

Background on the Italian Communist Left, Bordiga and Bordigism



The following text was originally written for the US magazine Discussion Bulletin and did actually appear in its final edition. It was written as a reply to a text published in an earlier edition of the same magazine. This was written by Macintosh, a member of the councilist organisation which publishes Internationalist Perspectives. Being councilist its description of the Italian Left was not very accurate and our North American comrades were moved to correct it. The comrades originally prepared it for publication in the Discussion Bulletin but we despaired of seeing it reach the pages of the journal we decided to publish it here. Printing it here not only brings it to the attention of a wider audience but also satisfies the requests of those correspondents of ours who are always asking for a brief text which describes the origins of all the groups which adhere to the IBRP.

The Italian Communist Left

There are points made by Macintosh in his piece *Bordiga, Bordigism and the Communist Left* that could use a little background for those who aren't familiar with the Italian Communist Left. Much of the sources for the history and

experience of the Italian Communist Left are, obviously, written in Italian and not readily available to those approaching the subject from outside the political tendencies which directly grew out of this experience or who do not have at least a reading knowledge of Italian. This short overview aims to put forward a short account of key factors that may help illuminate some unfamiliar or confused aspects of the development of this tendency.

The experience of Fascism left the Italian Communist Left dispersed, in exile abroad, in prisons, in internal exile to the Italian islands and forced underground. The militants of the Italian Left kept publishing *Prometeo* until 1938. Bordiga after his first arrest, in 1922, was increasingly sidelined as Gramsci and Togliatti's center, guided by the Comintern, maneuvered to take complete control of the party. Bordiga rapidly found himself increasingly isolated both in the International and within his own party. He found himself forced to put forward constantly changing opportunistic tactics dictated by the Moscow center. The Communist Party of Italy was formed late. Only after a bitter and protracted struggle had taken place between the Italian Left and Italian Social Democracy were the first steps taken to form the PCd'I. So by 1921, when these militants were finally able to form the Communist Party of Italy, the revolutionary wave had passed. The name of the new Italian party was the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito comunista d'Italia*). This was to indicate that the Italian party was merely a part of one single international revolutionary party. It signified the origins and struggle that created the Italian party, which was formed around the central issue of adherence to the Communist International. Not until the counterrevolutionaries assumed total control of the party, largely undertaken in the name of "bolshevization", did they change the name of the party to the Italian Communist Party. This was not a matter of semantics but of the nationalist and bourgeois perspective of the counterrevolutionaries that took power within the Italian party and within the Comintern as a whole.

By 1926, Bordiga had almost wholly withdrawn from an active political life. So, even though Bordiga signed onto the *Platform of the Committee of Intesa of 1925*, the Italian Communist Left was on its' own and Bordiga had already withdrawn out of active political life in Italy. This 1925 platform signified the separation of the Italian Communist Left from the Communist Party of Italy and the beginning of the existence of the Italian Communist Left as a separate entity.

Prometeo, the journal of the Communist Left in Italy, continued as the main voice of the Italian Left. After a gap in publication of five years the militants of the Italian Left, in 1943, restarted the journal Prometeo publishing it clandestinely. Bordiga did not return to active politics until the late 1940s, several years after the militants of the Italian Left formed Internationalist Communist Party (Partito Comunista Internazionalista, generally identifying itself by its paper *Battaglia Comunista*). During the intervening period the groups around Prometeo (and the publications of the Italian Left in exile) elaborated their theory independently of any contribution from Bordiga. So for much of the key period of their theoretical development Bordiga was not active or even present. Their theory was developed collectively and was not simply the product of any one militant or theorist despite the importance of Bordiga as a leader and the strength of his writing.

Bordiga chose not to participate in the initial founding of the PCInt, even though he his comrades invited him to attend and had arranged for his transport to participate in the formal founding of the new party at its' first national conference in Turin from December 1945 to January 1946. Bordiga never officially joined the PCInt. From the start of Bordiga's return to political activity, in 1949, there were clear divisions between his conceptions and those of his theoretical "heirs", whom he regarded as having wrongly moved away from the positions of the Italian Left of the twenties. When the split between the Bordigists and the rest of the Italian Communist Left occurred in 1952, it was accompanied by a sense of betrayal on the part of those who had struggled, in the face of Fascism, Stalinism and imperialist war, to bring the party into being. This split was not simply between two individuals, Onorato Damen and Amadeo Bordiga. It had its basis in differences over the theory and tactics of the party in regards to parliaments, unions, the role of revolutionaries in relation to national liberation movements, the role of the party in relation to the class and questions around party organization. While Bordiga, and those that followed him, sought a return to the positions of the Italian Left back in the early 1920s, the group that remained within the PCInt around *Battaglia Comunista* refused to abandon the theoretical gains made from their own political experiences. When Left Communists speak of "Bordigists" they generally mean those people who left in 1952 to join with Bordiga in forming his International Communist Party. Those who did not go and join Bordiga's party do not consider themselves Bordigist,

nor did they consider themselves his "followers". The political successors and splits of this party that Bordiga formed in 1952 are the ones generally called "Bordigist". The experience of the Italian Communist Left cannot be simplified into one of subordination and domination by Bordiga or any single theorist or leader and this is precisely what makes them a little harder to pin down than some other political tendencies. Labels such as "Bordigist", or "neo-Bordigist" or "ultra-leninist" do not describe the nature of the tendency as much as obscure it in the absence of an analysis.

A Bit of History

The Italian Communist Left had to deal with the betrayal of the working class by a party that they had only formed five years beforehand. So in the period from 1921 to 1926 they had all been isolated within the party and essentially forced to stay silent or quit the party. Their actual period within the Communist Party of Italy, and the Communist International was only FIVE active years. This is not a very long period of time considering that the struggle of the Italian Left, within Social Democracy, against the reformist current around Turati took considerably longer. The struggle of the Italian Left within Social Democracy lasted, from its beginnings with the creation of the tiny Marxist paper *La Soffitta* (lit. *The Attic* - challenging the reformists who regarded Marxism as having been relegated "to the attic") in 1912, to the formation of the PCd'I in 1921. It was this struggle within Italian Social Democracy that formed the basis of their experience through which their approach to subsequent developments was based. Thus instead of viewing the International as a collection of separate national party organizations as under Social Democracy they viewed the International as a world revolutionary party. Adhering to the International meant dispensing with the opportunism and reformism of the 2nd International, which was one of the key issues in the struggle with Turati and Italian Social Democracy.

Some things need to be mentioned in regards to understanding the position taken by the Italian Communist Left regarding democracy, worker's councils and revolutionary organization. Democracy was the historical form with which the bourgeoisie allowed Fascism to take power and crush the working class. The democracy of worker's councils, of the proletariat in its struggle, is not something that was ever treated contemptuously by the Italian Left. For the Italian Communist Left the worker's councils were organizations that could only

grow in the course of class struggle and revolution. Worker's councils were, and are seen as the form of rule by and for the proletariat whose task is to establish an order that disenfranchises and destroys the capitalists as a class. The councils function as the revolutionary party too must function, on the proletarian basis of elected and immediately revocable delegates (larger bodies electing smaller bodies, democratic centralism). As permanent institutions within capitalism they could only become like trade unions. The councils were seen as the measure of the militancy and combativeness of the class. They regarded the collapse of the councils as another sign of the passing of the revolutionary wave. The Italian Communist Left did not create a fetish out of Workers' Councils. Rather they regarded them as having their context and relevance within revolutionary struggle. Outside of the context of a revolutionary upheaval workers' councils can only become like trade unions either being absorbed or crushed by the bourgeoisie. Groups that come out of the Italian Communist Left generally see a revolutionary party of proletarians organized on an international scale and in the forefront of the struggles of the revolutionary working class as necessary for the overthrow of the capitalism. While the conception of the role of the party and its organization differs between the "Bordigist" elements and non-Bordigist elements of the Italian Communist Left, Battaglia Comunista and the groups joined with it in the IBRP, have never seen the role of this party as one of taking power in the name of the proletariat.

The strength of the theoretical outlook of the Italian Communist Left lay in their materialist analysis of events as they evolved in respect to their experiences in struggle under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. This analysis did not remain static in the sense of attempting to hold an unvarying analysis of events in the face of imperialist war and counterrevolution. That their development took place in the context of the growth of fascism followed by Second World War, through the worst period of the counterrevolution, makes their experience particularly instructive for those seeking to understand the development of capitalism into the present period.

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Those who want to learn more about the origins of the Italian Communist Left might want to read the Communist Workers

*Organisation pamphlet The Platform of the Committee of
Intesa 1925, available by sending 2£ (\$4.00US includes
postage) to:*

CWO, BM CWO, London, WC1N 3XX