

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/140
(World Communist Movement)
11 June 1980

AMENDOLA: THE LONER WHO STAYED ON THE TEAM

By Kevin Devlin

Summary: The Italian Communist Party has lost an outstanding if often controversial personality with the death of Giorgio Amendola. Seven months earlier, when already marked by a wasting illness, he had challenged the leadership by criticizing communist labor and economic policies, as manifested in the trade unions as well as in the party. He stood unrepentantly by his unpopular views even when they were attacked by Secretary-General Berlinguer and others, and urged the right of dissidents to reject the "general line." A convinced "European" who played an active role in the Strasbourg assembly, he stood for domestic policies based upon realism and responsibility rather than the class struggle.

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"I have always been a loner, and have resisted every attempt to imprison me within a tendency or a downright faction."

Giorgio Amendola (1)

The death of Giorgio Amendola at the age of 72 has deprived the Italian Communist Party (PCI) of an "historical leader" who was also one of its most colorful and controversial figures. Often depicted as a proponent of "rightist" or "revisionist" tendencies within the party, he might perhaps more truly be said to have represented in recent years the voice of realism and responsibility. On a number of occasions over the past decade and a half Amendola's outspoken views on controversial questions provoked vigorous policy debates within the party; and if when the dust settled he was left standing virtually alone, then he stood alone, head unbowed but with a ready smile for friend or adversary.

(1) Central Committee speech, l'Unità, 16 November 1979.

The last of these controversies was characteristic. In November 1979 he emerged temporarily from the prolonged illness which had marked his now gaunt features, and set the cat among the pigeons with an article (2) criticizing communist labor and economic policies, as manifested in the trade unions as well as in the party. Amendola charged that economic realities were being neglected for mistaken political motives: the party's policy of austerity and its strategy of the historic compromise were not being implemented: unrestrained wage demands without increased productivity were among the factors producing runaway inflation and a deepening socioeconomic crisis from which the working class would suffer.

Much if not all of what he said was obviously true (for example, his observation that the introduction of automation meant a reduction of the work force); but they were unpleasant truths, coming at a time when working-class unrest had already led the PCI to mute its former emphasis on austerity. The article was promptly criticized by Secretary-General Enrico Berlinguer, Gian Carlo Pajetta, labor leader Luciano Lama, and other leading Communists. Within a few days the "Amendola affair" had become a national political issue, as spokesmen for other political parties gleefully joined in the debate.

"Right to Reject Party Line"

The climax, or showdown, came quickly at a heated Central Committee plenum, when Amendola's positions were criticized with varying degrees of polemical vigor by a series of speakers, ending with Berlinguer himself. The secretary-general charged that Amendola's arguments amounted to an appeal for "renunciations and sacrifices" on the part of the workers. Woundingly, he suggested that what Amendola wanted was "a party line of which he poses as the interpreter and judge." But Amendola had already made it clear that he would not give ground in face of attacks, from whatever source. He tranquilly reiterated and reinforced the arguments in his article, insisting in particular on the party's coresponsibility for coping with Italy's grave crisis: "One cannot build any kind of socialism on the ruins of the country." But this time he added a more direct challenge to the apparatus. He said that he accepted democratic centralism, but that it should not function "in one direction only":

Measures of an administrative type should not be taken against those who, with full right, reject the general line of the party as fixed at the congress. I ask that they be able to express their disagreement openly and frankly, and that an open political struggle be waged against them by those who intend to defend the party line. In this way the terms of the

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- (2) Giorgio Amendola, "Interrogativi sul 'Caso' Fiat," Rinascita, 9 November 1979. See also Kevin Devlin, "The Amendola Affair," RAD Background Report/253 (World Communist Movement), Radio Free Europe Research, 11 November 1979.

controversy will be made known and understandable to all members, majorities will be formed, and we shall avoid a false and ambiguous unanimity which is the contrary of real political unity.

Berlinguer tersely rejected (without mentioning it) that appeal for greater internal democracy: "Discussion must lead to clear decisions and commitments valid for all."

This dramatic confrontation was the last of a series of controversies in which Amendola challenged the official line of the PCI on one issue or another without putting into question his basic loyalty to the party he had served for more than half a century, as clandestine militant and as senior politician. What was unusual this time was that he stood almost alone -- although that, too, could be seen as a fitting symbol of his political courage and personal integrity. What tended to happen on other occasions was that he held what could be termed "right-wing" positions on the issues in question, with some support, while other prominent figures (say, Luigi Longo or Pietro Ingrao) stood on the "Left." What generally happened then was that the "Center," usually personified by Enrico Berlinguer, prevailed after sometimes vigorous debate, and the image of disciplined solidarity was restored. This was the way it was in October 1976, when a debate over austerity and attitudes to the Christian Democrats ended with the secretary-general smoothly combining elements from Longo at one pole and Amendola at the other.

"Not Revolutionary"

Some observers have described Amendola as the liberal conscience of his party. Others have gone so far as to question his right to the title of Communist. (His old comrade-in-arms Umberto Terraccini has accused him of applying classical capitalist laws to Italy's crisis, and has said that he "preserves the bourgeois-democratic mentality of the environment in which he grew up: a progressive but not a revolutionary mentality.") (3) He was, in fact, one of the first to question the Leninist distinction between Communist and Social-Democrat.

In late 1964 Amendola published in the party weekly an article arguing that the time had come for Communists and Socialists to merge (or remerge) in one new party of the Italian working class:

Neither of the two solutions put before the working class of the capitalist countries of Western Europe in the past 50 years has so far shown itself fully capable of bringing about a socialist transformation of society. . . .

(3) Interview in Corriere della Sera, 18 November 1979.

One can agree with this evaluation or reject it; but if unification is to be brought about, it cannot be done either on social-democratic or on communist positions. (4)

This bold proposal was sharply attacked by a leading party theorist, Romano Ledda, and after considerable debate the idea was dropped -- but 16 years later it is again being canvassed, in different terms, by the Eurocommunists of Italy and Spain. This, one notes in passing, has happened more than once with Amendola's ideas. For example, the roots of the "historic compromise" strategy can be traced back to another Rinascita article by him in October 1964. In this he claimed that the alleged failure of the Center-Left experiment had shown that it was impossible to govern modern Italy without the cooperation of the Communists; it was therefore necessary to "admit the possibility of reaching a political agreement, even a partial and limited one, and therefore to begin research . . . on the formation of a democratic majority." (5)

Amendola was a friendly, outgoing man of wide culture, who won the esteem of allies and adversaries not only nationally but also on the West European level, notably in the European Parliament, where he had represented the PCI since its entry into that assembly in 1969. He was perhaps the most convinced and convincing "European" in the top echelons of his party. The tone of the concluding paragraph of one of his last articles on the subject, written during what seems to have been a deceptive spell of remission in his final illness, is characteristic:

To take Europe out of the tempest the Italian Communists will fight, in Italy and in Strasbourg, for the union of all progressive forces in the struggle for peace and development. And this is the true significance of our Eurocommunism. (6)

A member of the PCI's Central Committee and of the Directorate, and a parliamentary deputy for Naples since 1948, Amendola was never a man of the apparat; he went his own way to the end, insouciantly carrying his inconsistencies with him. Since their prolonged debate over party policies in the mid-1960s, he was often regarded as the personification of the party's "right wing," and his friend Pietro Ingrao as a spokesman for its "left." Yet Ingrao combined greater domestic militance with greater readiness to criticize the Soviet regime, while Amendola, for all his domestic liberalism, was more concerned with maintaining solidarity with Moscow (one of his last public utterances was the suggestion, contrary to the party line, that there might be some justification for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan).

(4) Rinascita, 28 November 1964.

(5) Ibid., 17 October 1964; original emphasis.

(6) Giorgio Amendola, "L'Europa nella Tempesta," ibid., 26 October 1979.

Giorgio Amendola was a fighter to the end, but a fair fighter, a man whose political activity was conducted with personal integrity, honesty, and ready kindness. It was fitting that he died just as the second volume of his widely hailed memoirs was published; but one may perhaps find greater significance in the fact that his death on June 5 was followed one day later by the death, from a heart attack, of his beloved French wife, Germaine Amendola.

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