

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Movements > World level (Movements) > Internationals (socialist, communist, revolutionary) (Movements, World) > International (Fourth) (Movements, World) > Livio Maitan > **Livio Maitan: looking to the future - his legacy, his political and (...)**

ITALY

Livio Maitan: looking to the future - his legacy, his political and theoretical contribution to revolutionary Marxism

Monday 30 January 2023, by [GIACHETTI Diego](#) (Date first published: 11 January 2023).

To commemorate the centenary of Livio Maitan's birth, a conference will be held on April 1, 2023, at the National Central Library in Rome, Viale Castro Pretorio, 105 - 00186, exactly one hundred years after his birth. It aims to reconstruct the journey of a revolutionary Marxist militant through his political and theoretical activity within the debates of the Italian and international labour movement over more than half a century. There are two objectives: to evaluate his thought and political role, placing it within events that have shaped several generations of militants since the second half of the twentieth century and to measure how much remains relevant to help us understand the present and develop perspectives for those who want to continue an anti-capitalist and internationalist project.

Contents

- [The road travelled](#)
- [Memory, history, hope](#)

In this sense, the one-day National Conference, organized by the Livio Maitan Library, supported by Sinistra Anticapitalista (Anti-Capitalist Left), also intends to be a moment of debate with other political and theoretical currents, with historians and intellectuals; a platform to hear memories of those who worked with him in Italy and/or internationally; a chance to hear contributions from those who today are involved in the preservation and enhancement of his archive.

Two themes will be addressed: Italian political history, starting after World War II and Livio Maitan's role in the construction of the Italian section of the Fourth International and in the political and social battles of the workers' movement; his equally important international activity, the unstinting work he did in the Fourth International, of which he was one of the main leaders for decades.

In parallel, we will open a space on this site (<https://liviomaitan.wordpress.com/>) for the inclusion of Livio Maitan's articles, speeches and interviews, which will also be reposted on the Sinistra Anticapitalista website (<https://anticapitalista.org/>).

The conference will be held on April 1, 2023 at the [Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma](#), viale Castro Pretorio, 105, Rome.

The road travelled

Twenty-five-year-old Livio Maitan joined the Fourth International in 1948. He had come from militancy in the Italian Socialist party, reconstituted after fascism, to found, with other activists, the Revolutionary Communist Groups, an organization that, after taking the name Revolutionary Communist League in 1979, dissolved in 1989 into Democrazia proletaria (Proletarian Democracy), while retaining its affiliation with the Fourth International. Proletarian Democracy merged in 1991 into the nascent Communist Refoundation Party. Livio lived out his last years of political militancy inside this current, until his death on September 16, 2004. A road travelled, to quote the title of the book of his memoirs, published in 2003, covers about sixty years of the history of the labour movement in Italy and internationally. He almost always experienced this history first hand, in the heart of mass mobilizations, from which he drew political and theoretical insights based on a rigorous analytic method

In the course of his life, he contributed crucially to the publication of Trotsky's works in Italy and, more generally, of Marxism with essays and books. He wielded an astute polemical pen that facilitated theoretical elaboration and was not limited or distorted by the repetition of Marxist dogma. Instead Livio tried to make theory useful for the understanding of the present, without distorting its foundations. He had a style of political and theoretical writing based on a culture linked to classical studies, alongside a congenital curiosity and thirst for knowledge that characterized him since his youth. Evidence of this is his personal archive full of documents ranging from 1940 to 2003, divided into six sections: youth militancy in socialist organizations; activity in the Fourth International; working in other left-wing parties; writings and publications; working materials; personal papers.

It is an archive that, thanks to the commitment and expertise of several comrades, can now be consulted in Rome, in 13 Via Elisabetta Canori Mora, at the library that bears her name, included in the SBN Pole of the libraries of the Rome Council, you can make contact with the e-mail: bibliomaitan@gmail.com.

The papers kept in the archive are the map of his historical-political journey, the autobiography of the author and of his life in Italy and the world. Bertolt Brecht coined the term "traveling salesman" of the revolution for the Comintern officials. Livio Maitan played this role for decades for the Fourth International. All of these events are documented but often poorly known. Lack of knowledge has made important aspects superficially familiar but only partially understood. The conference we are preparing aims to move from what in some ways is an incomplete "known" to the knowledge of a personal profile and a collective history that does not pale in comparison with those of other currents in the twentieth-century labour movement. This is what he was able to do with his two last works, *The Road Travelled [1]* and *Memoirs of a critical communist - Towards a history of the Fourth International*. Stories and events are narrated with sobriety, balance, never demonizing or contemptuous toward opponents and critics of his positions. He aimed at scrupulously reconstructing, contexts, situations, and political analyses of the period, considered and re-proposed in the form of memoirs.

Memory, history, hope

Maitan did not trust his memory alone, but went on to reconsider, to reread, to take up again, grappling with the goal of arriving at a historical consideration, according to a procedure, typical of historiography. Unlike memoirs, historical method never absolutizes the results, but relativizes them, because history is often de-legitimization of the past, continuous rereading of what seemed definitively acquired. Thus, he often explains, analyses, reconsiders, re-tells history by placing himself within the narrative and not as an external narrative voice.

For Livio much time was spent organising and acting politically and much less time was available for memoirs, of the need to tell and to remember. Political activity, if maintained over time and carried out with intensity and direct participation, leaves no space or place for the activist to think of themselves fully in the form of history, as autobiography. It was only in what would turn out to be the final years of his life that the need for memory took over, probably propelled in this direction by the combination of biology (the consciousness of life coming to an end), of biographical stocktaking after years and years of militancy, and historical-political reasons. The latter was dictated by the situation he found himself in from the 1990s, when the world had changed radically from the one in which he had lived and operated consciously for almost fifty years. There was also an element of historiographical criticism that held him back, or as he himself admitted, rather forced him to his habitual methodological rigour. As he said, when judging *“historical events, it is difficult to avoid the tendency to read past history too strongly as contemporary history,”* and, symmetrically, one must be aware *“that a comprehensive evaluation of the past, especially of a still recent past, would demand knowledge of the future.”*

Can one speak, concerning this last stage, of an element of disappointment, which often accompanies and is a stimulus to memory, when a sense of discouragement about the world in which one lives prevails? If by disappointment we mean where a person no longer asks anything of themselves, lives with regrets and laments, then the answer can only be negative. If one believes that a person's life is ended when no one asks him for anything anymore and when he himself no longer asks for anything, then Livio Maitan's journey was interrupted only by death, because he always questioned himself and was always asked for opinion or advice.

Even in the final part of his life, he clung to the tormenting relationship between pessimism of the intellect and optimism of will, enunciated in a letter to a comrade in Turin a long time ago, in 1949, when he was already posing the problem of the disparity between the need for a revolutionary organization and the difficulties of building it. How to react to the understandable objective feeling of demoralization that arose? This is how Livio Maitan answered the question:

Ours is a 'historical' confidence. Therefore, if we always keep this general perspective in mind, we can regret not being able to do today something that would save us greater toil in the future. Thus the general need would be to have an organized party in the front line capable of making real policy on the national level. [Given the] circumstances we are forced to move [in a] narrower sphere [...]. It could also be, however, - damn the astrologer - that even these reduced tasks were not feasible at this stage: and in this case this would certainly not be without consequences in the near and distant future, but in no way would it justify either a personal surrender or simple demoralization: there would always be something important to be done.

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Diego Giachetti

P.S.

• Translated by [fourth.international](https://fourth.international/en/europe/499) from [Livio Maitan.org.](https://fourth.international/en/europe/499):
<https://fourth.international/en/europe/499>

Footnotes

[1] In Italian: Il Strada Percorso

<https://www.ibs.it/strada-percorsa-dalla-resistenza-ai-libro-livio-maitan/e/9788845701801>