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THE INDEPENDENT ITALIANS

The Italian Communist Party delegation which returned from Moscow on May 5 after nine days of inter-party talks on the Sino-Soviet conflict seems to have made little or no headway in the debates with Suslov and other Soviet ideologues. On the other hand, the Italians seem to have given little or no ground, either -- and this is important news for Communists, and students of communism, throughout the world.

On his arrival back in Rome Pietro Ingrao, who headed the three-man delegation, made this clear in a prepared statement which he refused to elaborate. "We expressed our radical opposition to the Chinese leaders' theses and our reservations on the calling of a world conference of Communist parties at this time," he said. The Soviet delegation, on the other hand, had "fully expounded its evaluation of the situation, the severe criticism it had to make of the Chinese Communist Party's position and the reasons causing it to favor a world conference of the Communist parties."

The Tass communiqué on the talks had already said a lot by saying little. It noted that the discussions were held "in a spirit of sincere friendship and brotherhood, which prevails between the two parties." There is no mention here of that "identity of views on all issues" which in the past was the normal outcome of such inter-party talks, especially when one of the parties was the paternal CPSU. The contrast with the talks that Signor Togliatti had with President Tito in January is striking. On that occasion the former found that there was "no divergence" between the Italian and Yugoslav Communists on the issues raised by the Sino-Soviet conflict. Both condemned the Chinese ideological positions and their factionalist activity, and --

"We agree in holding that the divisions cannot be overcome through verbal proclamations or anathemas... Our Party (and the Yugoslav comrades are in agreement) have many reservations regarding the project for a world conference of Communist parties, which would run the risk of limiting itself to the repetition of general condemnations, aggravating them."¹

¹ Togliatti's Belgrade press conference, L'Unità, January 22.

This is the expression of a position which the Italian CP has stood by firmly since last fall, when it became clear that the Soviets were considering mustering their followers in the world movement for a showdown with the Chinese. After the Soviets had implicitly called for a "showdown conference," by reprinting statements by the Portuguese, Paraguayan and French parties, the Italian CP, in a Central Committee resolution of October 24, rejected this call by announcing its "reservations" about such a conference, which could lead to "a choice between two solutions, both harmful to the Communist movement -- either a further worsening of the present differences, even going so far as an open break, or else a completely formal and unsatisfactory compromise."

"Unacceptable to US"

This position, maintained during the Tito-Togliatti talks, was emphatically reaffirmed one day before the publication of the Suslov report, which the Italians knew was to signal the start of a new Soviet campaign to rally support for a conference of condemnation. Speaking for his party, Mario Alicata warned in an editorial in L'Unità that any attempt to settle the ideological conflict by "each side seeking the support necessary to 'excommunicate' the party and state one disagreed with and to 'expel' it from the movement and from the family of socialist states ... would, in our opinion, represent a serious step backwards for the whole international movement, and one unacceptable to us."²

On April 22 this stand was authoritatively restated by Togliatti himself, in his report to the Central Committee. After referring pointedly to the Yugoslav comrades, and the contribution they had made to Communist experience despite their (unjustified) expulsion from the Cominform in 1948, he declared:

"When people began to talk about holding a new conference of all Communist parties, to examine and judge the positions held by the Chinese comrades, we thought at one that this move could result once more in an excommunication, launched in a new direction; and this, it seemed to us, would be useless and harmful."

The Italian CP, he explained, proposed that, instead of such an all-party conference, there should be "a series of bilateral or group meetings."

Autonomy, Diversity

Togliatti went to state more clearly the attitudes behind this stand:

"This position of ours corresponds to the conception that we have of the international Communist movement, as being a movement united by a profound solidarity but open to necessary diversities and to the circulation of ideas..."

² L'Unità, April 1; emphasis added.

"The method of solemn excommunication ... contains the danger of a resurgence of authoritarian and sectarian systems in the leaderships of individual parties."

The Italian CP stands by its slogan of "Unity in Diversity" -- and more and more it lays a discreet emphasis on the last word. The general loosening of bonds in the world Communist movement, which is a result of destalinization and of the Sino-Soviet dispute, among other historical factors, has given the Italian party a chance to develop its opportunistic, revisionist line, even to the extent of virtually abandoning the classical doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat; and in the process it has become the ideological pace-maker for the Communist movement in the industrialized West. This policy would be threatened by any move to retie the bonds loosened since Stalin's death. If the Italians are opposed to a conference of condemnation, it is partly because, as Khrushchev and Suslov have both hinted recently, the "excommunication" of the Chinese would be accompanied by an attempt to close ranks and tighten discipline in the Soviet section of the divided world movement. Hence the Italian insistence on "the concept of the autonomy of the parties, the impossibility of creating a single organizational center, the end of the idea of a guiding state or guiding party" (as Giancarlo Pajetta put it in a recent article).³

Critical Comrades

The autonomy enjoyed by any Communist party must be limited, if the movement is to remain a movement. But it is in the interests of the Italian CP not only to win as great a measure of substantial independence as it can, but to persuade the electorate that it enjoys more independence than it does. In promoting this electoral image it is important that the party should appear to look with clear-eyed objectivity on the socialist regimes to the East, criticising where criticism is needed. The stalinist years, with their embarrassing policy somersaults now and then, are not so far behind, and some voters have stubborn memories.

During the past year or so this right of criticism has been exercised increasingly, if still discreetly. One recalls, for instance, the series of articles in the Italian Communist press in the spring of 1963, attacking Soviet cultural policies. Again, the Central Committee resolution of October 24, rejecting the implicit Soviet call for an all-party conference, contained this strongly-worded passage:

"Even in Socialist societies there remain acute and profound contradictions..."

"Of fundamental importance ... are the overcoming and liquidation of those illegitimate restrictions and violations of democratic principles and of socialist legality which for too long have obscured the ideals

³ Giancarlo Pajetta, "Polemiche sulla Cina," Rinascita, April 18, 1964.

of socialism and damaged economic and democratic development both in the Soviet Union and in other socialist countries."

This critical stance was reaffirmed in a recent Rinascita article by Pietro Ingrao on "Socialist Democracy and Internal Party Democracy." The article takes added importance from two facts. Ingrao headed the three-man party delegation which has just returned from the Moscow talks on the Sino-Soviet conflict, having apparently refused to toe the Soviet line. He has also long been regarded as a leader of the PCI's left wing. This term, however, should be understood in terms of internal policy and tactics -- and even there Ingrao seems to have been shifting position towards the center. Togliatti has apparently been remarkably successful in rallying all wings of the party (except for the pro-Chinese extremists) behind his inter-party policy. This was shown by his choice of Ingrao (who had already led a party delegation to Cuba in January) to head the group sent to Moscow to expound and defend the Italian stand on a conference.

Plurality in Democracy

In his article in the April 25 issue of Rinascita Ingrao sets forth his party's devotion to democracy in familiar terms, emphasizing that he means democracy not only throughout the nation but within the party -- repolishing the electoral image, in fact. But in pledging that this devotion to democracy will remain after the PCI has come to power, he offers implicit criticism of existing Communist regimes, in passages like the following:

"We have disposed of the idea of the trade union as a transmission belt; we support the autonomy of the trade union from the party, and we affirm that such autonomy must persist ... also in a society which is building socialism... More than that -- we affirm that the socialist leadership of the new proletarian state can also be realized through a plurality of political forces... There exists the possibility⁴ that the unity of political leadership of the new socialist state may be realized not through a single party, but through a collaboration (and debate, and confrontation) between various political forces of socialist orientation."

Ingrao goes on to tackle another question -- whether Italian Communists will continue to accept "the method of majorities and minorities" (that is, organized democratic opposition) after they have come to power. Of course they will, he replies, if only because of oft-protested loyalty to the Constitution. But he goes further:

⁴ Original emphasis.

"We envisage the organization of socialist power and of a workers' state in which definite political rights -- of voting, of expression of opinion, of organization, etc. -- are granted to all, even to men and groups which are not of a socialist orientation."

Ingrao insists, of course, that all this does not mean that the Italian party has abandoned "our classical position and the Marxist-Leninist criticism of the old order, even while we envisage a regime in which definite rights and liberties are granted even to non-socialist forces." But the Chinese are right: Togliatti's party has travelled far along the road of revisionism, at least in theory. It would be interesting to measure the Italian vision against the varied reality on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

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