

Italy: "The Project of Prodi's Centre-Left Union has failed"

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The recent election defeat of Berlusconi was not any kind of lasting defeat for the Italian right, which waged an aggressive and mobilising campaign. By contrast the centre-left "Union" waged a very defensive campaign and has resulted in a weak and divided government. It is far from being a tremendous victory for the left or the workers movement, according to Franco Turigliatto, interviewed below.

How do you explain the very close result of the election of 9-10 April?

In spite of a deep economic and social crisis which could have provoked strong opposition to the government, there is no sign in this electoral result of a victory of the Centre-left. Fundamentally, we can cite three main reasons for this.

One is the capacity of the Right to reactivate all its potential electors, thanks to a campaign that was very wide ranging and very aggressive, linked to domination of the media. It articulated the use of fears (fear of increasing taxes, fear of the "Bolsheviks", fear of "oppressive bureaucracy") - in a society that is traumatized - and of promises, for example, concerning taxes and tax evasion, which had an impact on a significant sector of the so-called middle classes.

The second reason is the following: in spite of the mobilisations, in spite of the struggles, the social recomposition of the workers' movement remains very limited. As a result what can be described as the workers' movement cannot project its hegemony over the whole of society. And that explains the difficulty of not only winning the votes of those who are favourable to the Centre-left and the Left, but also of making a breakthrough in sectors of society which can be the object of manipulation by populist propaganda.

And on this terrain Berlusconi demonstrated all that he was capable of. During his term of office he had to face some difficult moments, moments of open crisis. He found himself under the pressure of some mass movements. However, the trade union organizations and the parties of the Centre-left avoided building a solid and consistent anti-government mobilization.

It is not just a question of the mobilization against the war in 2003. I am also referring here to the electoral routs he suffered on the occasion of the local and European elections in June 2004 and especially the regional elections of April 2005, where Berlusconi's party only held on to two regions out of the thirteen that were up for re-election. The rhythm of the electoral calendar was respected by the Union and no mobilization demanding the resignation of the Berlusconi government was organized by the trade union and political forces of the so-called opposition.

The third reason relates to the very great weakness of the Centre-left's electoral campaign. The

Centre-left waited for the ripe fruit to fall into its hands. Whereas on the right the campaign was conducted in a radical fashion and with a strong ideological content, the forces of the Centre-left didn't know how to - or didn't want to - incorporate and set in movement broad popular sectors around simple proposals and demands which respond to their needs.

For example, the Centre-left was completely defensive on the question of taxes, whereas it could have very concretely shown the legitimacy of an offensive tax policy by demonstrating the plunder that was carried out by the Berlusconi government. It could have responded in this way, even just in the limited framework of redistributed justice. That was not done. In reality on all the important social and economic questions, the Centre-left was on the defensive.

It was forced to act in that way because at the heart of the Centre-left there was a conviction that the Confindustria (the Italian employer' organization) was going to facilitate or even guarantee victory. So even from a purely propagandistic point of view, the Union did not want to sharpen its demands,; because it didn't want to endanger its relations with the Confindustria and with all the big press organs. Furthermore, the press provided proof that in the present politico-mediatic context it cannot guarantee electoral success.

How would you define the Union from a socio-political point of view?

In the Union there is a whole sector of the old Christian Democracy which expresses itself through La Margherita. There is a sector which directly represents capital, like Lamberto Dini (who was Director General of the Bank of Italy, President of the Council of Ministers from January 1995 to May 1996 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1996 to 2001, establishing excellent relation with the United States: he went from Forza Italia to La Margherita in 2002, transiting via his own movement, Rinnovamento Italiano).

Furthermore there is a whole sector of the Left Democrats (DS) which manages capitalism and has completely gone over to its side. DS has a relationship with the organized workers' movement, let's say with the CGIL, of the same kind that the American Democratic Party has with the AFL-CIO.

Furthermore, the relationship that has been established with the big daily newspapers is only the cover for a more organic relationship with factions of the big bourgeoisie. The links with the banks are also very strong.

We can cite for example the position taken by the boss of Uni-Credit, Alessandro Profumo, who was clearly to be seen - and he wasn't the only one - taking part in the primary elections within the Union which were organized in October 2005. So he openly chose Prodi. That was a political act of some weight. The links with the BancaIntesa and Giovanni Bazzoli are just as explicit. So we can make a rather ironic remark.

This front which goes from the Confindustria to the PRC via the main bourgeois newspapers only won 50% of the vote! The other 50% was also won by another part of the bourgeoisie, with the support of a whole spectrum of bosses of small and medium enterprises, of fractions of what we could describe as the lumpen bourgeoisie, and obviously of popular sectors.

And if the Union is making a compromise with the Confindustria, which it is in the process of doing, it is a sort of politico-arithmetic compromise within 50% of the electorate. Which ought to provoke some more serious thinking, to say the least, within the "radical Left".

The leaders of the Union thought that the plebeian and vulgar tone used by Berlusconi in his campaign was the sign either of loss of self-control or of obvious excess. In reality this type of propaganda was very well studied. And when he used the term "imbecile" he was not only employing

a way of speaking that is very widespread, but placing himself within a dominant ideological framework. In reality, on the Left too, themes such as individualism, the domination of the market, the centrality of the enterprise are dominant. Which means that calling those who are opposed to these themes “imbeciles” appears as quiet natural.

Besides, Berlusconi succeeded in mobilizing against the Confindustria a large section of small and medium employers for whom, in order to survive, the only solution is to exploit their workers to the maximum. They are far from the kind of collaboration with the unions advocated by the Confindustria. So that is the overall socio-political framework; it is very negative.

So, how do you see the framework within which the Union should act?

The project of the Union has failed. Many people thought that the Union was going to break up the Berlusconi front. We can discuss to what extent that happened. What is certain is that Berlusconi succeeded in mobilizing all his bases of support to go out and vote. Now we can discuss whether this cohesion of the Berlusconi front can be maintained now that he is no longer in power.

But we are in a situation where the social and parliamentary relationships of forces are as I have outlined them above. Berlusconi and the section of the bourgeoisie that he represents can exert permanent pressure, exert blackmail over the new Prodi government. This Berlusconi Right is still solid enough to have an effect on the action of the government's. To which should be added the more than serious influence of the Confindustria and also the pressures exerted by the Church.

The Confindustria has already said what it wants. It wants none of the measures which have created job insecurity to be touched. It wants that to be accompanied by a reform of the Cassa Integrazione (a mechanism which allows a layer of workers who have lost their jobs to maintain a substitute salary as if they were in a sense just technically unemployed; it is something that was won in the 1970s). In addition the Confindustria wants a reduction of the taxes paid by companies.

All this with the aim of “facing up to the international competition”, according to a credo that is repeated in all countries. The program of the Union suits the employers' organization. It would even be willing to allow some social elements to be introduced in order to better push through the fundamental counter-reforms.

As far as the Church is concerned, it certainly played an important role through its ultra-reactionary campaign around all the themes concerning “the question of Life”.

This time the PRC is entering the governmental coalition, with all the constraints that flow from that...

In fact, in this context, once it is in government, the PRC in its turn will be subjected to strong pressures demanding greater moderation from it. These pressures will be all the stronger in that, faced with the Berlusconi front, the feeling that we have to maintain a “united bloc” is very widespread among a broad layer of workers.

I am already hearing workers saying to me, when they know that I have just been elected to the Senate, where the Union only has a majority of two seats: “Careful, you will always have to be present. Of course we won't be able to demand a whole series of things. But we will have to be satisfied with what we can win in this period”.

Many people say to me: “You'll have to be present, faced with Berlusconi, and immediately propose a law on conflict of interest”. In other words a law dealing with the mixing up of the private interests of the big businessman Berlusconi with those of the politician Berlusconi. Now this theme is not at

the centre of the coming social confrontations. But for many people, dealing with the conflict of interest appears as an urgent task, if only because of past debates.

If the Union's project has failed, the PRC's project has met the same fate. In reality, for the leadership of the PRC the perspective that was at least suggested should have been a massive victory of the union, accompanied by mass movements, therefore with the possibility of establishing a relationship of forces that would allow the implementation of the so-called positive points of the Union's programme and also provide the slight possibility of being able to take some independent positions in relation to the government.

This last aspect could only be concretized insofar as different kinds of mobilisations developed, with a certain continuity. This was supposed to have an influence, in a first stage, on the content of the programme, and then in the second stage on its implementation by the government.

Given the election results and the institutional situation, this orientation was way off the mark. Obviously this failure has not been admitted by the leadership, even though in the ranks of the party a certain number of doubts are being expressed on the subject.

The official version is as follows: it's a fine victory; we escaped a real danger (a victory of Berlusconi); the government must go forward; it must implement its programme because the danger is the establishment of a "grand coalition" (by analogy with the CDU-SPD Grand Coalition in Germany).

Face with this "grand coalition danger", the leadership of the PRC affirms that we have to support the change of government at any price. You have to understand that by change of government is meant a centre-right government followed by a centre-left government; which has nothing to do with a real alternative. The leadership of the PRC has always denied that taking part in an alliance in the framework of the Union only implied this kind of change of government. It always said either that it meant a real alternative or to be more precise, a transition towards a real alternative.

Throughout the whole recent period the leadership has nonetheless been clearer on the subject. It announced: in the present circumstances we absolutely have to support a change of government, against the danger of a "grand coalition". To put the cherry on the cake it added: because it is the only way to keep open the road to a real alternative. Which is nothing more than a statement and obviously not a political orientation. The leadership made maximum use of a widespread feeling - which many people took it upon themselves to spread widely - the feeling of "anything but Berlusconi", echoing the "anything but Bush" during the last American election.

What is the essence of your immediate response in the present situation?

The orientation that we are adopting can be described as follows. First of all, to reject any kind of triumphalism and to underline the difficulties, for example the difficulties that flow from the inability of the Union's orientation to break up the Berlusconian front.

Next, we must insist on the fact that the government will not be able to carry out its task, at least the task that is hoped for by a very large part of those who voted for it, because the pressure on it will be very strong. Starting from there, to resist it is necessary to organize a mobilization of workers to demand the implementation of measures favourable to them.

Only such a dialectic between mobilizations and concrete gains can make it possible also to win back a certain political influence over sectors of the working class and popular sectors who voted for Berlusconi. That is the way that we are countering the "common sense", as I explained it before which is tending to become an element of legitimisation of the present policies of the PRC

leadership. The refusal to support Prodi, as was the case in 1998, is not likely to be repeated, at least there is no sign that it will.

We can't separate the dynamic of the Union from its relations with the trade unions: what can you tell us about that?

To understand the situation you have to remember that the last congress of the CGIL (General Confederation of Italian Workers, the main union confederation) which was held from 1st-4th March 2006 was very negative. The leadership completely adapted itself to the Union and to Prodi. Furthermore, the left around the FIOM (Federation of Metalworkers) was defeated. It was put completely on the defensive.

The centre of gravity of the congress was one of complete support for Prodi. The declarations of Guglielmo Epifani, immediately after the election, on the need to repeal Law 30 (the Biagi Law on deregulation of the labour market) were circumstantial. He simply had to take account momentarily of the pressures exerted by Giorgio Cremaschi, national secretary of the FIOM.

But Epifani will find a way out, that's quite certain. We have to be clear - there is no willingness to fight on the part of the CGIL. In fact if the leadership of the CGIL had wanted to build a movement against Law 30, it would have had the time to do it long ago. But it wasn't the case.

In reality the degree of job insecurity that there is today in Italy is not a product of Law 30 which, besides, has not yet manifested all its negative effects. We have to start from the "Treu Package" - so called from the name of the minister, Tiziano Treu, who is at present a member of the Margherita.

In 1995, Treu was Minister of Labour and Social Provision in the government presided over by an authentic representative of the bourgeoisie, Lamberto Dini. Subsequently, in 1996, Prodi kept him in this job. He was also a minister in 1998 in the government of Massimo D'Alema. From this first Treu reform there followed a whole series of measures which increased job insecurity. Onto these measures was grafted Law 30 (the Biagi Law, enforced by Berlusconi).

This law opens the door to a multitude of fixed term contracts: in this case the very name of contract loses its meaning. In the Union's programmatic documents the proposition is basically to modify Law 30 and go back to its first version, which implied using fixed term contracts and temporary work for fewer categories of workers. Even symbolically such a going back does not correspond to the expectations of those who are today suffering from job insecurity.

The following confrontations seem to me to be on the agenda. First of all on deregulation, in other words on Law 30, because on its essential points the Confindustria doesn't want to give it up. The outcome of this "confrontation" is another question.

Next, the question of the fiscal corner will be debated. This is an invention of Prodi's. The fiscal corner is the difference between the direct salary, the indirect salary, the contributions for retirement pension, and the net salary of the worker, in other words what he really receives at the end of the month. Prodi has proposed to reduce this fiscal corner by 5 points. If the problem was to reduce the taxes paid by workers, the amount of contributions paid by workers, that could be discussed and it could be positive. But if the reduction of this gap is operated by reducing the employer's contributions - which are in fact a part of the salary that belongs to the worker - that quite simply amounts to a big swindle. Not only is the redistribution taking place in favour of the employers, but the future pensions of workers are being put into question.

The Italian political situation, as in other countries, is related to the state and the

dynamics of the workers' movement: how do you see this question?

The fundamental problem that I see could be described as follows. The struggles of recent years, which have certainly been important, have not resulted in a cumulative effect which would make it possible to consolidate, step by step, forms of organization, of struggles, of consciousness, which would have a more dynamic potential. Which would, in other words, make it possible to draw in new sectors of workers and to build "a classist hegemony". I don't want to say that elements of that don't exist. But the real process of rebuilding the workers' movement - to use a formula that to some people may sound old-fashioned - remains in a certain sense hanging in the air, "in waiting". There have been important movements, but they were episodic, which reduces their cumulative dynamics. The last mobilisation of metalworkers (in the broadest sense of the term) did not have the same repercussions on other sectors as in the past. Even though quantitatively this sector of workers remains more or less the same, although the struggles that have been led and the forms that they have taken recall historical moments of acute social confrontation, even though the metalworkers succeeded in winning on certain points that are symbolically important, that didn't have the same effect on society as in the past. And what was won, in its material dimension, remains more than limited.

In addition, for someone who follows the situation in the workplaces, these mobilisations didn't lead to a change in the concrete relationships of forces in the workplace itself. Starting from there, instead of discussing, as many people in the PRC are doing, whether the social bloc behind Berlusconi is going to maintain itself or fall apart, it seems to me much more important to be discussing the limits - and why there are these limits - to the rebuilding of an anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist social bloc. Without that, society will find itself without real defences in the face of operations of plunder, in the face of demagogical populist operations, or in the face of counter-reforms which advance in a concealed fashion.

For me the main responsibility of the PRC leadership is to have canalised the various social mobilizations into the framework of the Union. And in this way it has created an obstacle to this recomposition of an anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist social bloc.

P.S.

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* Franco Turigliatto was elected as a Senator for Piedmont on the PRC list in last month's elections. He is a member of the Critical Left current within the PRC, and of the Italian section of the Fourth International.