 90 Congrès Mondial sur l’Amérique Latine,” *Quatrième Internationale* May 1969
- 10) “Criticisms of the Positions of the SWP (USA)” by Peng Shuzi, March 16, 1981
- 11) “Die Vierte Internationale, die kubanische Revolution und Che Guevara,” *Inprekorr* no. 318
- 12) *Bandiera Rossa*, April 15 1968, quoted by Yurii Colombo, op cit.
- 13) *Bandiera Rossa*, April 1 1968, quoted by Yurii Colombo, op cit.
- 14) *Quarta Internazionale* n. 5-6, giugno 1972
- 15) Alain Krivine, “Ciao compagno!,” *Rouge* 30.9.2004
- 16) Flavia D’Angeli, “New turn for PRC,” *International Viewpoint* 359, May/June 2004
- 17) Livio Maitan, “Refounding Rifondazione,” *International Viewpoint* 340, May 2002
- 18) Livio Maitan, “On Fausto Bertinotti’s book,” *International Viewpoint* 326, December 2000
- 19) Livio Maitan, “Refounding Rifondazione,” *International Viewpoint* 340, May 2002
- 20) Livio Maitan, “Refounding Rifondazione,” *International Viewpoint* 340, May 2002
- 21) Alain Krivine, “Ciao compagno!” *Rouge* 30. September 2004
- 22) Livio Maitan, “Opening Speech of the Congress,” *International Viewpoint* 349, May 2003



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