

In the Italian elections, Rifondazione Comunista emerges as a bourgeois party

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The upcoming Italian election of February 24-25 marks a significant milestone for the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation Party). The main Italian “left” party to emerge from the dissolution of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Rifondazione has completed its transformation into a bourgeois party, running on an anti-corruption platform.

Though world capitalism is mired in its deepest economic crisis since the 1930s and social cuts are devastating the working class in Italy, Rifondazione wants socialism and working class struggle off of the political agenda. It has joined the Rivoluzione Civile (Citizens’ Revolution) coalition of anti-Mafia prosecutor Antonio Ingroia, while building ties to far-right circles through comedian-turned-populist-politician Beppe Grillo.

Besides Rifondazione, Ingroia’s alliance includes the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists), Federazione dei Verdi (Greens), Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values) of former Mani Pulite prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro, and Movimento Arancione (Orange Movement), led by another former judge, Luigi de Magistris, mayor of Naples.

Ingroia openly boasts that Rifondazione and similar parties in his coalition are giving him assurances that they will support right-wing positions. He said, “I demanded of these parties tangible steps back, some already made out of belief in our programme. Therefore, we are no fig leaf at all!”

Rifondazione raised no objection to Ingroia’s statement, because in joining the Citizens Revolution movement it is seeking precisely to repudiate any symbolic link it might retain to working class politics. In the decades since the PCI’s collapse, it has backed bourgeois “left” and “centre-left” governments carrying out pension cuts, imperialist wars, and other reactionary policies. Terrified of the implications of working class struggle, it is promoting instead various forms of middle class politics.

Rifondazione’s national secretary, Paolo Ferrero, has fully participated in engineering the Civil Revolution coalition and cynically presents it as an alternative to the Democratic Party (PD), the Italian bourgeoisie’s main “left” party. He said, “It’s a miracle that we could assemble it and open an alternative space left of the PD.” For Ferrero, “Ingroia is a personality with a straight back. To have him with us signals our will to have [election] lists composed of people with a straight back.”

Rifondazione is posing as an alternative to the PD because there is mass discontent with the current pro-austerity government of Prime Minister Mario Monti and opposition to PD national secretary Pier Luigi Bersani’s attempts to work out an alliance with Monti. However, Ferrero makes clear that Rivoluzione Civile is still prepared to work with the PD.

The balance sheet of PD-Rifondazione governments, to cite only the most recent 2006-2008 experience, includes deep pension cuts and participation in the Afghan war. Though mass anger with such right-wing policies cost Rifondazione its representation in the Italian parliament,

Ferrero is willing to repeat the experience. He bluntly stated, “The PD is asking Rivoluzione Civile to give them our votes to govern with Monti. If the PD breaks with Monti, then it makes sense to discuss.”

Whether or not Rivoluzione Civile works with the PD or with Monti, what workers can expect from it is the smashing of strikes, repression of protests and support for crackdowns against the working class. It is revealing that the group’s leaders are all members of the judiciary. Under the guise of “respect for the Constitution,” they are partisans of law and order.

This is exemplified by one of Rivoluzione Civile’s architects, Antonio Di Pietro, who in 2011 infamously called for repression of mass solidarity demonstrations in Italy with the anti-austerity protests of the Spanish and Greek indignados and Occupy Wall Street in the US. In Rome alone, at least 200,000 people participated in these protests.

Seizing on clashes between police and a small number of protesters, Di Pietro called for imposing draconian law-and-order measures. He declared: “We must return to the Reale Law, actually we need a Reale II. Provisions must include arrests and mandatory detention, summary trials with steep, exemplary penalties.”

The dictatorial Reale Law of 1975 was a massive attack on democratic rights. It greatly expanded police powers, including preventative imprisonment for up to four days, prohibition of wearing helmets and scarves and, above all, the pre-emptive use of firearms by police on anyone suspected of having intent to commit a crime.

Ingroia himself praised the police officers indicted for the brutal assault on sleeping youth at the Diaz school during the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa. He said, “The law must be applied even to the best men, but the solidarity [with the indicted police officers] of the ex-police chief [Gianni De Gennaro] is understandable. Those condemned are valuable men. I know some of them.”

Rivoluzione Civile hides its right-wing views behind the lowest common denominator of Italian bourgeois politics: the anti-corruption, anti-Mafia banner. In particular, it seeks to appeal to popular anger over the conflict of interest between ex-right-wing premier Silvio Berlusconi’s political role and his ownership of much of Italy’s media.

In a recent interview, Ingroia set out his priorities as follows: “If I became premier, the first reform I’d tackle would be the conflict of interests, which impedes free information and, consequently, obstructs direct access to democratic means.”

The view that Italian democracy will flower if the Mafia or Berlusconi’s business empire is eliminated is a reactionary fantasy, concealing the reality of capitalist oppression in Italy. The central obstacle to democracy in Italy today is Monti’s unelected government and the rule of finance capital. Installed by the European Union and the Obama administration, Monti wages wars and enforces unpopular austerity policies dictated by the European Commission and global banks such as Goldman Sachs, for which Monti served as an international adviser.

Maneuvers with the far right

The persona Ingroia projects—of a lawyer who will clean up Italy—is not a left-wing conception, let alone one oriented to the working class. Indeed, Rifondazione and the Rivoluzione Civile coalition are deeply engaged in political maneuvers with the far right.

Ingroia is not an accidental figure, but rather a political operative who has specialised in forging ties between Stalinists and the far right. His long-time association with Italian Stalinist groups is well known. In October 2011, he openly participated in the congress of the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (a split-off from Rifondazione, now also in Ingroia's coalition), thus risking disciplinary action by the Supreme Judicial Council.

Speaking at the 110th anniversary celebration of the Stalinist CGIL-FIOM trade union in Bologna in 2011, Ingroia praised anti-Mafia judge Paolo Borsellino as one of “the greats, the heroes,” and also “a simple man, indefatigable worker, a humble, understanding man with the ability to listen.” Murdered by the Mafia in 1992, Borsellino had a long history of affiliation to neo-fascist groups, including the University Front for National Action (FUAN), the Italian Social Movement (MSI), and the Youth Front (Fronte della Gioventù).

There is also an opening to the far right through Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-Star Movement, M5S), a right-wing populist movement.

M5S member Giovanni Favia has already joined Rivoluzione Civile. Ingroia quickly declared that “this is not a sign of hostility toward Grillo's movement, but rather the way of welcoming the same struggles.” In a personal letter to Grillo, Ingroia all but offered an alliance, stating: “Many of your struggles are ours as well, many of our programmatic items are also yours...but the ability to listen is a rare quality in politics. Let's show that we want to change the country even in this.”

Two weeks ago, Grillo praised the fascist Casa Pound organisation in a friendly conversation with some of its members. Asked whether he was “anti-fascist,” Grillo answered, “This is a problem that doesn't pertain to me. Questions which have no answer like: are you a racist or not? Are you for peace or war?” He continued, “Should a Casa Pound member with requisites wish to join M5S, he can.” He told the Casa Pound members, “You have ideas, some are agreeable.”

With Rifondazione's record of anti-worker policies and its decision to run on Rivoluzione Civile's bourgeois platform, its decision to develop ties with fascistic elements reveals more about its class character than its historical links to the Stalinist PCI. A party of lawyers, union executives, academics, and middle class professionals hostile to an independent revolutionary struggle by the working class, it is moving sharply to the right.

Rifondazione's evolution powerfully vindicates the International Committee of the Fourth International's historic opposition to the Stalinist and petty-bourgeois “left” forces—both in Italy and internationally—who viewed Rifondazione as the model for the development of a left-wing party. Built on a corrupt foundation of populist demagoguery, nationalism and class collaboration, it has been exposed by the global economic crisis that broke out in 2008 for what it was: a faction of bourgeois politics.

What unites the disparate political tendencies inside and around Rifondazione is their insistence on the leading role of bureaucratic and middle-class tendencies hostile to a revolutionary struggle for socialism by the working class and to Trotskyism.

Rifondazione's record

Rifondazione emerged from the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party amid the collapse of the USSR and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe. In 1989, which saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and economic recession in Italy, PCI national secretary Achille Occhetto announced the so-called Bologna Turn. In line with Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, Occhetto declared, “We must not continue on old roads, but invent new ones to unify the forces of progress.”

Gorbachev's policies led to the dissolution of the USSR, the restoration of capitalism, and a horrific economic and industrial collapse that produced a Russian gangster regime, led by a handful of multibillionaire oligarchs. A majority of Italy's PCI converted itself into a bourgeois party, the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Left Party, PDS). This party became today's PD.

A minority of the PCI declined to join the PDS and ultimately opted to keep a reference to the PCI in their party name, Rifondazione Comunista. Their concern was to ensure that the PCI's collapse produce no genuine challenge on the PDS's left. At Rifondazione Comunista's founding congress in 1991, Sergio Garavini warned that with “the founding of the PDS, the dissolution of the PCI opened a vacuum on the left which threatens to deepen.”

Rifondazione did not oppose the Kremlin's liquidation of the USSR, declaring in one early statement that it was “not communism that collapsed under the rubble of the Eastern European regimes, rather it is the systems which represented the negation of our ideals.” Armando Cossutta, one of Rifondazione's founders, had been a leading KGB contact in Italy.

The political stench of these bureaucrats and intelligence operatives complicit in the looting of the Soviet working class proved irresistibly attractive to a layer of the middle-class “left.” These forces, gathered inside the so-called Democrazia Proletaria (DP) in Italy, eagerly joined Rifondazione's Stalinist core. DP included the Pabloite revisionists led by Livio Maitan, the Maoist Movimento Lavoratori per il Socialismo, the “workerists” of Potere Operaio, and the “spontaneists” of Lotta Continua.

Over the two decades since the Soviet collapse, Rifondazione has proved itself again and again to be an instrument of social reaction. In the 1990s, Rifondazione began by offering support to the technocratic government of Lamberto Dini, who embarked on a programme of wide-ranging pension cuts. It then supported the first centre-left government of Romano Prodi and two subsequent centre-left administrations. Over these five years, Rifondazione lost half of its votes. Workers were disgusted by its class collaborationist policies, which led to mass impoverishment and imperialist war.

These governments carried out fiscal cuts to align Italy with the budget requirements laid down by the European Union's Maastricht Treaty. They cut cost-of-living adjustments to salaries and promoted “flexible” working conditions. They also promoted an aggressive imperialist agenda, including support for the US bombing of Iraq, an intervention in Zaire—which was openly backed by Rifondazione—the “Alba” mission in Albania, and the war against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999.

The treacherous policies of Rifondazione allowed Berlusconi to return to power in 2001, despite his unpopularity, whereupon he made further social cuts and insured Italian participation in the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though Rifondazione helped organise anti-war protests, its role in the protests proved to be a cynical cover for pro-imperialist politics.

In 2006, Prodi once again formed a centre-left government, based even more directly on Rifondazione's support. Rifondazione leader Fausto Bertinotti became president of the Chamber of Deputies, while the current Rifondazione national secretary, Paolo Ferrero, was named minister of social solidarity. The Prodi government promptly implemented severe budget cuts while continuing the military intervention in Afghanistan and intervening as well in Lebanon.

After initially voting down Prodi's foreign policy amid rising popular

opposition in 2007, Rifondazione senator Franco Turigliatto, a Pabloite, ultimately voted to support the Prodi government. Turigliatto's vote gave the government carte blanche on a 12-point ultimatum it had formulated. This included confirming Italy's imperialist policies in Afghanistan and Lebanon, a further "reform" of the pension system, and the unpopular TAV high-speed rail project. Unsurprisingly, this led again to a return to power by Berlusconi in the 2008 elections.

The European Union and the banks forced Berlusconi's removal and his replacement with Monti in November 2011. Amid a wave of social protests against Monti's policies, Rifondazione has integrated itself into the political orbit of Ingroia and its policies of law and order.

Rifondazione's shift into the camp of right-wing bourgeois politics is a sign of the immense class tensions building up in the fifth year of the world economic crisis. For decades, Rifondazione and its political allies blocked an independent political struggle by the working class against capitalism, tying workers and socialist-minded youth and intellectuals to the remnants of Italian Stalinism and petty-bourgeois politics.

No matter how corrupt it has become, however, Rifondazione cannot undo the implications of the bankruptcy of capitalism. The main forces of Italian petty-bourgeois "left" politics are embracing capitalist politics precisely as the working class is driven ever more imperiously into a struggle against capitalist oppression that has revolutionary implications. Explosive political struggles between the working class and the capitalist class that Rifondazione defends are on the agenda.

This paves the way for the construction of a new political leadership in the working class basing itself on the struggle for socialism and the traditions of orthodox Trotskyism advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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