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XI PCI CONGRESS: THE INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

Although the Eleventh PCI Congress centered mainly on internal Party matters and on the PCI's domestic strategy, the foreign delegates were not allowed to forget that the PCI is also a great international party.

The PCI has traditionally been too active, too creative to be content with a minor role in the international Communist movement. Especially since the beginning of the Sino-Soviet rift, the PCI has used the advantage to press throughout the world a persistent program of "ideological diplomacy". In turn, the PCI has become, through the sheer weight of its ideas and the attraction of its interpretation of "unity in diversity," the world's most influential non-ruling Communist party. In fact, it would not be too much to say that in the field of ideology the PCI is surpassed in importance only by the Soviet and Chinese parties. Some "fraternal" parties, like the Chinese, may reject violently the Italian translation of Marxism; but none can afford to ignore it. And on more than one occasion, the foreign delegates to this first Congress without Togliatti were reminded, happily in some cases and less so in others, that the PCI retains a lively and often less than tactful interest in their affairs.

Religion, Man and the State

In his famous testament, the late Palmiro Togliatti reminded the Soviet bloc that "the old atheist propaganda is of no use." It might be added that any obstructions to religious freedom in the Soviet bloc are a source of acute embarrassment for the PCI. It only makes more difficult the Party's attempt to win over the Catholic left in Italy. The importance of this theme was stressed in Secretary-General Luigi Longo's opening address to the Congress. For the most part there was nothing new in Longo's speech, but the emphasis on religious freedom was so unmistakeable that it was the major theme of the address. For on this one issue, Longo was clearer and more explicit than even Togliatti had ever been, producing what was in effect a eulogy of Vatican II:

It is beyond doubt that the (Second Vatican Ecumenical--WM) council constitutes a moment of great importance in the life of the Church and the Catholic world.

Turning to the PCI's hope to advance a "dialogue" with Catholics, Longo admitted that "the very unity of class has been impeded by a certain conception of the Christian religion." But he re-affirmed his belief that "we are witnessing a certain overcoming of various conservative ideological positions" -- which, said Longo, "identified the religious 'ideology' with the opiate of the people" The Secretary-General went on to state in clear terms the PCI's position on religion:

We reaffirm that we are in favor of the absolute respect of religious liberty, liberty of conscience, for believers and non-believers, for Christians and non-Christians....

We believe that the safeguarding of religious peace can be, beyond everything else, a concrete aid to the development of the Socialist society.... It is evident that we are in favor of a State that is truly laic.... Just as we are against a theocratic State, we are against State atheism. This means we are against the State's attributing any privilege whatever to an ideology, philosophy, religious faith or cultural and artistic school of thought, to the detriment of others.¹

Radio Zagreb commented (26 January) that Longo's thoughts on religion "have even over-shadowed such important problems as relations and conflict with the Communist Party of China, and the position of the Italian Party in connection with that conflict."

It is impossible to say what impression Longo's declaration of religious freedom made on the Soviet bloc delegates at the Congress, but it is unfortunately true that the regimes themselves took steps to limit the impression it might make within the Soviet bloc. The East European radio stations (with the sole exception of Yugoslavia) largely ignored Longo's defense of religious freedom. The same treatment was presumably accorded to Communist youth leader Achille Occhetto's explanation of what the Party wanted in Italy. Specifically, according to Occhetto, the PCI did not want Italy to become another East European country:

1) Emphasis added. See the FWA analysis (particularly the section on Lombardo-Radice), "Marxism and Freedom at the XI PCI Congress," 25 January 1966.

We do not want to make Italy into a country of the East, nor do we wish to be bound to old Socialist systems. Our objective must be to arrive at the construction of a new democratic state.

Ochetto also said that Italian Communists were prepared to work with others for a program in which "not all powers are in the hands of the State." It is worth noting here that since the PCI is so vitally concerned with gaining a voice in government it may be expected that the PCI will not confine criticism to the Congress hall. Even more than in the past, the PCI will be ready, for its own rather obvious reasons, to cast a critical eye on Soviet bloc developments.

The Revisionists

The PCI leadership is well aware of the complex factors involved in economic reform in Eastern Europe. The reportage of Giuseppe Boffa for l'Unita is a constant reminder that the PCI recognizes (and even encourages) the dependent relationship between economic and political revisionism. Early in his opening speech, Longo gave the PCI's "blessings" to economic reform in Eastern Europe, while at the same time defending it from the attacks of the dogmatists. After noting that nearly all the Eastern European countries were facing new phases of development in their economies, he declared that:

The need for new systems of economic management and calculation has become in the last few years one of the main problems for an important group of socialist countries. This need does not only derive from the difficulty of increasing income. It also derives from the need to affirm more intense forms of economic development and to overcome all that showed itself to be backward in the old conception of planning.

Longo reminded the Congress that the reforms under way throughout the Soviet bloc aimed at assuring a greater autonomy for individual enterprises and a more significant function to the market. The reforms also suggested that it was time for Eastern Europe to end its isolation. "These reforms underscore," said Longo, "also for the socialist countries, the growing need for the development of international cooperation.... The reforms in progress...can also favor steps forward in cooperation among the countries of the Socialist camp as well as between these countries and the capitalist world."

On another level, homage was paid to the PCI by quite a few of the delegates from the non-ruling Communist parties. Many of the Communist parties represented at the Congress -- from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Cuba, Cyprus, France, Holland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Venezuela -- owe something

of their tactical and ideological positions to the PCI's pioneering efforts. Few of the speeches made by these delegates failed to recognize the great interest their parties had in what Mohamed Harmel (Tunisian CP) called "your debates, your initiatives and your struggles...." The Australian delegate, William Gollan, told the Congress that the example of the PCI has spurred his Party into a membership drive which had resulted in a ten percent increase. The Chilean delegate, Jorge Inunza (director of El Siglo), said that, "our Party knows well the contribution of thinkers and fighters like Gramsci and Togliatti." Harry Hagberg, delegate of Sweden's distinctly revisionist CP, paid the most sincere compliment -- his speech was filled with borrowings from the PCI line. The PCI's involvement with the "third world" -- which Togliatti had encouraged in his testament -- was reflected by the attendance at the Congress of delegates from the ruling parties of Algeria, Guinea and Mali, and from the "national liberation movements" of Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa.

The PCI leadership may well have derived its greatest satisfaction from the remarks of an old enemy -- Jacques Duclos of the French CP. Three years ago (almost to the day) the CGT, under instructions from the French CP, sabotaged an attempt by the PCI-dominated CGIL to open an office in Brussels for liaison between the West European Communist trade unions and the Common Market. The CGIL had to go it alone. But during the past year the French CP has gradually changed its tune, until today it has almost completely endorsed -- without, of course, admitting that anything like endorsement has taken place -- the PCI policy on the Common Market. On 26 January, Duclos told the Italian Congress:

We think that we can establish between us a collaboration to fight within the heart of the Common Market and European institutions for a policy which would take into account the interests of the workers and the national interests of each country at the same time.

It is with this in mind that we ask that, without discrimination of any kind, unions and elective assemblies be represented in European organizations.

The Sino-Soviet Rift

Nothing at the Congress characterized so much the important role of the PCI in the Peking-Moscow struggle as the startling contrast between the messages sent by the Chinese and North Vietnamese parties. Longo revealed to the Congress on 25 January that the Chinese had been invited "to send a delegation of their own" but had refused. Instead, the Chinese sent a brief, unsentimental telegram of greetings which was addressed more to "the Italian working class" than to the PCI.

North Vietnam, like China, had been invited but could not (not would not) come. In a telegram the North Vietnamese explained that the Italian government (confirmed by the Italian Foreign Ministry on 26 January) had refused them a visa. The extremely cordial message of greetings turned out to be something of a consolation prize, for it represented a real appreciation of the independent Italian position. It was addressed without qualification to the PCI leadership and contained some interesting formulations which obviously have little in common with the Chinese line:

In the last years, under the direction of the PCI, the Italian working class and working population have obtained numerous successes in the struggle for democracy, in the improvement of living conditions, in the defense of world peace....

The just fight of our whole population, which enjoys the active support of socialistic brother countries and the Communist movement of the whole world, will certainly achieve final victory.

On this occasion we express sincere thanks to the PCI for having mobilized the Italian working class and the people in the resolute fight against the war policy and aggression on the part of American imperialists in Vietnam, and for the warm approval and great support granted to our struggle against American imperialists....

(Emphasis added)

It is difficult to believe that the leader of the Soviet delegation, Mikhail Suslov, would have been so optimistic as to hope that the Eleventh Congress would produce a more favorable Italian attitude to an international Communist conference; but if he did he was quickly disappointed by Secretary-General Longo. While attacking the Chinese positions as "grave, absurd and pretentious," Longo did not deviate one iota from the policy laid down by Togliatti. He re-emphasized the importance of the PCI's policy of "unity in diversity" and brusquely rejected the idea of a conference of excommunication by stating that "our Party... made an important contribution to bringing our movement out of the sterile discussion on the convocation or non-convocation of another conference of the 81 Communist Parties." Pietro Ingrao outlined the Italian position more clearly in his speech on 27 January: "We are not trying to attenuate the fight against the wrong positions of the Chinese comrades; we are (aiming-WM) to carry it (the fight-WM) forward in such a way that will reduce to a minimum the danger of a possible Chinese schism and to keep open the terms for a return to unity."

It has been said before: this may be the first PCI Congress without Togliatti, but his spirit was very much in evidence

This is particularly true with respect to the PCI's internationalism. It seems that the one message which the PCI leadership wished to convey to the foreign delegates was that "nothing has changed...we will continue to act as before." Doubtlessly, there are some Communist parties on both sides of the Sino-Soviet fence which regret this decision. For the international line of the PCI in all its aspects attacks an old habit -- the desire of some Communist parties to impose their will on others.

William McLaughlin