Livio Maitan, 1923-2004: a critical assessment

Part 2: Castro, Che Guevara and the armed struggle

By Peter Schwarz

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This is the second part of a three-part series on the political career of Livio Maitan, who died in Rome in September at the age of 81. With Ernest Mandel, Maitan was one of the best-known representatives of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, an international revisionist tendency. The first part of this series was posted November 4. The final part will be posted later this week.

While the United Secretariat expected that in Eastern Europe and the Western industrialised countries a new socialist offensive would come from the ranks of the Stalinist parties, in the developing countries and Latin America it placed its hopes in petty-bourgeois nationalists. What was common to both assumptions was the exclusion of any independent mobilisation of the working class under the leadership of the Fourth International, leaving the initiative to other social forces.

In China, the Pabloites glorified the peasant armies of Mao Zedong. Pablo personally put himself at the disposal of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in the 1950s, and after its victory, he joined the first Algerian government of Ahmed Ben Bella, coordinating relations with the national movements in Africa and throughout the world.

In 1959, when Fidel Castro’s guerrilla forces drove the Batista dictatorship out of Cuba, the Pabloites became enthusiastic supporters of the Cuban revolution. The claim that a workers state had been created in Cuba formed the basis for the reunification of the Pabloites with the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which had taken the initiative in establishing the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953.

The assertion that the nationalisation measures carried out by the Castro regime had transformed Cuba into a workers state represented a complete break with the Marxist view of socialism. If petty-bourgeois guerrilla leaders, who predominantly relied upon the peasantry, could establish a workers state without the existence of even the most basic organs of workers’ power, then the independent and conscious role in the socialist revolution traditionally attributed to the working class by Marxism was wrong.

Moreover, the Pabloites ignored the international character of the socialist revolution, upon which Trotsky had always placed the greatest emphasis. Regarded historically, socialism represents a higher stage of development of human society than capitalism. The latter has already developed the productive forces beyond the framework of the national state, and a socialist society cannot possibly turn back what has already been achieved. For this reason, the Stalinist theory of building “socialism in a single country” is completely false.

From this Marxist and internationalist standpoint, the nationalisation measures carried out by the Castro regime, which did not differ substantially from similar measures implemented by other nationalistic governments at the time, were of secondary importance. The more important question was whether the Cuban revolution provided a starting point for the development of the international socialist revolution. In this regard, the consequences of the Cuban events were devastating.

The Pabloites were not content simply to praise Castro’s Cuba as a workers state. The Cuban model of a guerrilla struggle led from the countryside was transposed to all of Latin America—with terribly destructive consequences for the Trotskyist movement. When Che Guevara moved from Cuba to Bolivia in 1965, to launch a guerrilla struggle there, the United Secretariat assured him of its full support, and its Bolivian section proclaimed its readiness to join the guerrillas. At a Latin American solidarity conference that took place in Cuba in 1967, the United Secretariat was represented by Joseph Hansen of the American SWP, who proclaimed the “indispensable role of the armed struggle on the path to socialism.” (8)

In 1969, the 9th World Congress of the United Secretariat proclaimed unambiguously: “The fundamental and only realistic perspective for Latin America is an armed struggle, which could last many years. For this reason, technical preparation must be seen not only as an aspect of revolutionary work, but as the fundamental aspect.... For a whole period, the guerrilla struggle will form the fundamental axis, even if at first the initiative apparently comes from outside or takes place one-sidedly (as was the case with Che’s Bolivian guerrillas).” (9)

This conception sacrificed Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution to a glorification of armed struggle, and supplanted the proletariat with the Kalashnikov and the hand grenade as the revolutionary factor. As bloodthirsty and radical as this perspective sounded, it was only an expression of the Pabloites’ deep pessimism and contempt for the working class—and this was at a time when the working class was growing rapidly throughout Latin America, becoming radicalised in the process.

Anyone taking the perspective of the United Secretariat seriously would have had to turn his back on the cities and support the guerrilla struggle in the countryside, and those who did paid a heavy price. Isolated from the urban working class and confronted with a powerful army, many young people who had turned to the United Secretariat in good faith easily fell prey to the military.

At the beginning of the 1970s in Argentina, the press of the United Secretariat applauded the spectacular armed actions of the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT-ERP), recognising this group as its official section before it drifted over to Maoism. In the end, the PRT-ERP was completely destroyed by the military.

Livio Maitan played an important role in the development and dissemination of this political line. In the United Secretariat he was regarded as a specialist on Latin America and China, and was directly involved in the elaboration of party resolutions on these areas.

According to the Chinese Pabloite Peng Shuzi, who did not agree with the United Secretariat on this question, Maitan was the author of a document that justified the executive committee of the United Secretariat swinging behind the guerrilla strategy in 1968. (10) At the 1969 World Congress, Maitan and Mandel were the most active proponents of the guerrilla strategy, which nevertheless was rejected by almost one third of the delegates.
In 1997, Maitan published an article on the 30th anniversary of Che Guevara’s death in *Inprecor*, the official organ of the United Secretariat, which uncritically summarised the organisation’s view at that time. The article was a hymn of praise to Che Guevara. In the form of various quotations from official United Secretariat publications, he was presented as a “socialist par excellence,” who was imbued with “the international character of the socialist revolution,” and became a “symbol of the new generation of revolutionaries.” (11)

**1968 and its consequences**

Maitan’s support for the guerrilla struggle in Latin America found a direct reaction in Italy. It contributed significantly to the political confusion that dominated the left in the 1970s and led to the emergence of a multitude of Maoist and anarchist groups and organisations espousing the armed struggle, which at times had tens of thousands of supporters.

In Italy, the radicalisation of the youth and the working class that had begun in the middle of the 1960s and that continued in the 1970s resulted in fierce conflicts with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which had turned sharply to the right. In 1972, Enrico Berlinguer took over the leadership of the party. At first, his “Eurocommunist” course—signalised by a sharper demarcation from Moscow and rapprochement with social democracy—was enthusiastically supported by the United Secretariat. However, the right-wing content of this policy was unmistakable. Berlinguer aimed at a “historical compromise” with the Christian Democrats and entry into government. From 1976 to 1979, the PCI parliamentary group supported the government camp, although the party was not represented in the cabinet.

The fact that the most well-known Italian “Trotskyist” put his hopes on a “renewal” of the PCI, while at the same time promoting the illusions in Mao and Che Guevara that were widespread in the protest movement, cut off the new generation then entering politics from the true, Marxist perspectives of the Fourth International.

Maitan’s own organisation, the Gruppi Comunisti Rivoluzionari (GCR), never attained significant influence. Its membership never rose above 200, and it stood independently in elections only once in its entire history, in 1980.

Nevertheless, Maitan’s influence should not be underestimated. Over the course of decades, thousands of members passed through the GCR. Many of those who played a prominent role in the confused radical groups of the 1970s had passed through Maitan’s school at one time or another. In the 1990s, most of them would find themselves together with Maitan again under the umbrella of Rifondazione Comunista.

In 1968, at the high point of the student revolt, Maitan temporarily lost control of his organisation. The majority of the GCR wanted to end political work inside the PCI and dissolve the organisation into the spontaneous movement. They not only rejected the orientation to the PCI, but also the claim to Trotskyism in any organised form. At the congress of the GCR, one majority speaker justified this liquidationist course by saying, “The Trotskyist heritage is now the common inheritance of all revolutionaries and its defence cannot be the raison d’être of an organisation.” (12)

Maitan was not prepared to immediately give up work within the PCI, but confessed to his opponents that he would, if necessary, orient himself differently. Answering his opponents at the congress, he said that the organisation should not be made a fetish and the priority should be “action towards the new avant-garde.” He added: “On the day when a revolutionary tendency develops in Italy that is larger than ours and is able to lead the mass movement, we will use criteria that we consider correct. We will not argue about primogeniture and can contribute to the success of such a movement.... But such a situation does not exist.” (13)

The positions of both Maitan and his opponents excluded the development of an independent movement of the working class under the banner the Fourth International. The split revolved around the tactical question of whether the time was right to jump off the PCI bandwagon and swing behind the petty-bourgeois protest movement.

The majority later gave birth to the group Avanguardia Operaia, which openly proclaimed adherence to Maoism. It justified its rejection of the Fourth International by saying the FI stood in the way of a growing together of the Trotskyists “with the objectively left-wing currents, such as Maoism and Castroism.”

Another section of the majority turned towards the *Il Manifesto* group, which had been formed in 1969 by dissident PCI leaders, mainly intellectuals, and which advocated a mixture of past PCI views, in the tradition of Palmiro Togliatti, conceptions of the Frankfurt School, and Maoist positions. Today, the only thing that remains of this group is a daily newspaper of the same name.

Supported by the minority, Maitan refounded the GCR, which soon abandoned work inside the PCI and strove to link up with newly forming radical groups. In 1969, the 9th Congress of the United Secretariat had decided the appropriate orientation was “to the new avant-garde with mass influence.” This same congress expressed its support for the armed struggle in Latin America. Maitan proposed a resolution on the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Initially, Maitan also strove for closer cooperation with the PCI dissidents of *Il Manifesto*. “We must give precedence to *Il Manifesto* in the policy of fostering the growing together of the revolutionary left,” he wrote in 1972. “We have the possibility, and must have, of incorporating ourselves into the dialectic that came about in *Il Manifesto* and which continues to exist. This does not mean that we exclude other forces....” (14)

Later, from the mid-1970s on, he turned towards the organisations that had emerged from the student movement. The PDU (Partito di unità proletaria), Avanguardia Operaia and Lotta Continua had crystallised out of the multiplicity of these groups as the most influential. They adored Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, and represented a mixture of spontaneist and pseudo-revolutionary views. They promoted strikes and forms of “direct action” and played a highly active role in the political and social disputes of the time. In all, they could count on some 10,000 members and supporters.

The ebbing of social struggles after 1974 threw these groups into a deep crisis. A minority turned to armed struggle and terrorism, which took on a more comprehensive and broader form in Italy than in possibly any other European country, and which further contributed to the disorientation of the working class. The remainder abandoned the radical, activist forms of struggle and turned to more traditional forms of political struggle. In 1976, the three organisations mentioned above stood jointly in the parliamentary elections under the banner *Democrazia Proletaria*.

The GCR fully supported this election campaign. Maitan spoke alongside Adriano Sofri of *Lotta Continua* at election meetings in which thousands participated. But the result was disappointing. The Christian Democrats remained the strongest party, closely followed by the PCI, which obtained the best result in its history. *Democrazia Proletaria* received half a million votes, winning six seats. However, its 1.5 percent share of the vote was far lower than it had expected. *Lotta Continua*, with which the GCR had collaborated closely, dissolved itself shortly after the election.

The absence of a viable perspective for the working class enabled the Italian ruling class and its most important political support, the PCI, to survive the violent class battles between 1968 and 1975, and go over to a counteroffensive. The left organisations fell into despair, which continued throughout the 1980s. *Democrazia Proletaria*, originally conceived as an electoral alliance, continued to exist and became the melting pot for the remnants of the radical organisations.

In 1989, Maitan’s group (renamed *Lega Comunista Rivoluzionaria*, LCR) also joined *Democrazia Proletaria*. Two years later, the entire
organisation aligned itself with Rifondazione Comunista, which had emerged from the dissolution of the PCI.

From then on, Maitan and his supporters dedicated all of their political energies to the construction of Rifondazione, as the French Pabloite Alain Krivine confirms in an obituary of Maitan: “Since 1991, Livio has been elected into the leadership of this new party at each congress. It is correct that the members of the Fourth International have decided to participate completely in its construction ever since its foundation, in accordance with its leadership.... Some of our comrades take up positions of responsibility in the Senate, in party organisations, or in the leadership of the daily paper Liberazione.” (15)

To be continued

Notes:
8) Quatrième Internationale, Nov/Dec. 1967
9) “Résolution du 9o Congrès Mondial sur l’Amérique Latine,” Quatrième Internationale May 1969
10) “Criticisms of the Positions of the SWP (USA)” by Peng Shuzi, March 16, 1981
11) “Die Vierte Internationale, die kubanische Revolution und Che Guevara,” Inprekorr no. 318
12) Bandiera Rossa, April 15 1968, quoted by Yurii Colombo, op cit.
13) Bandiera Rossa, April 1 1968, quoted by Yurii Colombo, op cit.
14) Quarta Internazionale n. 5-6, giugno 1972

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