

Reports to the ISSE/SEP Conference: Canada and Italy

18 April 2007

The following are reports on the political situation in Canada and Italy delivered to the International Students for Social Equality/Socialist Equality Party Emergency Conference Against War by Guy Charron, a WSWS writer and SEP member in Canada, and Marc Wells, a WSWS writer and SEP member in the US.

The conference was held March 31-April 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The remarks were made in response to the discussion at the conference and the resolution adopted by the conference, ‘End the occupation of Iraq! No to war against Iran! For an international socialist movement against war!’

Further reports and international greetings will be published in the coming days.

Remarks by Guy Charron on Canada

The same objective tendencies that are shaping US and world politics are also at play in Canada. What dominates official politics in Canada is the rise of militarism aimed at asserting Canadian bourgeois interests on a world stage, combined with a relentless attack on social conditions and the democratic rights of the working class at home.

The recent elections in the Canadian province of Quebec, held March 26, hold important lessons. The election results demonstrated that the population is starting to reject the whole framework of official politics. The two main big business parties, that alternatively have formed the Quebec governments since 1970, now, together, did not receive more than 45 percent of the vote. This is compared with more than 65 percent 10 years ago.

The Liberal Party received 25 percent fewer votes than it did in 2003, and as a result it has gone from forming a majority government to forming a minority government—the first minority government in Quebec in 130 years.

The other principal big business party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), a party that advocates Quebec's separation from Canada, has lost its share of the vote as well. In 2003, the vote for the PQ plunged, and in this election it fell even further. The PQ has not, as in the past, benefited from disaffection with the Liberal Party. Instead, it lost a further 5 percent of the vote share, and as a consequence lost its official opposition status by becoming only the third largest party in the House.

With the support of the media, the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party, was able to gather a substantial portion of the protest vote, and is forming the official opposition.

In the months before the electoral campaign, the ADQ was desperate for support. It had gathered only 12 percent support in opinion polls last fall. In order to find support, the ADQ adopted an anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic campaign, aided by the media, just before the election, saying that Muslims and Jews had too many privileges in Quebec.

The bourgeoisie saw that the ADQ, with its demand for the outright privatization of healthcare and its emphasis on law and order issues, could be useful to push the political spectrum to the right, and therefore sought to use it.

After the election, the media also claimed that with the rise of the ADQ

at last the real right-wing views of the population could be expressed. But in fact, the right wing could gain some support only because of the policies of the official “left.” There is a deep-seated opposition in the population of Canada and Quebec to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2004, there were mass demonstrations against the war in Iraq—200,000 people gathered in Montreal in below-freezing temperatures. 70 percent of the population is currently against the Canadian mission in southern Afghanistan. But the turn to war has the total support of the elites and official politics.

It is not very surprising that, under these circumstances, the right-wing parties (ADQ, PQ and the Liberal Party) did not speak about the war during the elections. However, a so-called left party, Solidarity Quebec, which says that it opposed the war, has also been uniformly silent on the question. In fact, though claiming to oppose the war, it actually supports it and promotes the claim that the war has been fought to free women and fight the Taliban. The only reason it gives for opposing it is that it has been led by NATO, rather than the UN.

The other way the official left played an important role was in strangling the opposition toward the Liberal government. The Liberal government lost its support not because its positions were too far to the left, but on the contrary, because they were too far to the right.

In 2003, six months after its elections, the Liberal government faced mass workers opposition to its attempt to cut social programs and working conditions. Workers asked for a general strike. The union bureaucracy was forced to say it would support such a strike but later strangled the movement. In 2004, there were the largest student strikes in Quebec history, with 200,000 students participating, taking to the streets to oppose cuts in financial assistance for students. This movement was also strangled by the trade unions. The unions wanted any opposition to the government to take the form of support for the PQ in Quebec, claiming that because the PQ supports independence from Quebec, it is a progressive party. They use nationalism to drum up support for this big business party.

This is the importance of the conference today. We are starting to see the break up of the political setup. On the one side are the big business parties, the official left and the union bureaucracy, all defending the war and the attacks on social conditions. On the other hand, there are large masses of working people who oppose these policies. They do not lack resolve or action. What they lack is a political perspective. There is an absence of understanding as to the nature of the trade unions and the role of nationalism.

I think that the program for the international unity of the working class on the basis of socialist policies, as embodied in the conference resolution, will gain tremendous support in Quebec in the coming months and years, as the old political set-up is upset. The resolution today is part of what workers and students need in Quebec, throughout Canada, and internationally.

Remarks by Mark Wells on Italy

The social discontent that has accumulated as a direct consequence of the policies of the government of Romano Prodi in Italy is not finding

expression within the current political establishment of Italy. Prodi has formed an alliance with the former Stalinists Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats), the Italian Communists, Communist Refoundation and the Greens, among others. This alliance is intended to provide a cover for the implementation of a militarist and pro-imperialist policy abroad, combined with a series of domestic liberalization and austerity measures that involve an unprecedented attack on the living standards of workers.

There are no essential differences between the strategy of the Prodi administration and that of the previous right-wing coalition led by media mogul Silvio Berlusconi. Both act in the interests of the Italian ruling elite, aligned with American imperialism.

On February 21, Prodi resigned from his post as Prime Minister over a foreign policy dispute. The official government stance is one of full support for, and escalation of, the Italian involvement in Afghanistan and Lebanon. The government also supports an enlargement of the US military base in Vicenza, despite large demonstrations against the American military presence in Italy. The political move by Prodi was a warning and an ultimatum to the so-called radical left, mainly consisting of ex-Stalinists inside Communist Refoundation, demanding that their participation in the government include the unconditional acceptance of Prodi's policies.

The bourgeois press has not hesitated to highlight the importance of the fact that the Prodi administration continues its pro-capitalist policies of "reform," positions that are fully supported by Communist Refoundation. The dissenting position taken by Pabloite Turigliatto, a senator member of Refoundation, whom we will analyze later, was declared "undemocratic" by his own party.

Only a few days later, Prodi resumed control of the government following the unconditional acceptance of a 12-point agenda by the parties in his coalition, including the "radical left." The agenda, which strategically resembles very much the sort of actions typical of Berlusconi, and is a frontal attack on the Italian working class and its clear opposition to war, imperialism and socially reactionary policies.

Subordinating the will of the people to "international obligations"—like the UN or NATO—is the justification used for the continuation of the military policies in Afghanistan and Lebanon, along with the enlargement of the Vicenza base, which will play a crucial role in any eventual attack against Iran. Prodi therefore promised not only to ignore the voice of millions of Italians who are vehemently opposed to war, but to attack their standard of living.

Along with this militarist stance, the government renewed its commitment to the liberalization and privatization of such vital fields as education and pensions, as well as trade and services—that is, he plans to eliminate those socio-economic concessions implemented by the Italian bourgeoisie after World War II to achieve a certain level of social stability in Italy. A large portion of the population has consistently opposed these measures.

To further demonstrate the true nature of the Greens, who are part of the coalition, a number of anti-environmental policies were also approved, such as the acquisition of port technology to process liquefied gas and the very controversial high-speed train TAV project in Northern Italy.

A profound shift in the balance of power was caused by a few measures in the 12-point agenda that give Prodi the authority to resolve issues within his coalition by asserting his individual authority over the nine political parties—basically, Prodi will supply the final word. All the members of the coalition have agreed to these demands.

The contradictions within the ruling class are increasingly threatening the wafer-thin majority of the government. In response, Prodi has sought to forge an alliance with the Christian Democrats, who broke from Berlusconi's coalition, emphasizing the clear trajectory to the right that the Prodi administration has taken. None of this could take place without the faithful complicity of Communist Refoundation, which continues to

pose as the voice of the people and the defender of the people's interests.

The case of senator Turigliatto, former member of Communist Refoundation, now a member of the generic "mixed parliamentary group," is very revealing. He belongs to Sinistra Critica (Critical Left), a Pabloite group affiliated with the United Secretariat that operates from within Communist Refoundation. While presenting themselves as opponents of capitalism and having articulated their opposition to numerous measures adopted by Prodi's administration, they conclude that the only alternative to a return to the right-wing policies of Berlusconi is the current Prodi government.

The Pabloites of the United Secretariat broke with the Fourth International and Trotskyism in the 1950s, developing an orientation to the Stalinists and various stripes of nationalist organizations. The participation of Critical Left in Communist Refoundation, through which they help prop up the Prodi government, is a continuation of this perspective.

This stance is in direct opposition to the development of an independent movement of the working class against the capitalist system and its ruling elite.

While Critical Left condemns what it calls "the most austere budget in the entire history of the Republic, the sending of troops to Lebanon, the maintenance of those in Afghanistan, the confirmation of submission to the dictates of the Vatican on questions of civil rights and secularism," the organization remains an active and, in fact, crucial partner in a government it claims to criticize.

Turigliatto himself, the "left opposition" hero of the moment praised by such a cast of characters as Noam Chomsky, George Galloway, Tariq Ali, Olivier Besancenot, Alex Callinicos and film director Ken Loach, sought to reestablish, not undermine, the credibility of the political establishment by confessing that he never wanted to bring down the Prodi government, despite the fact that he opposes its policies. His operating principle is one of political opportunism. His resignation from his Senate post is being praised as a morally correct action. In reality, his subterfuge serves the purpose of misleading and disorienting the working class by continuing to nurture illusions about Communist Refoundation and Prodi.

On March 17, tens of thousands marched in Rome to protest against the war in Iraq and the policies of the Prodi government. Communist Refoundation did not participate in the demonstration nor did it make an appeal to the public to take part. It is clear that the Italian people are dissatisfied with the pro-war and pro-austerity stance of the so-called left. In addition to the Critical Left there is Marco Ferrando of Progetto Comunista, who falsely claims to be a Trotskyist. He is one of the more active critics of the Prodi government, but he fails to explain his past longtime association with Communist Refoundation.

A crucial task of the ISSE will be the education of students and workers about the politically insidious character of parties and organizations like Communist Refoundation and Critical Left in Italy, or the LCR, PT and LO in France. The role of these organizations is in direct conflict with the class interests of the international proletariat. A complete divorce from these forces must be sought to ensure the independence of the international working class as a whole across and despite national borders, races, gender, religious differences and ethnicity.



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