

The politics of tactical manoeuvre

Interview with Paolo Ferrero of Italy's Communist Refoundation Party

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The Italian *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC) is seen as a role model by many on the European left. The Communist Refoundation Party, as its name correctly translates, was established in 1991 by members of the Italian Communist Party, who rejected its transformation into a left democratic party, the present day *Democratic Left* (DS). Since then the PRC has absorbed many organisations of the radical left and plays an important role on the left fringe of official Italian politics. Obtaining 8.6 percent of electoral votes in 1996 and 5 percent in 2001, it has representatives in parliament.

On the one hand, the PRC attempts to latch onto militant moods within the population and participates in extra-parliamentary actions. It is active in the CGIL union, which frequently organises protests against the government led by Silvio Berlusconi. It has also taken part in the activities of the *European Social Forum* and in recent demonstrations against the Iraq war.

On the other hand, throughout the 1990s the PRC acted to ensure that the then centre-left government received the necessary parliamentary support to push through sharp budget cuts. In 1995, it supported the transitional regime of former Central Bank chief Lamberto Dini. From 1996 to 1998, it guaranteed a parliamentary majority to the "Olive Tree" alliance under Romani Prodi, even though it was not part of the government. It thereby enabled the current president of the EU Commission to rein in government spending and consolidate the national budget, a prerequisite for Italy's participation in the European currency union.

In this way, the PRC functioned as a model centrist organisation. While employing radical and socialist phraseology, in practice it served as a left fig-leaf for successive governments. The PRC fostered the illusion that it was possible to gain concessions from these governments through exerting a combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary pressure, diverting those entering into struggle from taking an independent political direction and condemning them to impotence.

As a result, its own course was forced to follow a zig-zag line. Phases of collaboration with the government alternated with shifts to the left, and vice versa. These shifts did not occur without inner turmoil and conflict, and many fractions continue to struggle within the party today. However, with every turn to the left, the PRC lost a section of its leadership.

In 1996, the *Comunisti Unitari* split because the PRC would not participate in the Olive Tree alliance and stood independently in the elections. The *Comunisti Unitari* has since dissolved into the DS. The *Comunisti Italiani* broke away when the PRC withheld support for the Prodi government in 1998, a move that triggered a government crisis. Since then, the *Comunisti Italiani* has existed as an independent organisation under the leadership of the old Stalinist Armando Cossutta.

Two years ago, as a right-wing alliance headed by Silvio Berlusconi

came to power, the PRC was finally relieved of the dilemma of working with the government in parliament and against it on the streets. Now it is able once again to conduct itself as an opposition without restrictions. But has it learned any lessons from these past experiences? This, among other things, was what we wanted to learn as we visited the national office of the PRC on February 14, on the eve of the mass antiwar protests in Rome.

The party's offices were in the basement of an apartment block in one of Rome's outer districts. We entered them through a garage door leading into a wide hall, rimmed by palettes stapled with leaflets. We eventually reached a low but spacious meeting room in which two dozen party activists were gathered.

We were introduced to Paolo Ferrero. He is a member of the national secretariat, the five-member board of the party's leadership. In his appearance and manner Ferrero presents himself as a worker. His casual manner with a burnt-out stub of a cigar end in his mouth adds a touch of the bohemian. When he speaks, one immediately recognises the experienced politician, proficient at speaking in public and responding quickly to questions.

The first thing we asked Ferrero was his position on the war against Iraq. He flatly opposed the war. When asked for his reasons, he gave two:

"First, the war is a reactionary response to the crisis of neo-liberalism and the population's refusal to accept it. Reactionary elements are using 'war' and 'terrorism' in order to maintain global control. They consider this war as an opportunity, notwithstanding the lack of agreement from the public, to exercise control on the domestic population by targeting a foreign enemy, 'terrorists'. It involves a ruling system not resting on consent but on the fact that a foreign enemy exists, making a politics of war possible. To a certain extent, war is necessary in order to maintain control.

"Second, the Middle East is of strategic importance, due to its oil. Clearly, a big operation is being undertaken in order to establish a base in the Middle East. That is useful from the standpoint of oil wells, even if this leads to conflict with France and the other, less privileged nations.

"There are therefore these two reasons for the war: first as a reaction to the lack of support for neo-liberalism with war providing a possibility of maintaining control and secondly, the problem of oil resources."

We then asked Ferrero why the Italian government supported the war, to which he responded,

"Berlusconi is by vocation oriented towards America, it is for him a basic orientation. However, it is not without contradictions. The industrialists are not necessarily all in favour. For example, the *Corriere della Sera*, the most important newspaper of the Italian bourgeoisie, is against the war.

"Besides there is an entire Catholic layer that does not agree with the war. In addition, there are the more pro-European oriented sections.

Berlusconi represents that element that is strongly directed towards the US and which in Italy is part of the traditional right. But he is faced with some problems.”

We then turned to the discussion of the attitude of other European governments. Here the first differences of opinion became evident. While we maintained that the French and German governments had not opposed the war on principled grounds, Ferrero considered, in his words, “the contradictions between the bourgeois interests” to be highly significant.

He added, “The fact that in addition to popular opposition to the war there was also opposition among international leaders has led to circumstances, I think, that the government in the US never counted on. That can become a considerable factor. It is extraordinarily interesting to ascertain this.

“Even during the Seattle summit, the big demonstrations created the conditions in which the contradictions between the different interests of various capitalists were able to express themselves. The summit was unable to reach an agreement.

“I consider we are in a situation in which the opposition of Chirac and Schröder plays an important role—even though their opposition is not of course based on moral grounds in that they also defend global neo-liberalism. Even so, I don’t think one can describe their opposition as unimportant. We have arrived at a point in which a crisis in NATO is developing, which we have never experienced, not since World War II and very certainly not since 1989.

“The broad population does not agree to the use of terrorism as a pretext for a war. Their mass opposition operates, it seems to me, in a way that enables the contradictions between the bourgeois interests themselves to be expressed more easily. The contradictions between the positions of Bush and Chirac are real, they are not just a façade. They are naturally not expressed in the name of the Holy Mother, but they are based on material interests and are undermining NATO.

“I think that the US did not expect a conflict of this type. This conflict opens up in a distinct way a new phase, in which the reactionary response of the US to the crisis of neo-liberalism must not necessarily be the response of other countries, or all countries.”

Ferrero would not elaborate further on the political conclusions flowing from his assessment. But his estimate of the “contradictions between the bourgeois interests” speaks for itself. Obviously he counts on being able to draw to his side some European governments and sections of the Italian bourgeoisie—and not only in regard to questions of war but also on social questions. How else is one to interpret his observation, other countries could respond to the “crisis of neo-liberalism”—as he calls it—differently to the US?

In reality, the situation is the reverse. Germany and France have reacted to the acute conflict with the US with a sharp, internal political turn to the right. In both countries, far-reaching attacks on social gains and democratic rights have been put on the agenda. This in itself makes clear that a movement against the war can only be built in opposition to the governments of these countries, if it is to embrace broad layers of the population and to articulate their interests.

When we asked Ferrero what connections he saw between the preparations for war and the social crisis in the US and in Europe, he immediately was careful and adopted a more orthodox position.

“I see the war and the politics of wage cutbacks and declining working conditions as two sides of the same coin,” he said. “It is absolutely the same problem. In this connection, the opposition of Chirac or Schröder is absolutely no alternative to Bush, because they themselves agitate only on the level ‘No to war’ but do not offer a different social model.”

The second part of our discussion turned on the role of the PRC during the period of the centre-left government. We asked Ferrero how he evaluated the experience today. His reply in a nutshell was: “We have learned nothing and would do the same thing again.”

To use his own words: “You are asking about a balance sheet of the period during the period we were part of the government of the Olive Tree coalition?” he repeated, to make sure he had understood correctly.

He then continued, “We reached an agreement with the Olive Tree coalition, even though we had different programs. We knew that there was no consensus. We attempted for a definite time, to test whether it was possible to take the Olive Tree coalition in a certain direction, to make it act upon the most pressing social problems—in the first place jobs.

“That worked for a time and then when this phase ended, after the introduction of the common currency, it was necessary to decide which model would be used. The centre-left government has completely committed itself to neo-liberal politics.

“I believe we did what we more or less had to. After the first Berlusconi government there was a need for an alternative amongst the people, you had to take that into consideration. Then, at a certain point we realised where the government was heading. I believe it was the right thing to do. First, to support the need for a change and then to ascertain that it really wasn’t possible to break with the politics of the right. Moreover, this is a problem that we will also have in the future.”

This passage is characteristic of the opportunism which marks every aspect of the PRC’s politics. That the Olive Tree alliance would move to the right was no secret when it won the elections in 1996, and was known to the PRC’s leadership. After all, leading the coalition—along with Prodi—was a former Christian Democrat and captain of industry who did not hide his neo-liberal views. But the PRC preferred to share the illusions of many voters.

If the party had told voters the truth, prepared them for the inevitable turn to the right by the Olive Tree alliance and rejected all responsibility for its politics, this would have resulted in a clear movement to the left. Voters could have verified correctness of the warning on the basis of their own experiences. They would have understood the reasons for the move to the right by Olive Tree and been able to draw political conclusions from it.

In making itself an accomplice of the Olive Tree alliance and taking on responsibility for its politics the PRC contributed to the fact that the right was able to exploit the inevitable disillusionment resulting from the government’s politics.

As the discussion with Ferrero developed, it became increasingly clear that the PRC was unable to assume a principled position on any question and to fight for it. Their politics are limited to a series of tactical manoeuvres. Despite the claim made in the party’s name, to re-found the communist movement, its aim is not the development of an independent movement of the working class, but a tactical alliance with sections of the trade union bureaucracy, the centre-left parties, and—as Ferro explained to our surprise—the right-wing parties.

The plan, outlined by Ferrero, consisted of drawing a wing of the trade unions and Olive Tree onto the side of the PRC on social issues, and in the institutional domain, to collaborate with Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* in order to replace the recently enacted majority vote system with a proportional system. We will let him explain in his own words:

“One thing which we are working towards is maintaining the split between the unions. There is a division between CGIL on the one hand and CISL-UIL on the other, and we want to keep CGIL on the side of the social struggle. We are also trying to break up the centre-left alliance.

“On this question we propose overcoming the bilateral system, in which we have exclusively the centre-left as our preferred partner. For instance, the centre-right alliance is more in favour of the proportional voting system, which we favour, than the centre-left.

“So on the level of social movements, on the level of social organizations we want to maintain the CGIL where it is. On the political level, we want to break up the centre-left alliance. We are building a left alternative around the PRC and forging closer relations with the left

forces; this will break up the alliance of the centre-left.

“On the institutional level—we are striving to return to the proportional voting system. However, in this area our preferred relation is with Forza Italia. Why? Because Berlusconi leans much more towards the proportional system than (Left-Democrat) d’Alema.”

The PRC is currently conducting a campaign to uphold legal protections for workers facing unfair dismissal. While the other parties want to weaken or abolish article 18 of the constitution, which contains a prohibition against such dismissals, the PRC is collecting signatures for a referendum, which will extend the protection against unfair dismissal rule to smaller enterprises. There have been large demonstrations over this issue in the last year.

Ferrero has great expectations for this campaign, as he explained:

“We will carry through this referendum in opposition to all the others: against the centre-right parties and against half of the centre-left. And yet it is possible that we will win this referendum, because the workers are saying to themselves, for instance: ‘While I vote fascist, I actually find this prohibition against dismissal good.’ It is a class question.

“If we win this referendum, it will be as if an atom bomb exploded in Italy. It is as though the PDS (German Party of Democratic Socialism) were to be successful on an issue in Germany. About 10 percent of members of parliament support the referendum. If we win it, the whole line of the centre-right will be called into question and the centre-left will be challenged. In this way a successful referendum would make it clear that the bilateral system in no way represents the country: all are opposed, but the people are saying something else. If we win this referendum, it would strengthen our position in society.”

Here also, the only question for Ferrero is whether the PRC is successful in winning over a section of the trade union bureaucracy or the Olive Tree alliance. His point of reference is not the mass of the population, but the trade union and political apparatuses:

“If we win the referendum, it will be like a bomb exploding, a new dynamic will be released that will be favourable to us. But if we lose, the outlook is different. That is why we say that much depends on the outcome.

“It is the same with the CGIL. If we can maintain its adherence for the social struggle that would be an achievement, on the other hand if the CGIL undertakes an agreement with CISL-UIL, it would be a catastrophe because it would have a demoralising effect on millions of workers.

“How can I express it? This is a game, in which the PRC does not stand in opposition to all the others. We are in a web of relationships, and we must succeed in holding other sections, for example, CGIL, to a position in the building of the movement because this changes the balance of forces and allows us to win more confidence in our political strength. If not—we would be isolated.”

These, concluded Ferrero, were the prospects for the next two to three years. “After that, there will be the elections.”

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