

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/253
(World Communist Movement)
21 November 1979

THE AMENDOLA AFFAIR

By Kevin Devlin

Summary: Giorgio Amendola, one of the "historic leaders" of the Italian CP, has provoked a controversy by criticizing communist labor policies, as manifested in the trade unions as well as in the party. His article in Rinascita 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. A vigorous criticism of the article by Secretary-General Berlinguer heralded a Central Committee plenum in which these issues were debated. Defending and developing his arguments, Amendola bluntly took issue with his critics, including Berlinguer, and even strengthened his challenge by urging that Communists be allowed to reject the party line, with the formation of majorities and minorities in open debate. Intervening unexpectedly after other speakers had criticized Amendola, Berlinguer rejected his theses in terms which manifested what one Marxist commentator called a shift to "the Ingraoist Left." Nevertheless, the issues raised by the outspoken Amendola remain unresolved.

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It is not easy to be the enfant terrible of a major political party at the age of 72, but the outspoken Giorgio Amendola seems to manage it with zest. Still convalescent from a serious illness, the Italian CP's most prominent "European" has marked the 50th anniversary of his entry into the party by a sharp attack on communist labor policies, criticizing the attitudes of the party itself as well as of the trade unions. This provocative challenge to a leadership already coping with political setbacks and widespread discontent among the membership led to a further display of communist disunity, as Amendola's article was criticized by Secretary-General Enrico Berlinguer, Gian Carlo Pajetta, labor leader Luciano Lama, and others. Within a few days the "Amendola affair" had become a national political issue, as representatives of other political parties joined in the debate, generally with a shrewd eye to the points they could score against the PCI.

The internal controversy came to a head with a Central Committee plenum at which Amendola impenitently defended and developed his argument, answering his principal critics -- Pajetta, Lama, and yes, Berlinguer. On the last day of the plenum, in an unexpected intervention, Berlinguer criticized Amendola, charging him with causing "bewilderment and mistrust" in party ranks. Amendola commented bluntly: "The differences remain."

What did Amendola say to cause such a furore? His article (1) in the party weekly bears the innocuous title, "Questions on the Fiat 'Case.'" But the basic question is whether the PCI, yielding to leftist pressures both from within and from outside its ranks, is not failing to pursue its own strategy of the "historic compromise" with courage and consistence.

In the background of the controversy lie the complex problems of Italy's enduring sociopolitical crisis; in the foreground, the industrial conflicts in Fiat's huge Turin plant. Last month the Fiat management dismissed 61 workers branded as troublemakers and accused of being linked with factory violence and sabotage. A brief protest strike called by the communist-dominated CGIL labor federation met with little response from the workers, but on the very day that Amendola's article appeared a Turin judge ruled that the collective dismissal of the 61 had been illegal -- whereupon the Fiat management dismissed them again, this time with letters alleging detailed reasons. Amendola comments crisply: "All that happens at Fiat is of concern to the whole Italian working class movement, and harshly reveals the errors committed."

The first third of the article is a sociopolitical survey of Italian trade unionism since the 1920s, illustrating Amendola's opening remark that "the behavior of the Fiat workers has

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- (1) Giorgio Amendola, "Interrogativi sul 'caso' Fiat," Rinascita, 9 November 1979.

for decades demonstrated the positive and negative developments in the Italian working class movement," but at the same time manifesting the political orientations that have led leftist critics to accuse him of "social-democratic" leanings.

His brief analysis of the present Fiat dispute must certainly appear provocative to the left wing of his party. He does, indeed, criticize the Fiat management for trying to weaken the authority of the unions by dismissing the men in question without consulting the unions, in a foolish attempt to re-establish productive efficiency without the co-operative participation of the union. "But why did the union let itself be taken by surprise by the management's move, and did not itself first take the initiative for a coherent struggle against every form of violence and hooliganism in the factory and against terrorism in general?" The defeat suffered at Fiat with the failure of the protest strike against the dismissal of the 61 imposes on all political and trade-union forces /the need for/ an effort of self-criticism . . . which, in my view, should lead to drastic changes."

Among these changes, he suggested, should be the introduction of secret voting, subject to verification, at union meetings, so that in various situations the will of the workers should be made known "without any kind of coercion and intimidation." Other changes would amount to a shift away from political rhetoric toward economic realism. For example, the "uncontrolled" growth in wage demands had brought an "exaggerated egalitarianism" which in turn led to a loss in professional pride, while at the same time "wage increases were not accompanied by a corresponding increase in productivity." The party line (on the need for an austerity program) adopted at the last congress, interpreted by each one in his own way, had "not passed into the reality of trade union struggle, and this must be recognized."

Rhetoric and Reality

The trade union, he said (presumably referring to the CGIL), "has committed the error of speaking a language that is ambiguous and coded, diplomatic and circumspect, to maintain in balance the precarious solidarity of the trade unions, without facing up to the actual diversity of positions, in a game of increasing demagoguery and sliding to the left." Thus, the unions called for the Italian wage to be brought up to the average West European level (in itself a legitimate goal), but without working for "a coherent policy for the productive restructuring of the Italian economy." In campaigning against unemployment, they had hidden the fact that in the greater part of the country there was, in fact, full employment. They had failed to conduct a struggle against absenteeism, "defending even scandalous cases." This lack of economic realism had led the unions to fight for the survival of all factories, even inefficient ones, at the cost of enormous and unjustified outlays by the state. By fighting for the maintenance and extension of the cost-of-living index (scala mobile), refusing to let it be modified to help lower incomes, they had helped to drive the country toward ever dizzy heights of inflation.

Developing his basic argument that economic realities were being neglected for political motives, Amendola criticized "the mistaken decision to embark without adequate preparation on great new industrial centers, located for reasons of political patronage in certain areas, without a preliminary study of economic planning and of the territory." This applied also to investments in the underdeveloped south of Italy: "The slogan of investments in the south has become simply a cover for a policy which tends to defend and improve the conditions of organized categories of employees, at the expense of the youth and the unemployed in the south.

Moreover, this problem of unemployment had not been faced in its real terms, which were those of "unemployment concentrated in some zones of the south, and predominantly made up of young people with primary and secondary degrees, some of whom refuse job opportunities thought incompatible with their aspirations" for pensionable civil service posts." Amendola linked this with "stubborn efforts to deny the existence in Italy of hundreds of thousands of foreign immigrant workers, largely unprotected by the law because of their clandestine status." (2)

Amendola's appeal for a rational sociopolitical approach to Italy's problems included, for example, the observation that automation could not be introduced "without accepting a reduction in the number of workers needed to achieve a certain output -- a reduction, certainly, to be reached by agreement and not imposed by the boss, but not rejected a priori by the trade union." But violence and ruffianism of the sort associated with the Fiat disturbances were something else. "The initial mistake of the trade union was not to denounce immediately the first act of violent hooliganism committed in the factory, as in the school. The error of the Communists was not to have criticized that behavior openly from the start, through supinely accepting trade union autonomy and because of a desire not to cut themselves off from the so-called /leftist/ 'movements.'"

Another salvo in the broadside was directed against the disruption of civic life through increasingly frequent strikes which paralyzed entire sectors of the national life, even in essential services. In Amendola's view, this situation posed the need for "a self-regulation of the right to strike, for the

- (2) In this connection Amendola said that "a regular immigration contract for the employment of highly qualified Polish miners in Sardinia" had been concluded, and that the first few hundred (le prime centinaia) of these Polish mining technicians had already arrived. The statement cannot be confirmed; but the Poles in question would obviously not be in the same category as the "clandestine" migrant laborers whom Amendola had mentioned earlier; and in any case his estimate of "hundreds" seems improbably high.

safeguarding of general interests. . . . If we want to avert the intervention of an authoritarian government to impose a return to order, it is time for us to think about how to restore the conditions for a civil, ordered coexistence."

Noting that the PCI had been trying to mobilize democratic forces in the fight against terrorism, Amendola said: "But its action has had serious limitations, because of the presence within the party of zones of persistent sectarianism and a rejection of the [party's] political line through a pre-eminent concern not to incur criticism from the Left." What had happened in Turin, he suggested, was that the party had not been able to bring its own line of "austerity and national unity" into the factory. In the last analysis, and in practice, this amounted to a "rejection of the policy of the historic compromise."

Counterattacks

The first counterattack came from Gian Carlo Pajetta, who told a meeting in Turin that he had read "with sorrow and surprise" some of Amendola's conclusions. While calling for "a frank debate" on the issues raised, he did not himself go into detail; but he did say that "the danger today comes from the emergence of zones of demoralization [within the party], and to say that we have been wrong about almost everything can only promote it." (3)

Next day the party daily led with a major article by the communist trade union leader, Luciano Lama, attempting to answer Amendola. (4) The tone was one of rational debate, and Lama disarmingly conceded agreement with Amendola on various issues. His main point was that Amendola ignored two essential questions -- "the existence of a political struggle in the country against specific class enemies, and the necessity to bring about profound changes in the economy and in Italian society in order to get over the crisis." Amendola, in short, was disregarding "the socialist character of the party."

On the day Lama's article appeared, Berlinguer himself made a more vigorous counterattack in a speech in Rome. It was a counter-attack made very definitely from the left. Amendola's article, the secretary-general complained, said nothing about "the action of the enemies of the workers' movement and the trade union movement," nothing about "the all-out battle waged against our policy by the most diverse sectors of the political, economic, and labor worlds." (5)

(3) L'Unità, 10 November 1979.

(4) Luciano Lama, "La Nostra Politica e i Nostri Obiettivi," ibid., 11 November 1979.

(5) Ibid., 12 November 1979.

He also criticized Amendola for asking for "efforts, restrictions, and even sacrifices" from workers and youth, without giving an acceptable goal. "To save Italy" from economic collapse was not enough: the only acceptable goal was a socio-political "transformation that will bring about the overcoming of capitalism" and enable the working class to exercise its responsibilities as the "national ruling class." Berlinguer ended, significantly, by stressing the need to maintain the discipline of democratic centralism, reading out the relevant passages from the new party statutes.

Central Committee Showdown

Berlinguer's "hawkish" stand heralded what might be called a showdown at a Central Committee plenum (November 14-16). The first day of the plenum was devoted to discussion of a report by Gian Carlo Pajetta on international affairs, but the next two days were given up to debate on Gerardo Chiaromonte's report on the party's economic and social policies, in which the central issue was Amendola's article. In his report Chiaromonte referred to the article rather than criticizing it. His own emphasis was on blaming the Christian Democrats for Italy's troubles and on the primacy of "the quality and goals of economic development" rather than of fighting inflation and promoting productivity. But the obvious divergences were not labored, and Amendola was able to begin his own speech by saying that he approved of Chiaromonte's report (later unanimously endorsed, in a return to communist tradition), "even if it contains contradictions not yet resolved."

When Amendola, gaunt of feature from his illness, took the podium, he made it clear that he was in no mood for compromise. The "emotional powder keg" touched off within the party by his article had obscured the substance of the issues raised, he observed calmly. Proceeding to develop the themes of his article, he said it covered three groups of questions. The first dealt with the pre-eminent problem of runaway inflation and the need for the party and the unions to join in a consistent struggle to deal with it through measures to raise productivity, reduce public deficits, etc. In effect: Italy was living beyond its means. Then, there was the group of questions concerning the trade unions -- not their program but their current practice, for there was a substantial divergence between them. Here Amendola noted "the stifling of democracy" in the factories. The third group of questions concerned terrorism and the need to clarify the attitude of the PCI and the unions toward leftist extremism in general. He said he was glad that this thorny subject had now been brought into the open for discussion. He had been attacked for not having criticized the bosses and the Christian Democrats, and for being "one-sided." But he thought that it was not necessary to be one-sided, "so as not to dilute the criticism and self-criticism in a generic discourse," even if this offended many comrades who felt that dirty linen should be washed only in the privacy of the family.

With that, Amendola turned to answering his principal critics -- Pajetta, Lama, and Berlinguer (who sat impassively beside his podium). Pajetta had accused him of slandering the Turin working class; what he had done (and he did it again) was to criticize Turin Communists for not having carried into the factories the "democratic, antifascist, antiterrorist initiative" which they had carried out in the city itself, through an inadmissible surrender to the trade unions of the functions proper to the party. This had happened "because of a weakness of political orientation, and the presence . . . within the party of sectarian resistance to the policy of national unity, of austerity, and of the historic compromise." Lama had accused him of not taking into account the difficulties facing the trade unions and the results achieved. Amendola recognized these difficulties and successes, but still insisted that a trade union leader must "appeal to the class conscience of the workers by telling the truth, the whole truth, and not covering up scandalous cases of absenteeism, or hiding the existence in Italy of a half-million [clandestine] foreign immigrants, who should instead be sought out, helped, and organized."

Turning then to Berlinguer, Amendola said that he appreciated the "civil" tone of the party leader's criticism of his article, but was not persuaded by it. "One cannot shift the blame for our own errors on to our political adversaries and the bosses. . . . Nor can one wait for the transformation of the system before asking the workers, the people, to make the sacrifices necessary to bring about that transformation. . . . I cannot understand the suggested distinction between the objective of socialism and that of saving the fatherland. One cannot build any kind of socialism on the ruins of the country." In passing, he noted that he was said to be "isolated" within the party; well, he took that as a compliment: "I have always been a loner, and have resisted every attempt to imprison me within a tendency or a downright faction."

Finally, he said that he accepted democratic centralism, but that it should not function "in one direction only" (a senso unico). He added:

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

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's Intervention

Before and after his speech, Amendola's arguments were criticized by other Central Committee members. Alessandro Natta of the Secretariat, for example, spoke of Amendola as holding "a complex of positions which . . . can give the idea that what matters is to get the 'machine' moving again, or that change is possible if the workers unilaterally keep wages down and make other sacrifices" -- positions which would alienate the party from the masses. On the other hand, while the majority tended (with variations) to be critical, a few speakers expressed support for his arguments or -- like Mayor Diego Novelli of Turin -- refrained from criticizing him.

On the morning of the last day the decisive blow fell, with an unexpected (6) intervention by the secretary-general himself. (7) Berlinguer complained that in describing the Italian situation Amendola was, as it were, crying out that the house was on fire and about to collapse, and then pointing to the "sacrifices" (of the workers) as the only way to prevent that collapse. "Amendola says we must tell the truth to the workers, and about the workers. That is right -- but the truth also includes exploitation . . . and alienation." Amendola's argument amounted to "an appeal for a series of renunciations and sacrifices"; and if the party did not go beyond that it would make no headway. The call for a reduction of inflation and a growth of productivity meant aiming at the renewal of "a system of economic and social balances which belongs to the past. Well I hold he went on that this objective not only cannot be adopted by our party of the working class but that it is unrealistic, since in that system the inevitable rifts have already appeared, and it has entered into crisis." Amendola's line would, at best,

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- (6) Berlinguer's name had not been on the roster of speakers, and the text of his speech was not ready until six hours later.
 - (7) Berlinguer's speech and those of 19 others were published in L'Unità of November 17, Chiaromonte's report, Amendola's speech, and those of 12 others in the issue of November 16.

mean putting off or slowing down the further deterioration of the system, whereas the aim should be to create "new balances" taking account of the gains already made -- no question of giving them up, of retreating. If the workers were to accept the sacrifices of austerity, it could only be with the aim of changing the society.

Toward the end of his long speech Berlinguer's criticism became more personal. He suggested that what Amendola wanted was "a struggle for his line or, better, a party line of which he poses as the interpreter and judge. From what he has written in Rinascita and repeated here, it would appear that anyone who does not think as he does is a factionalist, or outside the party line." Having said that, Berlinguer gave short shrift (without mentioning it) to Amendola's plea for an interpretation of democratic centralism that would allow for open debate on the party line with the formation of majorities and minorities. "Discussion must point to and end with unity . . . discussion must lead to clear decisions and commitments valid for all."

Shift to the Left?

Significantly, Berlinguer's intervention had the effect of ending the debate. The only person who spoke after him, on Friday afternoon, was Chiaromonte, who as rapporteur had to sum up the discussion, before his report was formally adopted unanimously. Other members who had put their names down to speak withdrew after Berlinguer's intervention. They included Pietro Ingrao, Armando Cossutta, and Aldo Tortorella. The withdrawal of the first two seemed particularly significant, since in different ways they represent the left wing of the party (Ingrao leaning toward populist radicalism and Cossutta toward pro-Soviet orthodoxy). That could be taken as another indication that, if the Berlinguerian center had again prevailed, that center had shifted significantly toward the Left. In this Berlinguer is undoubtedly reacting more to the PCI's recent political losses (down 4 per cent in the June elections) than to the Italian socio-political crisis, which is of primary concern to Amendola. The strategy of the historic compromise remains, if only because no alternative is apparent, and there may well be a shift back if conditions change; but for the time being the PCI can be expected instead to emphasize its political identity as an opposition force, its ideological identity as the party of the working class.

Meanwhile, one of the most penetrating commentaries on "the Amendola affair" has come from a former member of the PCI, the Marxist philosopher Lucio Colletti, in an interview with La Stampa. (8) Colletti thought that the affair had its positive and its negative sides. On the positive side, "for the first time, perhaps, an important leader like Amendola has spoken out clearly and in depth, without reticences and self-censorship, saying openly what he thinks of the situation in the country. On the other hand, the judgment

(8) 18 November 1979.

must be negative if one considers that the manifestation of open disagreement immediately created a dramatic, tension-laden atmosphere which found expression in the attempt to isolate Amendola as a reprobate attacking the unity of the party." On the substance of the controversy, in his judgment, Amendola was right and Berlinguer wrong: "A party which claims to function as the guide of the working class cannot march as the rearguard of the workers. It must have the strength and the capacity to indicate real alternatives. And the alternatives are those indicated by Amendola."

In Colletti's view, the affair demonstrated a shift in Berlinguer's positions: "It is clear that he has moved on to the positions of the Ingraoist Left." This change, in turn, he suggested, implicitly meant giving up two pillars of PCI policy in recent years. The first was the commitment to political pluralism and parliamentary democracy; the second was the pledge to maintain the market economy during the transition to socialism. What this meant, Colletti thought, was that in adopting this line Berlinguer was "giving up any serious attempt to reach agreement on the entry of the Communists into government."

That remains to be seen. The pressures which have caused Berlinguer to move toward "the Ingraoist Left" are not the only ones to which he and his party are subjected. "The differences remain," said Amendola after the CC plenum. To which one can add: and so do the uncomfortable truths which he proclaimed.

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