

Left prop for Prodi

Italy: Bertinotti voted speaker in the Italian parliament

Peter Schwarz
6 May 2006

Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*) chairman Fausto Bertinotti's election as speaker in the lower house of parliament—the third-highest post in Italian public life—marks this organization's complete integration into the ruling political establishment.

Bertinotti, 66, was elected last Saturday in a fourth-round ballot with 337 votes. The first three ballots required a two-thirds majority, while in the fourth a simple majority was sufficient. Nearly all the deputies of the Union alliance (*Unione*) voted in favor of Bertinotti. The Union is a broad spectrum of parties extending from a wing of the Christian Democrats to various other bourgeois groupings, and includes the Left Democrats and *Communist Refoundation*.

Originally the former prime minister and prominent Left Democrat, Massimo D'Alema, had shown interest in the office. However the future head of government Romano Prodi convinced him to cede to Bertinotti.

As speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Bertinotti occupies a crucial post with the job of securing stable majorities for a Prodi government. Traditionally the post has been regarded as non-partisan. The speaker is responsible for regulating parliamentary schedule rather than legislative content. However under present political conditions—with Prodi holding an extremely slim majority, an unstable government coalition comprising ten different parties, and an aggressive opposition—Bertinotti will have the task of ensuring that parliament does not sabotage the new government.

There is another likely reason for Prodi's decision. By entrusting Bertinotti with the prestigious speaker's post, he is securing the loyalty of a man who forced his resignation as prime minister in 1998. At that time, *Communist Refoundation* brought down the first government led by Prodi, after supporting it in parliament for three years.

For years sections of the so-called radical left in Europe have praised *Communist Refoundation* as a role model for the type of politics they advocate: the unification of former Social Democrats, Stalinists, radicals and trade unionists in a new "left wing party." Bertinotti's appearances at various European and World Social Forums were cheered and his party was

celebrated as a successful example of how to link parliamentary work with social movements. *Communist Refoundation* was considered living proof of the guiding principle of the anti-globalization movement: "Another politics is possible."

The organization emerged in 1991 following the break up of the Italian Communist Party. Bertinotti, who had begun his political career in the Socialist Party led by Bettino Craxi, switched to the Communist Party in 1967 and later made a career as a trade union leader. At the start of the 1990s, he rejected the transformation of the ICP into an overtly social democratic party and created *Communist Refoundation*, in which numerous former Stalinists found a new home.

In the years that followed, *Communist Refoundation* absorbed numerous radical groupings that had originally developed in opposition to the Stalinist ICP. One of these organizations was the Italian section of the United Secretariat (its French section is the Liege Communiste Révolutionnaire—LCR), which dissolved itself into *Communist Refoundation*. Its most prominent leader, Livio Maitan, served as one of Bertinotti's closest advisors before dying in 2004.

In the nineties, *Communist Refoundation* helped prop up two technocratic governments led by the Bank of Italy chief Lamberto Dini and Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, as well as the first government led by Prodi. At that time, however, it posed as a defender of the extra-parliamentary movements. Now, in addition to taking the post of parliamentary speaker, the party is expected to get two ministers in the new government, assuming a central political responsibility for the defense of the bourgeois order under conditions of profound crisis.

The parliamentary election at the beginning of April revealed the depth of Italy's political crisis. Although Prodi's electoral alliance was supported by the entire left as well as broad layers of the Italian and European bourgeoisie, its victory was wafer thin. The reason for the poor showing lies above all in Prodi's political program, which richly deserves the label "neo-liberal."

The former Christian Democrat, an industrial manager and economics professor, ran on a program that centered on balancing the national budget and relieving businesses of the burden of paying social security contributions. In the nineties,

Prodi had already slashed social expenditures in order to make Italy fit for the introduction of the euro. As president of the European Commission, he was later responsible for a number of measures, including the Lisbon agenda, designed to make Europe the “most competitive and dynamic marketing area in the world” by 2010.

Prodi’s hostility to the interests of ordinary workers made it possible for then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, aided by his control of the media, to manipulate the fears of oppressed social layers. It also helped him win support from sections of the middle class in the relatively wealthy north of Italy, whose export-oriented industry is dominated by middle sized and small companies.

The election of speakers for the two houses of parliament last Saturday was considered the first real test of Prodi’s fragile majority. Until then, Berlusconi had refused to accept his defeat at the polls and submit his resignation. He finally did this on Tuesday, after Prodi’s candidates had been accepted in both chambers.

In the lower house, the vote was relatively free of problems, because Prodi’s alliance has a clear majority of seats, despite his slim election majority. However it was a different story in the Senate, where Prodi only has a two-seat advantage. Here, for better or worse, he is dependent on *Communist Refoundation*, which has a total of 27 senators.

The Berlusconi camp had proposed 87-year-old Giulio Andreotti, a lifetime senator, as candidate for the speaker of the Senate. The aged politician personifies the methods of conspiracy, corruption and illegal wheeling and dealing that have dominated Italian political life for decades. The Christian Democrat Andreotti has been involved in 33 of Italy’s 59 postwar governments, and in seven governments he was prime minister. He maintained close links to the Vatican and the Mafia and was considered a master of intrigue. Twenty-nine separate attempts were made to lift his parliamentary immunity, and only the last was successful. In 2002, he was condemned to 24 years prison for involvement in the murder of a journalist. An appeals court overturned the conviction, however, sparing him from spending the rest of his life behind bars.

The Prodi camp reacted to Andreotti’s candidacy as it always does to such provocations: it adapted to the right wing and put forward 73-year-old Franco Marini as its candidate. Like Andreotti, he is a former Christian Democrat who served in 1991 as Labor Minister in Andreotti’s last government.

Although the two candidates are friends and politically indistinguishable, the voting was characterized by bouts of tumult. The results of the second vote, which Marini won, were annulled, after it turned out that his first name had been spelled incorrectly on two ballots. Marini finally won the three necessary extra votes in the fourth ballot.

On May 8, the parliament reassembles to elect a new president. The candidates are not certain at this point. Following initial interest by Berlusconi in Italy’s highest public

office, he is now proposing 85-year-old Carlo Azeglio Ciampi for another term. Ciampi, a financier and former central bank president, would probably be acceptable to Prodi.

The violent conflicts between parties that essentially represent the same pro-business and anti-worker program, together with the allocation of the highest public offices to men who should have long since accepted their pensions, are an expression of the utter isolation of the entire political elite from the mass of the population. Neither the Berlusconi camp—comprising an alliance of the most rapacious elements of the Italian bourgeoisie with neo-fascists and open racists, nor the Prodi camp, made up of more traditional and pro-European layers of the bourgeoisie backed by the apparatuses of the former worker organizations—have a program capable of meeting in any sense whatsoever the needs of the broad population.

There is not the least doubt regarding the character of the Prodi government. Those business associations that supported Prodi in the election campaign are now demanding a rapid implementation of the social and welfare cuts which Berlusconi was unable to impose. In this situation *Communist Refoundation* has taken on the crucial role of shielding the government from mass discontent.

The integration of *Communist Refoundation* into the bourgeois camp cannot be explained simply on the basis of the personal characteristics of its leader Bertinotti, who is well known for his plush life-style and his handling of the media and business bosses. It is rather the inevitable result of a perspective that rejects the building of an independent political party of the working class and instead orients to the decaying and discredited old political apparatuses. It graphically highlights the results of a course that is also being followed elsewhere in Europe, by the Left Party in Germany, for example, as well as the United Left in France.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact