

The Italian Communist Left – A Brief Internationalist History

*Internationalist Communist Tendency
2009*

This document was written around 2009 by Jock for the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party, now the Internationalist Communist Tendency, and can be found on their website at <http://www.left-com.org/en/articles/2009-07-01/the-italian-communist-left-a-brief-internationalist-history>.

Text presented to the comrades of the EKS (International Communist Left) in Turkey on March 5th, 2009.¹

“We, the Internationalist Communist Party – Italian section of the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party – come directly from the Italian Communist Left and have made the necessary steps forwards, facing the real dynamic of capitalism and the present nature of imperialism (which, remember, is not a policy). For us, the others coming from the tradition of the Italian Communist Left either abandoned its methodological general ground (and this is the case of the ICC) or like the Bordigists² remained static (invariant?) with the 1921–1922 positions, leaving themselves outside the development of revolutionary perspectives for capitalism today.” – Mauro Stefanini in an e-mail to a contact.

The term “Communist Left” is a bit confusing today. The groups which adhere to the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party (IBRP) don’t often use the term. We prefer to be called the “Internationalists”. We also try not to use the term “Italian left”, as it too can be quite confusing. In the “Italian Left” tradition you have three components, the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista) (the main group of the future IBRP), the French Communist Left (forerunner of the ICC) and the Bordigists (today represented by so many groups that they cannot be easily accounted for, but the original stem was Programma Comunista – the Bordigist groups usually take the sobriquet “International Communist Party”). For us, one of the biggest confusions is that when we say we are of the Italian Left Communist tradition, we often get identified with Bordiga and Bordigism.

The Italian Left has experienced two periods when its ideas had a big following, 1919–24 and to a lesser extent 1943–49. Curiously you won’t find either of these periods discussed at any length in the ICC pamphlet on the Italian Left. This is because the ICC does not relate to the whole experience of the Italian Left and certainly prefers to look at

¹ The EKS invited the Bureau to Ankara at the end of last year but decided to join the ICC before we met them. They however re-iterated their invitation and so we accepted. This brief text was given to an internal meeting of the EKS and we also addressed a joint IBRP–ICC Public Meeting in Hacettepe University on the current crisis and the situation of the international working class.

² Mauro Stefanini, refers here to the International Communist Current (ICC) and the different organisations that claim heritage to the Italian Left Communist leader Amadeo Bordiga.

the period of the 1930s when the Left was weak, divided and trying to come to terms with the betrayal of the Third International and the rise of a new form of capitalism in the USSR. However, this was the period when Marc Chirik, the ICC founder, entered political activity in Western Europe so it has more significance for them.

The Communist Party of Italy

So, starting after World War One and the Russian Revolution, the big problem in Italy was the problem of establishing a communist party which could affiliate to the Third International which had been set up in 1919. The problem that the Left faced was the deliberate confusion spread by the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) under Serrati, which kept the option of affiliating to the Third International open without actually doing it. To add to the confusion, the PSI had been able to maintain a “neither support nor sabotage” position on the war since Italy did not join it until May 1915. It was thus in a position to confuse the issue even more. At the time (1919–20) Italy was seething with political turmoil with workers occupying factories and striking in thousands. This was known as the “Biennio Rosso” or the Two Red Years. But there was no class party to lead these struggles towards an assault on the state. The workers remained in the factories and the ruling class just waited until the movement exhausted itself. By the time the Left did get to break from the socialists and set up the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I) at Livorno in 1921, the class movement was over, and the bourgeoisie was turning to fascism.

The Party that was founded was created by the Left, and its first general secretary was the young Amadeo Bordiga. Bordiga had a tendency to formalism even then, and one of his errors was to call his fraction “the Abstentionist Fraction” when really he should have called it the Communist Fraction. The result was that many communists who thought that parliament should be used as a tribune to gain publicity (but might not have seen it as the road to power) were hesitant about joining the party, and it not only meant that it was numerically smaller than it should have been, but emerged later than it should have. Bordiga’s tactical idea for using the abstentionist label was that the old Socialist Party had become corrupt and reformist because its members had received parliamentary privileges and this was his way of keeping out the reformists. It was all the more confusing in that Bordiga went to the Second Comintern Congress and insisted on adding the 21st condition which made all Comintern decisions binding on all Communist Parties. This meant that he committed the Italian Party to parliamentary and trade union work which some considered a step backwards. But Bordiga was consistent in the insistence that the founding of the Italian part of the International took precedence over everything. This was why one of Bordiga’s criticisms of the KAPD, the German Left Communists, was that they raised issues which they themselves thought of as tactical questions, to a point of principle which they put before the unity of communist action. He wrote to them that as “a Marxist I am first of all a centralist and only then an abstentionist”.

In Italy the situation was becoming more desperate for the working class as the revolutionary momentum had been lost. Now a period of reaction followed. At the same time the Comintern was in visible decline. At its Fourth Congress in 1922, it decided to form “united fronts” with those very socialist parties which had supported imperialist war and which had so painfully slowed the process of founding communist parties. For the Communist Left, the adoption of the united front marks a turning point in the history of the working class. It is one of the factors which distinguish us all from the Trotskyist currents today. In Italy, the Left still controlled the party so they came up with the idea of proclaiming a “united front from below” and even tried to persuade other parties to adopt this interpretation. The idea was that communists would cooperate with socialist workers at the factory level but not with their parties. However even this was too much for the Comintern EC and when Bordiga was arrested by the Fascist Government in 1923, they took the

opportunity to install Gramsci as party secretary. Gramsci had always recognised Bordiga as the real leader of the party but Moscow prevailed upon him to replace its most known leader. Under him the party was “bolshvised” and the Left was gradually removed from power. Bordiga did not actively lead the opposition to this as he accepted the central authority of the EC of the Comintern. But he did not hide his opposition to the course which the party and the International were taking. This led him to support the efforts of the comrades of the Committee of Intesa (Agreement Committee) who drew up a critique of the degeneration of the party. Amongst its signatories were Onorato Damen and Francesca Grossi (Cecca) whom he later married. They would be in 1943 amongst the founders of our Italian section, the Internationalist Communist Party.

The Committee of Intesa argued that

“It is mistaken to think that in every situation expedients and tactical manoeuvres can widen the Party base since relations between the party and the masses depend in large part on the objective situation.” (The Platform of the Committee of Intesa. CWO Pamphlet, p.18)

The EC of the Comintern demanded the expulsion of all who had supported the Committee. Its members were stripped of all offices by Gramsci but the Left continued to fight politically against the degeneration of the party. This culminated in 1926, in two events which summed up this fight, Bordiga’s last speech to the CI and the Lyons Congress of the PCd’I. The former saw Bordiga denounce Stalin, the abandonment of the internationalism of the Russian Revolution and the treatment of Trotsky. Stalin is supposed to have replied “May God forgive you”. The PCd’I certainly did not. At the Lyons Congress, all the party officials who had supported the Left were told by Gramsci that if they did not vote for his theses they would lose their party positions and their pay (which is one reason why our comrades have opposed the idea of “professional revolutionaries” ever since). Under this pressure many recanted so that the Left was now more isolated. The Left was now expelled from the Party and some went into exile in France and Belgium. Damen never went into exile. He was to be arrested several times and was imprisoned during both the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. Bordiga also remained in Italy but retired back into civil life and allowed to pursue his occupation as an engineer in Naples. He played no further part in political activity until 1945.

The Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy

The Italian Left emerged as such during the ’30s particularly in France, where in 1928 (in Pantin) the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy was formed. It published *Prometeo* (originally the revolutionary magazine of the Naples (Bordiga’s) section of the PCd’I) and then *Bilan*.

The Fraction was not a homogeneous body, it couldn’t be such. Our comrades found themselves at the heart of the counter-revolutionary process. The problem was to understand it: its reasons, its nature and so on. The War in Spain divided the Fraction. Some comrades thought they could go to Spain and take part in the war on the Republican side in order to win it for a real communist struggle. Those who opposed them also went to Spain to try to win them back to communist positions. In the event, the comrades who entered the militias soon found to their cost that it was not possible in what had become an imperialist war to win the workers to communism. The major gain was that the *Bilan* comrades recognised that the anti-fascist war was the prelude to the dragooning of the working class into support for imperialism in one form or another.

However two tendencies, at least, existed inside *Bilan*. For instance, while a part denied the possibility to characterize decisively the nature of the USSR, another was stating that a counter-revolutionary policy of a Party and of a State is the product of a

developing social and political counter-revolution, where the State is no longer the proletarian semi-state (Lenin – *The State and Revolution*) and the party had crossed the class line, substituting itself for the old, traditional bourgeoisie (state-capitalism). But *Bilan* was unclear on many issues, one of which was the state in the period of transition. Another was on the analysis of the economic contradictions of capitalism, where the texts of Mitchell saw in late Luxemburgist economics the only real explanation of capitalist crises. These errors led to the disastrous underestimation of the nature of the crisis in 1939. Taking the view (from Chapter 18 of Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*) that arms production would enable capitalism to emerge from the Great Depression they felt that capitalism could avoid another imperialist war. The Fraction abandoned *Bilan* and replaced it with *Octobre* which only produced half a dozen issues in the final months of peace in 1939. Vercesi (Perrone) argued that the working class was undefeated and that revolution was still possible. It was no wonder that the Left Fraction in exile collapsed on the opening of the Second Imperialist War. It was definitely midnight in the century for the working class now. Some members of the Fraction were to be killed by Stalin and some by Hitler, but in the brutal but more disorganised fascist state of Italy, the Left still continued to survive albeit in internal exile, prison and under house arrest.

The Foundation of the Internationalist Communist Party

With the collapse of the Mussolini regime in 1943, a space opened for this clandestine activity to be more organised and Damen and Stefanini, amongst others, took the opportunity to found, in great secrecy, the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt.). The first issues of the new *Prometeo* and some revolutionary defeatist leaflets were produced. Its declaration was uncompromising;

“Workers! Against the slogan of a national war which arms Italian workers against English and German proletarians, oppose the slogan of the communist revolution, which unites the workers of the world against their common enemy – capitalism.”
(*Prometeo* 1, November 1943)

Gradually many of the “French” (and “Belgian”) comrades came back to Italy to join the party. Only the tiny Gauche Communiste de France (GCF) refused to join the new party, instead cooperating on leaflets with Trotskyists and councilists. Eventually, it decided that this was not the time for a new party on the grounds that it was a still counterrevolutionary period. Indeed, the GCF of Marc Chirik was soon to conclude that a new and more devastating war was on the agenda and in 1952, he abandoned Europe and revolutionary activity. He returned from Venezuela to found Revolution Internationale in 1967 and by 1975 had formed the ICC.

The failure of the GCF to join the PCInt was a mistake as even the ICC history of the Italian Left demonstrates. The PCInt had taken up the work of *Bilan* but had resolved many of its confusions. Damen insisted that:

1. Rosa Luxemburg and not Lenin was right on the national question.
2. The old Communist parties (now fully stalinised) were not centrist but bourgeois.
3. There was no hope of conquering the unions and that new strategies towards the daily class struggle would have to be evolved to connect the daily struggle of the class to the longer term struggle for communism.
4. The USSR was not a neither-nor society but state capitalist.
5. There could be no substitution of the party for the class as a whole.

“The Communist party must not take power in order to exercise it in the name of the proletariat because the proletariat does not delegate to others its historic mission nor hand

over a general power of attorney, not even to its political party.” (Theses of the Damen Tendency at the 1952 Congress of the PCInt)

And Bordiga? Bordiga remained at home during the fascist period and during the war and never joined the Party, though he collaborated with its publications. In 1945, at the end of the war (and the reunification of Italy) several comrades from the South close to Amadeo Bordiga, joined the Party. At this time the Party had 5000 members all over Italy with some supporters in France, Belgium and the USA.

However in 1948 with the strike wave over and the Italian bourgeois republic established, the differences between the two old tendencies in the Fraction re-emerged. Bordiga added to the confusion, and with the help of Vercesi, Maffi and others, succeeded three years later in splitting the Internationalist Communist Party. He then went on to found his own organisation in 1952 (Programma Comunista, called International – not Internationalist – Communist Party). The points of methodological and political disagreements were:

- the characteristics of imperialism – the Bordiga group insisted that in some “backward” areas of the world, the national struggle was part of the anti-imperialist movement of “coloured people” as Bordiga expressed it.
- the union question – Bordiga insisted that the possibility of gaining influence in the working class could still come through gaining influence in the unions.
- the Party/class relationship. Bordiga (who we must now regard as different from the Bordiga of the 1920s) maintained that we could not speak of the class unless it had a political party, thus destroying the distinction Marx made between a class for itself and a class in itself. The consequence of this view was that the Party alone would make the revolution – clearly an impossibility.
- Bordiga rejected the idea that the USSR was state capitalist and thus had no clear position as to what kind of society it was (in fact Bordiga advanced different views at different times throughout the rest of his life).
- the final distortion of Marxism was to insist that it was “invariant” and that the doctrine was the same since 1848, a theory which ignored all that the proletariat had learned on its long road to emancipation and stood in stark contrast to the views of Marx and Engels, who several times criticised their own formulations in the light of proletarian experience.

Programma was to split further several times with each part insisting it was the real class party so that in Italy today there are several International Communist Parties but only one Internationalist Communist Party.

The PCInt, like the rest of the revolutionary movement, gradually declined in membership as the post-war boom stabilised capitalism, but when this ended, Damen noted that a new situation had appeared and in 1970 wrote an article calling on the Party to reach out to these new elements. However the new groups that did appear were for the most part councilists and hence had little interest in relating to a “party”. This also included the Communist Workers’ Organisation which was formed in September 1975. The PCInt wrote a critique of its platform. The CWO found it very fraternal and cogent but was not yet ready to agree with it. The ICC had told us that the PCInt was “Bordigist” and thus we were very wary of them. However when the PCInt initiated the International Conferences in 1977, the CWO accepted the invitation with some interest.

The International Conferences

The CWO had independently reached similar positions to the PCInt on the economic basis for understanding the capitalist crisis. Both organisations saw the post-war cycle of accumulation had come to an end in 1971, and both based this on a value analysis of capitalist accumulation. Both organisations also agreed on the nature of the period of transition between capitalism and communism and there was growing rapprochement on the question of the party, given the critique the PCInt had made of the CWO's Platform of 1975. On all other issues (national liberation, the unions (despite some nuances), decadence, and the nature of the USSR, social democracy, etc.), both organisations shared the same positions as the ICC. What increasingly emerged in the conferences though was a further difference on perspectives and method, and this, together with the key issue of the party, would eventually lead to the failure of the Third Conference in 1980.

The first two conferences were really confrontations between the ICC and the PCInt (at the first the CWO, for practical reasons was only present via its documents). Whilst there were a number of other groups at the Second, the two main protagonists remained the same. The CWO delegation came back from the Second Conference stating that it was largely a re-run of the First and arguing that a Third Conference on exactly the same debate on the Party would be our last. Thus the CWO delegation for the Third Conference was already mandated to announce its withdrawal in the absence of any new initiative. This it did, as did the GCI (Belgium). The PCInt now had the choice of ending up only repeating the same dialogue with the ICC alone or trying to salvage something from the conferences, so they came up with the famous seventh criteria on the Party. The ICC could not accept this at that time since their depiction of the role of the Party as some kind of cheerleader encouraging the working class from the outside, whereas BC was arguing that the party is a part of the class (its most conscious part) inside it and physically and organisationally leading it. The new criteria (which can be seen in our "Basic Positions" on page 28) tried to make a distinction between the two positions. In the end only the CWO and BC voted for it. With the exception of the GCI, all the other groups then disappeared. In reality it seems that the ICC was confused on organisation (it was not alone) and suffered a number of splits in the 1980s in which the more councilist elements left. The Bureau has not had any close relations with any of these ex-ICC groups for the simple reason that they were a step back politically and organisationally. The ICC, on the other hand, has never shown that the departure of more councilist elements, means it had moved on on the party question.

The Formation of the Bureau

In 1982 the PCInt and the CWO then held a Fourth Conference together with the students of the SSUCM of Iran who agreed to the seven criteria. This conference was simply a debate (it could hardly be called a confrontation since the SSUCM was so elusive to pin down) but it at least enabled the PCInt and the CWO to work together, and this paved the way for the creation of the Bureau in late 1983. We held a further International Conference in Vienna in 1989 on the crisis in Eastern Europe with the GIK (Austria) the IRK (Germany) and the CCA (Mexico). The Bureau has since grown modestly with nuclei in Canada, the USA, Germany and France as well as associated comrades in South America. We do not see ourselves as the party but we are for the party. That is, we recognise the need for an international party and that there has to be political preparation in advance before that party can come about. We do not even see ourselves as the future nucleus of the revolutionary party but only one of its constituent elements. We expect the future struggles of the class to throw up new elements who will pose issues in new ways and we hope to engage positively with them.

We also do not see ourselves as a rival of the ICC, as we see the ICC as having a different project (it is already a centralised organisation with branches in many countries). We think this is premature and that the growth of real movements of the class will be necessary first before such centralisation is either necessary or desirable.

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