

Italy's former Communist Party shifts further to the right

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The long march of Italy's Communist Party to the right is unending.

In the 1970s, the party was a pioneer of so-called "euro-communism" and renounced revolution in order to seek (unsuccessfully) a coalition with the conservative Christian Democrats.

In 1990, the party ditched its communist paraphernalia and emblems, renamed itself the Democratic Left Party and joined the social democratic International. In 1998, it stressed the "democratic" element in its name and politics—as opposed to any emphasis on a "left" orientation—and called itself merely Left Democrats. Now it is ditching the "left" altogether.

The former Stalinists are in the process of merging with the bourgeois Catholic party Margherita to create a Democratic Party along the lines of the American Democrats.

The merger was agreed upon at party congresses of the Left Democrats and Margherita in the middle of April. The first congress of the new party is to take place later this year, on October 16.

The two partners are very unequal. After the Second World War, the Italian Communist Party was the largest CP in Western Europe, with 1.8 million members. Today, party membership totals 600,000. In the parliamentary elections of 2006, the Left Democrats received 17.5 percent of the vote—the second highest total after Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia.

Margherita is a receptacle for political has-beens seeking new careers. Many come from the break-up of the Christian Democrats in 1992, but other factions are also represented. Margherita won 10.7 percent in the recent elections.

The 52-year-old head of the party, Francesco Rutelli, has conducted his own long odyssey through the ruins of the Italian political landscape. He began his political life in the Radicals, a bourgeois party opposed to the Vatican. He then joined the Social Democratic Party (PSDI), a right-wing split-off from the Socialists, and finally landed up with the Greens.

In 1993, Rutelli was elected mayor of Rome at the head of a broad coalition. Six years later he entered the European parliament with his own party—the Democrats. In 2002, he merged the Democrats with the Christian Democratic People's Party (PPI) and the organisation led by the former Central Bank head Lamberto Dini to create the Margherita.

Rutelli has on the way passed through every conceivable political constellation: from a radical opponent of the Vatican to

Christian Democracy, from a member of the Greens to embracing free-market economics, etc, etc. This agile political operator will no doubt play a major role in the new party. The tail will wag the dog.

The Left Democrats are placing their party machinery and foot soldiers at the disposal of the new party, while the Catholic, conservative free-marketeers from Margherita will determine its political course.

The driving force behind the setting up of the Democratic Party is the head of the Italian government, Romano Prodi. The independent former Christian Democrat and business manager is seeking to establish his own power base and stabilise his government, which currently comprises a volatile coalition of no less than 10 parties.

Sixteen of the 25 Italian ministers belong to the two parties which are now seeking to merge. The new party would then form the largest parliamentary group in both houses of the Italian parliament.

At the congress held by Margherita in Rome, Prodi was one of the most forceful advocates of the new project, which he is also advancing at the European level. Prior to the French presidential election he sent an open letter to the Socialist Party candidate, Ségolène Royal, calling on her to unite "socialists and democrats." This model, he argued, was now very successful in Italy and should be applied to France and throughout Europe. "I believe that we, as convinced democrats and socialists, as Europeans, must unite our forces," Prodi wrote.

Prodi has been fighting to establish a broad bourgeois "party of the centre" for years. In an open letter to the newspaper *La Repubblica* he wrote that the establishment of the Democratic Party represented the fulfilment of a dream he had pursued for the past 12 years.

Prodi emerged from the elections in April 2006 with a razor-thin majority over his main rival, Berlusconi. His majority is especially thin in the Senate, where every vote on policy could go either way.

In February this year, Prodi demonstratively resigned after losing a key vote in the Senate over the deployment of Italian troops in Afghanistan. He reassumed his post as prime minister only after all the parties of the governing coalition had given a written pledge of their undivided loyalty to him.

The formation of this new party is in large part a response to the radicalization of the Italian population. Many who supported Prodi in the election last year as an alternative to the despised Berlusconi

government are now deserting him. They are frustrated and disgusted with Prodi's strict austerity policies and his support for US military policy, which he has combined with attacks on basic democratic rights.

There have already been several mass demonstrations against Prodi's policies this year. At the largest demonstration, in Vicenza, hundreds of thousands protested under the slogan "Prodi Vergogna" ("Shame on You, Prodi") against plans for the expansion of a US military base. There is also growing opposition to the deployment of Italian troops to Afghanistan and Lebanon, the privatisation of public enterprises, the dismantling of pensions, and the austerity budget introduced by the Prodi government.

The purpose of the new party is to provide the necessary support for the government to implement its neo-liberal agenda with even greater ruthlessness. Thus, the revised version of the government's pension plan, which has so far provoked massive popular resistance, is prominent in the new party's program.

The right-wing course of the new party was clearly expressed at the congress of the Left Democrats in Florence in the contribution of Pierluigi Bersani. Bersani is the minister for industry in Prodi's cabinet and recently introduced a liberalisation decree in the context of the government's austerity budget. In Florence, Bersani praised "free market" values and declared that employers were the epitome of civic responsibility.

Guests of honour at the Left Democrat congress were the chairman of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Kurt Beck, the former US Democratic Party presidential candidate, Howard Dean, the president of the European Social Democrats, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, and the German European Union deputy, Martin Schulz (SPD).

The ideological core of the new party resembles a patchwork quilt embracing social Catholicism, patriotism and neo-liberalism, together with pseudo-reformism, environmental protection and feminism. According to the leader of the Left Democrats, Piero Fassino: "The new party is open to all reformers, civil rights activists, democrats, socialists and Catholics." A questionnaire distributed to delegates revealed a number of political role models, ranging from Mahatma Ghandi to John F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Meanwhile, the Italian media has elevated Anna Finocchiaro of the Left Democrats to the status of an Italian Ségolène Royal, and cited the statement by Italian Family Affairs Secretary Rosy Bindi (Margherita): "All over the world, the hour for women has arrived: Merkel in Germany, Royal in France, Bachelet in Chile, Clinton in the US. Italy cannot remain on the sidelines."

Although the new projected party is in its infancy, it already confronts severe problems.

A minority of the Left Democrats at the congress, representing about 15 percent of the membership, opposed the merger plans. Their leader, the secretary of research, Fabio Mussi, criticised the alliance with the Catholic Margherita, arguing against any religious affiliation. He noted that the "preamble of values," a kind of codex for the new party, expressly included Catholicism.

The preamble states that the new party stands in the tradition of the "Christian-social, liberal, socialist, social democratic and environmental cultures."

Party chief Piero Fassino responded by accusing Mussi of nostalgia and insisted that the Left Democrats would "lose neither their identity, their history, nor their values." Nevertheless, the group around Mussi refused to enter the new party and are now planning to quit the Left Democrats.

Hopes of winning other members of Prodi's government alliance to the new Democratic Party, e.g., Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values), the party led by the Mafia opponent Antonio di Pietro, or the UDEUR led by Clemente Mastella, have so far failed to come to fruition.

Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), the second organisation to emerge from the dissolution of the Communist Party and also a member of the Prodi government, has reacted with dissatisfaction to the merger of the Left Democrats and Margherita. In the newspaper *La Stampa*, Rifondazione leader Franco Giordano complained about the manner in which Rutelli and Fassino proceed from "a kind of equilibrium between the system of employers and the world of work." A similar response came from Guglielmo Epifani, the head of the biggest Italian trade union, the CGL. He protested against the predominance of employers in the new party.

Giordano and Epifani are afraid that the new party will make it more difficult for them to operate as a left fig leaf for the policies of the Prodi government. In addition, the union between the Left Democrats and Margherita threatens to exclude Rifondazione from key positions of influence. Nevertheless, this will not prevent them from loyally continuing to support the government.

The shift to the right by the former Communist Party plays into the hands of the right-wing alliance, "House of Freedom," led by Berlusconi. Berlusconi could not resist making an appearance as a surprise guest at the Left Democrat congress in Florence to congratulate delegates on their step. He explained he was in "95 percent agreement" with the policies behind the unification.

There have already been discussions between Prodi and Berlusconi over a new electoral reform which will create obstacles for smaller parties and groups. A number of newspapers are speculating about closer cooperation between the two camps, or even the possibility of a grand coalition, should the new Democratic Party prove incapable of stabilising the Prodi government.



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