

Italy: Rifondazione joins with Prodi

Marianne Arens, Peter Schwarz
28 March 2005

The sixth party congress of Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) has finally dispelled the illusion that this party in any way represents a socialist alternative to the bourgeois parties.

The party congress, held at the beginning of March in Venice, decided to join the bourgeois electoral alliance of former European Union Commission President Romano Prodi. The PRC will not pose any preconditions on joining Prodi's Olive Tree Alliance for regional elections in April and next year's general election, or on accepting cabinet positions should Prodi win.

Prodi, who was present at the party congress, welcomed the new course, saying, "Bertinotti has presented his party as a reformist party that wants to participate in the reformist majority in parliament, and this is the starting point for possibly working together in the near future."

Fausto Bertinotti, who was re-elected as PRC national secretary for the fifth time in Venice, had prepared for months for the electoral alliance with Prodi and ruthlessly pushed it through against considerable resistance within the party. At the conference, he justified collaboration with Prodi by arguing that replacing the Berlusconi government now took priority over all other tasks.

"The question is, can one contemplate being a presence in the real politics of the country and in the masses without acknowledging the most widespread demand of the people, our whole people: the demand to get rid of Berlusconi?" he asked. "Those who are unable to contribute to realising this goal will disappear from the political scene and will lose any relationship to the masses."

This argument is as old as political opportunism itself. In the name of fighting against the greater evil, the allegedly lesser evil is supported, thus suffocating any real alternative and every independent political movement of the masses.

An example of the results of such a line could be seen in the recent American presidential elections. In the US, numerous radical tendencies supported Democratic candidate John Kerry, arguing that driving Bush out of office took priority over all other goals, and that this could only be achieved by electing Kerry. They ignored the fact that Kerry had supported the Iraq war and represented the interests of the same financial oligarchy as Bush. A Kerry victory would have changed little in the course of American politics. In the end, it was Kerry who secured Bush's re-election, because he persistently refused to appeal to widespread sentiments against the Iraq war and the pronounced level of social inequality.

Despite the national peculiarities, Prodi is no different politically from Kerry. He is an established representative of the Italian ruling class. The renowned economics professor began his political career in the ranks of the Christian Democrats. He occupied his first ministerial post in 1978, and in the 1980s and 1990s headed the enormous state holding company IRI, which he restructured and prepared for privatisation.

After the election victory of the Olive Tree Alliance, which he had created, Prodi led the Italian government from 1996 to 1998. Although Rifondazione supported the Prodi administration in parliament, it did not take part in the government. As head of government, he led Italy into the European monetary union by making drastic cuts in social benefits in

close collaboration with the trade unions. The first Berlusconi government had failed because of the massive resistance to such cuts.

In 1999, Prodi took over the presidency of the European Commission, a post he held for five years. During his term of office, the EU has expanded eastwards and a European constitution has been drafted that codifies the rights of capital and the ruling elite at the expense of working people.

The alliance of parties upon which Prodi relies runs from the successors of the Christian Democrats and Craxi's Socialist Party, through the Liberals and the Greens to the Left Democrats and the Italian Communists, a split away from Rifondazione. The Left Democrats (DS), who emerged as the largest group out of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the early 1990s, now take the American Democratic Party as their model.

The political career of Prodi and those parties that support him show that there can be no doubt that the replacement of Berlusconi by Prodi would not significantly change the course of Italian politics. The differences between the two camps are exclusively tactical. Prodi enjoys the support of traditional large-scale industry and wants to push through the attacks on the working class in cooperation with the trade unions and the organisations that emerged from the PCI. Berlusconi, who rests on the right-wing National Alliance and Northern League, embodies the type of social climber who has achieved wealth and influence as a result of globalisation. Berlusconi maintains close relations with the US, while Prodi looks to strengthening European imperialism.

Nevertheless, in Venice, Bertinotti claimed that a Prodi government would not only lead to a change in political course, but would herald a new epoch of social reforms. This statement ran like a thread throughout his entire report to the party congress. "It is our goal to drive out Berlusconi, in order to open up a new course of reforms," he proclaimed.

At another point, he declared that it was not primarily a matter of whether Rifondazione participated in an alternative government or not, although this problem was posed and must be resolved. It concerns breaking with a period of neo-liberalism that has lasted 25 years. "We confront the following problem: After a quarter century, is it possible to take to the path of social reform again and bestride a structure that breaks with this cycle [the supremacy of neo-liberal policies] and embarks upon a progressive course, or will we experience a regression of society, democracy and citizens' rights, which for a long period will be irreversible?"

Bertinotti's claim that the return of a Prodi administration will herald a new era of social reformism is disproved not only by the experiences of the first Prodi government; it also contradicts European and international reality. The Iraq war, increasing conflicts between Europe and the US and a worsening of the economic crisis have enormously increased the pressure on the working class throughout Europe. Both Social Democratic and conservative governments are vehemently attacking past social achievements and democratic rights. A Prodi government would do no less. A second government led by the "professor" would stand further to the right than the first.

The fact that Rifondazione is also ready to follow such a course was made clear in several of the conference resolutions. Although the

delegates voted unanimously for the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq, the majority also supported Bertinotti's "Zapatero approach": The replacement of the occupying soldiers by the blue helmets of a UN force. This means Italian soldiers would remain in Iraq, but would wear a different-coloured helmet.

A minority request to adopt the demand for a sliding scale of wages adjusted to the rate of price increases (*scala mobile*) into the party programme was rejected by the congress. The *scala mobile* had been abolished by the first Prodi government.

The resolution tabled by Bertinotti received approximately 60 percent of the votes and about as many delegates supported his re-election at the congress.

The remaining 40 percent were spread among four tendencies. The largest, Ernesto, was supported by about a quarter of the delegates. This old Stalinist grouping, which publishes a magazine named after Ernesto Che Guevara, supports government participation but only if there is a prior discussion on the government programme.

The other three tendencies, Progetto Comunista, ERRE and Falce Martello, were generally opposed to participating in government. Together, they received about 15 percent of the votes. These three groupings, which falsely claim to be Trotskyist, have worked inside Rifondazione for many years. ERRE is aligned with the Italian section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, whose recently deceased leader Livio Maitan was one of Bertinotti's closest confidantes. Maitan was commemorated at length at the congress.

Speakers from these tendencies sharply attacked the planned collaboration with Prodi. For example, Marco Ferrando, the spokesman for Progetto Comunista and a member of the Rifondazione executive committee since 1994, described the planned alliance as a "new version of the political compromise between liberalism and social democracy.... As a result, the liberals (representing the bourgeoisie) would lead the government, determine its programme and character, and would grant the Social Democrats a dowry of a few ministers so they can control the workers movement and maintain social peace."

The capitalist crisis and global competition have "completely destroyed the credibility of reformism," Ferrando declared. Romano Prodi's programme for government was written by the leaders of the employers' association and the big banks.

All four minority tendencies complained bitterly about the bureaucratic methods with which the Bertinotti wing pushed through its line. For example, membership lists seemed to have swollen considerably in the months before the congress. Apparently, they had been manipulated to ensure the Bertinotti camp enjoyed a safe majority. The congress then changed the party statutes in such a way—in the words of Ferrando—"that all the power is concentrated in the hands of the secretary, and the national leadership is reduced to a talk shop with no influence."

But none of this has prevented either Progetto Comunista or the other opposition tendencies from continuing to work loyally within Rifondazione. Following the congress, Ferrando declared, "Now, the 40 percent of the party have a great responsibility. They must finally develop a political perspective, which represents an alternative to the turn to government and is aimed at winning the party majority and replacing the leadership.... Progetto Comunista will fight to the end to fulfil this task inside Rifondazione."

This statement alone shows that these tendencies do not represent an alternative to the rightward course of the party majority but serve as a fig leaf to cover over this turn. They continue to cling to a conception that was wrong from the start—that Rifondazione could be transformed into a revolutionary socialist party.

Rifondazione's latest rightward turn is no surprise. It results logically from the history, political perspective and social orientation of this party.

Rifondazione was founded in 1992 as a reaction to the turn by the PCI

away from its name and its traditional symbol of the hammer and sickle. Rifondazione was headed by established PCI members, who feared that the rightward turn of the PCI would leave a vacuum on the left, in which an uncontrolled opposition movement could develop. At the heart of Rifondazione's programme is the defence of the traditions of the Stalinist PCI, which has proved to be a reliable pillar of bourgeois order, ever since it first accepted government responsibility following the fall of Mussolini, disarmed the anti-fascist resistance and supported the bourgeois constitution.

At the same time, Rifondazione was open to the radical groups that had developed during the protest movement of the 1960s and 1970s. They were permitted to join the party as political tendencies, received a seat and a vote on the executive committee, and took on the task of presenting the organisation as a revolutionary alternative to the reformist parties. Rifondazione was praised as a model for a socialist alternative not only in Italy, but throughout Europe.

But that was and remains a pipe dream. Since it was founded, Rifondazione has defended the bourgeois order. In 1995, it provided a parliamentary majority for the interim government of former central bank head Lamberto Dini, and in the following three years for the Prodi government. In 1999, when it finally withdrew its parliamentary support for Prodi, leading to the fall of his administration, the attacks on the working class had progressed a long way, and Prodi's successor, the Left Democrat Massimo D'Alema, found support from a wing of the Christian Democrats.

Since then, Rifondazione has concentrated its work on extra-parliamentary movements—on union protests, the European Social Forum and demonstrations against the Iraq war. None of these movements fundamentally questions the bourgeois order. Their perspective is limited to pressuring the ruling elite to grant concessions. They are organically hostile to an independent political development of the working class, which is directed against the capitalist system. Rifondazione strives to be the hinge between the extra-parliamentary tendencies and the bourgeois institutions within which it is anchored at a regional and local level.

The worsening of the social and political crisis in Italy is making this construct increasingly untenable. Rifondazione feels it must declare its true allegiance; that is the reason for its latest rightward shift in Venice.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact