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THE PCI'S "THIRD WAY" CONGRESS

By Kevin Devlin

Summary: The Italian Communist Party is holding its 15th congress during a political crisis, with premature elections in the near future now appearing inevitable. The congress also comes during a period of internal crisis -- of frustration and unrest in the ranks and signs of uncertainty in the leadership, due to the price the PCI has had to pay for its uneasy collaboration with the Christian Democrats (in the "majority" but not in the government). The strategy of the "historic compromise" adopted at the last congress in 1975 will be reaffirmed, but the congress may stress the party's readiness to return to "responsible" opposition. It will also emphasize the PCI's identity as a Marxist party committed to seeking a "third way," distinct from either the "Soviet/East European model" or Western social-democracy.

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The Italian Communist Party's 14th Congress in March 1975 was easily labeled: it was "the congress of the historic compromise," with dynamic emphasis on the long-term strategy announced by Enrico Berlinguer in his Rinascita articles of September-October 1973 -- a strategy that called for patient efforts to establish a new, co-operative relationship with the Christian Democratic Party and other "democratic" forces, and eventually for communist participation in government, as the only way to cope with Italy's enduring socioeconomic crisis. At that time the PCI had the wind in its sails. The faction-ridden Christian Democrats (DC) had shown themselves incapable of reversing the economic deterioration, or even to form stable governmental coalitions, whether of the Center-Left or Center-Right variety. They had furthermore suffered a major defeat in the divorce referendum of May 1974, when in every part of the country a pivotal part of the DC electorate swung against the party. Shortly after that congress the local elections of June 1975 produced the PCI's great leap forward, from around 27 per cent to over 32 per cent, within a few percentage points of their great adversary, bringing the party to power in virtually all of Italy's major cities and in many regions and provinces as well. In the national elections a year later the PCI consolidated this gain with 34.4 per cent, but failed to reduce the lead of the DC, which, in a climate of polarization, achieved 38.8 per cent.

Now, on the eve of the 15th congress, to be held in Rome from March 30 to April 4, the mood is quite different -- one of sober reassessment; one of withdrawal to regroup, it might perhaps be said. The communist leaders' dilemma might be summed up by saying that they have paid too much for too little. Since the 1976 elections the party has, in effect, been sharing the job of running Italy without sharing in the government of Italy -- responsibility without corresponding power. But the political costs for the agreement during 1977 not to vote against the DC government, of the entry of the PCI into the "majority" but not into government after March 1978, and of participation in the elaboration of programs but not of their implementation, were high. This was shown clearly in the local elections of May 1978, when the communist vote dropped by over 8 per cent in these areas to 26.5 per cent, as against 42.5 per cent for the resurgent DC, and a gain of 4 points for the Socialists (13.3 per cent).

Internal Unrest

Equally disturbing was the effect of this "semigovernmental" experience on an increasingly critical and frustrated rank and file. The party's co-operation with the DC in implementing a policy of austerity was particularly resented; and this also affected the attitude of the communist-dominated CGIL labor federa-

tion. The extent of this discontent was indicated by a survey of communist attitudes made by two scholars, Marzio Barbagli and Piergiorgio Corbetta, for the journal Il Mulino. (1) According to this, only 13 per cent shared the official position of the party on the historic compromise; 59 per cent accepted a PCI-DC coalition merely as a (temporary) measure "best adapted" to present conditions; 20 per cent rejected it flatly and opted for the old "leftist alternative"; while 8 per cent clung nostalgically to the Leninist goal of an outright dictatorship of the proletariat. Disaffection was also shown in other areas. One third unconditionally approved the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, while another third criticized the Soviets only for the method used, while equally disapproving of the "Prague Spring"; 17 per cent, on the other hand, broke with the leadership on the other flank by refusing to consider the USSR as a socialist country. Similarly, 89 per cent stamped the Catholic Church as the "ally of the bosses," and 39 per cent thought the party was "conceding too much to the Catholics."

It was, therefore, a complex of considerations which led the leadership to withdraw its support from the Andreotti government in late January, thus precipitating the political crisis which now appears likely to lead to premature elections in June (perhaps to coincide with the direct elections to the European Parliament on June 10). The shadow of the elections will lie over the 15th congress. The amended strategy to be adopted there must take account of various factors -- a definite shift to the right within the DC since the death of Aldo Moro, the prudent and patient Christian Democratic architect of a new, co-operative relationship with the PCI; the fact that the Communist Party must expect to fall back from its 1976 high-water mark in these elections; the death of Ugo La Malfa, the respected Republican leader who insisted that the communist contribution was, indeed, needed to tackle the crisis; the challenge of a more assertive Socialist leader, Bettino Craxi, who hopes that the party's fortunes will be greatly favored by the European elections; and the fact that the PCI's emphasis on European integration will be weakened by open disagreements with the French CP.

Problem of Identity

Internal and external factors combine to oblige the party to re-examine its own image. Linked with this are the problems of the party's identity and of the internal unrest mentioned earlier.

- (1) The Barbagli-Corbetta survey was based upon a national poll by the Dixa Institute, interviews with militants in a party federation of Emilia-Romagna, and an analysis of internal documents of another federation in this "red" region. See the report in L'Espresso, 24 December 1978 (p. 17), and that by Robert Solé in Le Monde, 8 March 1979.

Thus, the theses adopted in December (reportedly after unprecedented debate, which involved Central Committee voting paragraph by paragraph) (2) stress the communist component of the Eurocommunism to which the party now officially commits itself. Passing criticism of the "limits, contradictions and errors" of the Soviet and other communist regimes goes with emphasis on the historic importance of the October Revolution and of the PCI's "new internationalism." And if the PCI rejects existing models of "real socialism," it rejects with equal vigor the social-democratic way, under the slogan of "the third way" (title of a recent book by the veteran leader Pietro Ingrao):

Unlike the social-democratic experiences, it is a matter of starting processes of socialist transformation different from the ones carried out since the October Revolution in the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. It is in this sense that we talk about a third way, with regard to Europe. . . .

By pursuing such a road, the West European workers' movement can make a further essential contribution to the struggle against imperialist and neocolonialist forces, to building a fully democratic form of socialism, to the establishment of a new international order of peace and co-operation, and thus also to the democratic development of the existing socialist societies. (3)

The commitment to the strategy of the historic compromise remains, because the arguments for Berlinguer's rejection of a "51 per cent strategy" are still valid, but a new emphasis on the party's readiness to return to "responsible" opposition can be expected, and a corresponding shift from overtures to the DC leadership to an appeal to the Catholic protest vote. Realism, flexibility, and discipline are habitual characteristics which will help the leadership (now paying more attention to rank-and-file attitudes) to carry out such adjustments. If the hopes of 1975 have faded, the PCI is still ready, accepting losses with gains, to pursue what has been called its "long march through the institutions."

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(2) See F. Marek, "Italien: fuehrt die soziale Krise zur politischen Krise?" Wiener Tagebuch, February 1979.

(3) "Progetto di Tesi per il XV Congresso Nazionale del PCI" (supplement), L'Unità, 10 December 1978.