

On the union question - Amadeo Bordiga and Onorato Damen

Bordiga's
Letter of
January 5,
1951

Damen to
Bordiga on
the Union
Question⁵



An extract from the book 'Bordiga: Beyond the Myth', published by the CWO/ICT, available in multiple languages, on the question of working with unions. All italics in this article are the commentaries from the ICT.

What follows are two further extracts from the book by Onorato Damen "Bordiga: Beyond the Myth". Other parts of this can be found on our website As the title suggests these are devoted to the union question. The extracts demonstrate that Damen supported work within unions but it was in the form of factory groups, politically constituted and outside of union structures and their

conservative aims. Bordiga still had not given up the perspective of reconquering the unions for the working class once the objective situation had changed. Damen considered this impossible. This is the first time this exchange has appeared in English. This version has been slightly altered and improved, with some errors corrected from the version which appeared in **Revolutionary Perspectives 2** (series 4). The part in italics which follows is an introduction by the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista).

CWO

Amongst the fundamental problems that the Internationalist Communist Party had to face following the end of the Second World War the union issue was among the most important. The validity of the work the party was called upon to develop on the level of demand struggles and within the union movement depended on a clear evaluation and definition of the role that the unions would play in the immediate post-war period. Alongside the differences on the unions which had developed in the Party Bordiga clarified his own thoughts in a letter which was later published in the "Pre-congress Bulletin 1952" with this explanation:

"Comrade Bordiga has finally seen fit to specify in detail his thinking on the union question. The way that this letter/ document came to the Party would be irrelevant if not for the fact that, having been sent before the meeting of June 1, 1951 in Milan, it remained in the pockets of the recipient, in the Stalinist manner, brought to light much later and for reasons of *force majeure*."

1) The current union situation is different from that of 1921, not only because of the absence of a strong Communist Party, but also due to the fact that the content of union activity has been progressively eliminated and bureaucratic functions are replacing rank and file action: assemblies, elections, party fractions in the unions. This applies to everything from professional staff to heads, etc. This disappearance, favourable to the interests of the capitalist class, follows the same narrative as those other factors: CLN-type corporatism, unions of the Di Vittorio¹ or Pastore² type. There is no reason to declare this process irreversible. If a strong Communist Party faces up to the capitalist offensive, if the proletariat openly distances itself from the (union) tactics of the National Liberation Committee (CLN), if it escapes the influence of the current Russian policy, then it is possible that at some time X and in some country Y class unions may resurface *ex novo* or by conquering existing unions. We cannot exclude this from a historical perspective. And these unions certainly will be formed during a period of advancing struggles, of a fight for the conquest of power. In both cases it is immaterial that D'Aragona,³ or Di Vittorio leads today, that does not stop our fraction's activity in the CGL.

2) Given the limited strength of the party, while this is not growing enough and we do not know if it will before or after the revival of non-political class organisations that have many members, the party could not nor should not proclaim a boycott of unions, factory organs and workers' struggles, nor submit on principle its own candidates' list in union elections in the factories nor, wherever there is a majority in support, use the slogan of boycott in workers' struggles, encouraging them not to vote, or not to belong to the union, nor to go on strike or other such things. Putting it positively, in most cases, practical abstention not boycott.

3) In certain situations, wherever the balance of forces is favourable, we should never raise the slogan of boycott. We may or may not submit lists of our own, depending on the practical consequences anticipated, and in any case we spread our principles by means of the factory group formed by elements of the party, that emanates from the party and is subordinate to the party.

4) It is necessary to develop the propaganda of the history of unions, and in particular explain the tactics of the Communist International and the Communist Party of Italy in the favourable phase of the First World War, the Theses of Moscow and Rome, etc., etc., the history of the communist union fraction of the CGL, the railway union, etc. A principle: no intermediate bodies between the party and the class means no possibility of revolution. The party does not abandon these organs just because it is a minority in them. But in no case does it submit its principles and directives to the will of the majority under the pretext that they are "workers". This also applies to the Soviets. (See Lenin, Zinoviev, etc ...).

Amadeo Bordiga, January 5, 1951.

What follows are some excerpts from Bordiga's letters and documents, which clearly demonstrate, especially with regard to the union issue, that Bordiga's "thinking" was struggling and shows some uncertainty. In any case it was far removed – at that time – from the position of boycotting strikes and indifference towards workers' struggles. In fact he was in favour of participating in such struggles, though always fighting the line imposed by unions. It was these positions (boycott and indifference) that would characterise the behaviour of those who would be his supporters at the time of the 1952 split. And it should be noted that it was precisely the "union issue" which was the main stage for numerous twists and tactical stunts of the "new party" that the splitters went on to form, this time with Bordiga at their head.

"Today in Italy, given the small size of the party, you cannot raise the slogan that these organs [unions] must be conquered and always participate in their elections, but we cannot and must not raise the slogan of a general boycott. Ninety percent, maybe ninety-nine percent of the time, the numerical correlation of forces is such that the problem does not even arise. But where it does, you might think about participation in campaigns, with lists in some cases, and generally without accepting posts that you may possibly win, but always spreading our criticism and propaganda. The basis for this task is the workplace group and other groups of adherents to the party. It is the party going to the workplace, and not vice versa, they are not cells from below, but instruments of the party, which is organised on a territorial basis (the Left in 1925).

The Italian left has never confused parliamentary issues with unions, which are very different. In the latter it has always been in favour of participation, and never in favour of boycott or departure."

A. Bordiga, February 2, 1951.

"The party does not include more than a part of the working class, the party leads the working class not only through teaching its doctrine, proselytising in favour of their organisation and the preparation of military actions, but also by participating in organs much larger than the party and accessible to all class members. This means that there are three levels (and this is most evident on

the eve of the major events): the party, that according to the left is not vast, the proletarian organisations by their constitution, which only include workers regardless of their ideological adherence, and the class, which includes everyone, including those who are not organised.”

A. Bordiga, February 2 1951.

“However the call to create another *couche*,⁴ related to other organs which ‘constitutionally’ do not only contain proletarians, but also elements of other classes (parliamentary bodies, etc...) is a DIFFERENT question, a pure manoeuvre. The first question which arises now is a central problem, if we do not solve it, there’ll be no revolutionary class or class party, before, during or after the revolution.”

A. Bordiga, February 2, *1951.*

“As for unions, I have come to this conclusion: in the absence of an organ linking proletarian interests, the connective tissue between the vital centre of the party and the peripheral muscles of the class, the revolution is impossible. It has to be independently reborn, outside the influence of the ruling class, in new forms.

I would be in favour of Onorato’s formula where he proposes to free the union movement from bourgeois oppression, but against his claim that this depends on workplace organs and not on ‘external’ organs of economic association. The union is a non-constitutional voluntary organisation and, and the bourgeoisie is trying to destroy this form.”

A. Bordiga, April 15, 1951.

It seems superfluous to point out once again my position on the “union-party” issue on the many points on which we agree completely, compared to the few, even rare cases where our analyses differ due, not just to a disagreement of principle, but because we see our experience differently as we have lived it differently.

Let's take them in order. Our agreement is complete in:

- 1) Rejecting the slogan, whether expressed, implicit or implemented, to boycott unions, workplace organs and workers’ struggles.
- 2) Participating when our success is practically possible in elections to workplace committees, with or own list but in the end not taking the seats won.
- 3) Considering factory groups, which go from the party to the places of work and not the other way around, as the basis of our work.
- 4) Considering still valid the position of the left, which has always declared for participation and not boycott or departure, with regard to the union issue.

The agreement is not as complete when we take this participation from the factory to the union, in which we are virtually absent and therefore it is physically impossible to exert any influence. Our approach also differs on the

problem of the reconquest of existing unions. You wrote: "If a strong Communist Party faces up to the capitalist offensive, if the proletariat openly distances itself from the (union) tactics of the National Liberation Committee, if it escapes the influence of the current Russian policy, then it is possible that at some time X and in some country Y class unions may resurface *ex novo* or by conquering existing unions. We cannot exclude this from a historical perspective. And these unions certainly will be formed during a period of advancing struggles, of a fight for the conquest of power."

I think that the current corporate union (who cares if fascist, communist or social democratic), due to its essential role in the revival of the capitalist system, is destined to continue until the end of the economic, social and political hardships of a dying capitalism, and will only be defeated when the assault of the revolutionary proletariat brings down the imperialist state. In such a period of advance and struggle for power, grouping of the proletarian forces will not wait for a repeat of the traditional practice of the union, but will face up to the particular problems of power in new mass organisation with a more suitable structure than that of the union (factory councils, or soviets or others, such as occurred in Russia and Germany) and under the direction of the revolutionary party,

Finally, on your hypothesis that extracting the proletariat from Russian influence necessarily involves their immediate and certain fall under American influence, an oscillation which depends on which of the two opposing poles of imperialism is more attractive. This is perhaps a historical period in which unions of all kinds will politically flourish, but in no way is it, nor can it be, a period of class unionism.

Currently, unions interest us, but not because we consider them as proletarian organs under bourgeois dictatorship, as you think, but because the masses are in them, which on one hand are unable to fend for themselves on the class terrain and on the other are constantly willing to be drawn into the realm of imperialist competition. That is where we must exercise our critical activity of class re-education and political orientation; such activity must be accompanied by our own union policy, to be developed in the workplace, and especially wherever the reaction of the union bureaucracy is less effective against party political free speech. In this sense, I think the need for regrouping proletarians on the terrain of absolute autonomy, no matter if few in number at the beginning, must always be the central concern of the party. This is the specific way to focus the significant and not too distant experience of our union fraction.

A NOTE ON THE INTERNAL CRISIS

I enclose the statement I sent to the E.C. which raises the problem of the crisis at the top of the party in real terms. We do not accept the experiments whose theoretical justification has led me and then comrade Bottaioli⁶ to leave the EC. The issue that has divided us and still divides us is always to defend the political line adopted in Florence,⁷ voted for or not. Now, if the centre continues to have a different opinion, if it continues to believe that this can become detrimental to the organisation, I think it's time to raise the specific problem of the active defence of that political line, applying wherever physically possible, with or without the consent of the EC, a line which can be roughly summarised as follows:

- 1) To clearly reject any perspective that means leaving the unions, and the boycott of these organisms and their struggles
- 2) To participate in the struggle in the Internal Commissions, openly and with our own list, in the workplaces where it is materially possible to show our strength and not accept any posts that might be gained.
- 3) To reject without hypocrisy the policy that minimises the present and future tasks of the party and that restricts the field of possible activity based on concerns that have nothing to do with revolutionary militant activity.
- 4) To reactivate the organisational and political life of the party, starting from what it considers suitable for the revolutionary struggle, without running away from the responsibilities of this fight, but facing up to them depending on our objectives, the immediate situation and the opposing political forces dialectically reflected in the dynamics of class conflict.

O. Damen, March 14, 1951.

1. Giuseppe Di Vittorio (1892-1957) ex-anarcho-syndicalist; took the place of Ravazzoli in the union work of the PCI when the latter was thrown out of the P.C.d'I. as a Trotskyist (He was part of the New Opposition with Tresso y Leonetti, the so-called group of "Three" "Tres"); during the liberation he was part of the Communist Party leadership. Elected secretary of the CGIL in 1945.
2. Ottavio Pastore (1887-1965), became chief editor of the daily *L'Unità* in 1924.
3. Ludovico D'Aragona, was secretary of the C.G.L., an organisation which he declared dissolved during WW1. He continued to be a leader of the C.G.L in the post-war period and had an important role in the factory occupation movement in Turin, signing the agreement with the bosses to return to work.
4. Layer or strata, in French in the original.
5. It concerns a letter-document sent to Bordiga with the intention of exactly defining his points of agreement and disagreement concerning the union question.

6. In March 1951 Damen and Bottaioli left the Executive Committee of the Internationalist Communist Party in which they were a minority. Giovanni Bottaioli "Butta" (1900-1959) was a militant of the Italian Communist Fraction and a member of the Executive Committee of Marseilles during WW2. After his exile in France, he returned to Cremona in 1945.

7. The First National Congress of the Internationalist Communist Party was held in Florence, from the 6-9 May, 1948. Following the national meeting in Turin, 1945, taking into account the inevitable existence of certain disagreements, and misunderstandings amongst the cadres of the Italian Left, after two decades of dispersion and isolation, the Congress approved a set of Theses which some members of the party accepted with open reservations. As the national and international situation worsened in an ever – more revolutionary sense, some symptoms of crisis appeared with the appearance of a tendency in the party leadership, of a pessimistic nature, if it can be put in that way, regarding the development of the political and organisational tasks which were being imposed. See the article in the Pamphlets produced by Prometheus Editions – *The Process of formation and birth of the Internationalist Communist Party* .and *The Internationalist Split of 1952*. We should make it clear that ever since this party had been created, there existed a tendency within it which sought to restrict its tasks, going so far as to deny the historical legitimacy of its very existence. According to them, the party should not have reappeared until after an overturning of the reactionary situation which characterised the post-Second World War period. There were those who advocated the construction of a fraction rather than a party, when the former had exhausted the reasons and tasks for which it was created in the twenties in the context of the centrist experience. With the passing of all worker parties to the side of the counterrevolution which had been confirmed in Russia, the problem of

forming a new party became something necessary and urgent, even if only not to lose all the work that the fraction had done in those years. By way of a synthesis, here is the assessment made by Onorato Damen at the Turin Meeting and the Congress in Florence: *“For the proletariat to again become a revolutionary force it must be assisted, it must be helped so as to learn to recognise its enemies and be free from the influence of the workers' parties that have gone over to the counter-revolution. And it is up to the party to create in the heat of the fight the human class force which is called on to solve this crisis in a revolutionary way, otherwise it leads us to war. In this sense the party is revealed as the necessary theoretical, critical and organisational condition for this revolutionary solution: revolution, or war.”*