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Conference (Italy): Remembering Livio Maitan but looking to the future

Sunday 9 April 2023, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2023).

Dave Kellaway reports on a conference he participated in last Saturday in Rome.

On April 1, there were hundreds of us in the modern auditorium of the central Roman national library. It may have looked like an academic conference of mostly senior researchers and professors with a sprinkle of younger students. But as you heard the speakers, you could close your eyes and relive some of the key events and debates of the Italian and international class struggle over the last seventy years. The sound and fury could be heard if you listened hard enough.

- What do you do in 1946 as a young revolutionary like Livio—reject the Communist Party’s (CP) line on national reconciliation? Do you work inside the CP or in the Socialist Party (SP), which has some positions to its left?
- Once the SP shifted back to a moderate line and the space for building separate parties to the left of the CP was vanishingly small, how can you build your current by working as ‘entryists’ inside the hugely dominant party of the working class?
- How and when do you end the entry project and link up with the workers’ and students’ struggles of Italy’s “Hot Autumn” in 1969, when a real space to the left of the CP had emerged?
- How do you, as revolutionary socialists, get into places like the Fiat car plants, which are strongholds of the class? How do you contribute to a vibrant political debate about workers’ self-organisation and workers’ councils?
- How do you later defend workers gains like the sliding scale of wages or stop redundancies, as the government and bosses started a vicious counteroffensive in the 1980s?
- As a small current of revolutionaries, how do you go about regrouping with other currents in new unified organisations?
- Taking advantage of relatively fair electoral systems at that time, how do you work as revolutionaries inside parliament and the senate?
- When in 1991 the CP decided to ditch the word “communist” and finally make a definitive turn to explicitly embrace social liberalism and social democracy, how did you respond to the big split that led to the formation of a radical left mass party like Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation)?
- With the rise of the No Global Movement, how do you turn Rifondazione into something that links up with the movement?

- What do you do when Rifondazione's majority leadership decides to join the socially liberal Prodi government, which then supports intervention in Afghanistan?
- Lastly, how do you rebuild today after the big losses, like when Rifondazione and the revolutionary left lost their seats in parliament, when the bosses' austerity offensive worked, and when the trade unions gave up? Do you argue for a restart from the bottom up through building basic self-organisation, cooperatives, and solidarity networks, or do you maintain what you consider to be vital party-building tasks?

So this was no comfortable nostalgia fest honouring the centenary of Livio Maitan's birth and his contributions to the international and Italian movements. You could identify, amid the cordial exchanges, some real differences and the echoes of some sharp factional fights. These were not the commentaries of armchair theorists. Nearly all had been mass leaders, and those who were still fit enough were still very active.

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I've been interested in Italian politics for a long time, but I was surprised and impressed by how many different people spoke at the party to mark Livio Maitan's 100th birthday (he died in 2004). It was almost like the extended family coming together for an event like a wedding or funeral, despite the rifts and tensions between them. Respect for Livio made it possible to bring together almost all of the forces that have grown to the left of the CP over the last 60 years or so and are still fighting to build a socialist alternative. There was something quite moving and positive about it.

Gigi Malabarba, a veteran leader of the Fiat workers and later a senator for the revolutionary left, spoke about how Livio had supported the work of the comrades in Fiat. He also contended that the defeats of the movement were so great that rebuilding it from the bottom up was the key task today. Gigi does a lot of work supporting groups like the Rimaflo workers, who when their factory was shut down set up their own cooperative, or with migrant rural workers who produce their own tins of tomatoes.

Salvatore Cannavo and Franco Turigliatto voted against Prodi's war mission in Afghanistan in the Senate. This helped bring down Prodi's government. He said that Livio was right to look at the big picture and support the entry of the current first into Democrazia Proletaria (Proletarian Democracy) and then into Rifondazione. He shared Gigi's emphasis on re-establishing basic solidarity before you could really talk about party building in the classic sense.

Fabrizio Burattini, who has worked for many years in the main Italian trade union confederation, the CGIL, made a telling point about how Livio Maitan educated comrades like himself on the correct approach to the Italian CP. In the 1970s, a lot of the new left only saw the 'revisionism' of the great communist party and frontally opposed this 'class enemy', even going so far as to say it was the worst of the class enemies. Here we have echoes of some comrades today on the left who argue that

Labour is the same as the Tories, if not worse, and underestimate the importance of calling for a Labour vote to get rid of the Tories. Livio proposed a more dialectical approach, emphasising how the CP had constructed its hegemony over the Italian working class through its role in winning some partial gains through its positions in local and national political and cultural institutions. You had to use the united front approach, working to get unity in struggle with workers who supported the CP around demands that could be the common basis for going beyond the limits of the party line.

Although there was a minority of female comrades speaking, they made some telling contributions. Particularly strong was Eliana Como from the Sinistra Anticapitalista (Left Anticapitalists), who was the only speaker who had never met Livio! She was a leader of the opposition to the moderate leadership of the CGIL. Eliana explained how, through her support for a minority pre-congress motion, she was able to speak to a large number of workplace assemblies. The overall situation of defeats and defensive struggles was reflected in the meagre attendance at some meetings. However, what impressed her was the larger turnout among workers at the new Amazon centres, which provides some hope for future developments.

At the CGIL congress, Eliana was also the organiser of a protest that received media coverage. Landini, the leader, had invited the post-fascist, hard right prime minister, Giorgi Meloni, to speak to the congress. Eliana helped organise a protest using hundreds of soft toys representing the children killed by the deliberate failure of the government to rescue a boatload of migrants recently off the Calabrian coast. She led a walkout of thirty delegates.

Another woman and well-known veteran of the Italian left, Luciana Castellina, also spoke. She has been elected several times and has been involved in the Manifesto group that split from the CP and started an alternative communist newspaper in 1971 that is still going today. To show you this was not like some funeral or memorial meeting where nobody really disagrees with anybody else, she disagreed with Eliana's protest against Landini. Instead, she argued that this represented a maturity and recognition of the union's strength. Luciana explained how she had become good friends with Livio when they had both been on the leadership team of Rifondazione. She recounted a hilarious incident when she went with Livio to Russia to raise some issues about the treatment of a political group. Their interlocutor had no idea that they were both anti-Stalinists, which led to some gentle prodding of her feet by Livio under the table!

The fact that someone like Fausto Bertinotti, ex-CGIL leader, ex-leader of Rifondazione, and ex-speaker of parliament, took time to come and speak at this event says something about the respect and esteem that Livio Maitan's memory has earned on the Italian left. Despite being on different sides of the debate at the end of Rifondazione and in fact expelling Franco Turigliato from the party (which someone reminded him of during the speech), he made a very warm speech. He commended the way Livio was both able to maintain a political orientation that was often very much against the current but, at the same time, was not ultra left or sectarian since he fully supported the various regroupments leading into Rifondazione. He praised his ability to conduct debates with those who disagreed with him and how he always tried to contextualise and understand the viewpoints of others. Such an approach also needs developing on the British left, in my opinion.

Two leaders of the new left, Silverio Corvisieri and Franco Russo, who built organisations of several thousands and were involved in mass mobilisations in the 1970s, also made interesting contributions about the way entryism in the CP ended around the radical youth and worker upsurge of the 1960s and particularly the hot autumn of 1969. Unlike Livio and the Fourth International current of the time, they left the PCI earlier and were able to build quite large currents compared to Livio's. It is no consolation that their groups no longer exist, whereas the FI currents are still going. One reason why the comrades in France left the CP there much earlier and were consequently able to better take advantage of the May 1968 revolt was that the French leadership was much more brutal

against internal opposition compared to the Italians and expelled leftists like Alain Krivine much earlier than 1968. As has been noted in relation to the experience of British entryism in the Labour Party, it is always much easier to go in than to decide when to pull out.

Livio was human and a creature of his times to a degree, as historic feminist and Fourth Internationalist Lidia Cirillo pointed out in her video contribution. She said that although Livio was fine with accepting the importance of the struggle of women for equal rights and opportunities, he was less understanding of the discussions on identity and difference.

Roberto Firenze remembered how he bumped into Livio at the momentous and violent demonstrations of the No Global movement in Genova. He was not expecting to find him in the middle of those actions. Roberto, as a cadre member of Rifondazione at the time, had organised the transport from Milan of hundreds of activists. Livio said he was not just a theorist or writer; he wanted to be close to the movement. He would always ask comrades for details about what people were saying or doing in their sector of intervention.

Giorgio Cremaschi was a leader of one of the most radical unions, the FIOM (metalworkers), and is currently on the leadership of Potere al Popolo (Power to the People) which has stood candidates in recent elections, winning just over 1%. He is well known and is often on TV like some of the other speakers. His closing remark was to exhort people to embrace the notion of being an activist, a militant, and to be proud of being one because this was more necessary than ever given the multiple crises we are facing. Livio was an example of an active militant right to the end.

There were three international speakers. Manuel Gari from the Spanish state showed how Livio contributed to the debates during the transition from Francoism. Revolutionaries tried in vain to counter the reformist parties' collaboration with conservative parties and the monarchy to establish a new national union government, which failed to bring about a radical rupture with Franco. Penelope Duggan, from the Fourth International Bureau, outlined Livio's international role in supporting its sections and supporters in many countries but particularly in Latin America. She outlined his part in the different debates that spanned decades. I myself, from Britain, who had worked and lived with Livio for 5 years back in the 1980s, tried to show how Livio's personal example provides us with a few useful tips on how to maintain a long-term revolutionary commitment.

The conference also marked the publication of a new book in Italian by Mauro Buccheri called *Livio Maitan and Italian Trotskyism*. He gave an introduction to it at the start of the meeting. He recognised how the selfless work of comrades in setting up the Livio Maitan library and archive provided him with invaluable original sources for his book. Livio was meticulous in keeping all sorts of documents, periodicals, and notes, which constitute not just a personal history but a history of the revolutionary current within the broad workers movement. It is a resource that is open for consultation by anyone interested. If we are serious about our movement, we should not be reticent about looking after our heritage. As we have tried to show, the debates and issues of the past in Italy are not just reducible to archives but relate to similar discussions we are facing today.

Franco Turigliatto, from the leadership of Sinistra Anticapitalita, thanked all the organisers and speakers at the conference and particularly applauded the voluntary efforts of many comrades in establishing the Maitan archive and library on a serious basis. As he says, despite the big defeats the movement has suffered with each government being worse than the last, there is still a continuity, and there are still currents within the movement that are working today to establish a broad opposition to the reformists. Building electoral coalitions is helpful, like the Potere al Popolo is doing, but the key is to build opposition in the unions and social movements in a consistent way so

that self-organised workers can challenge their moderate leaders.

The report on the conference at the Sinistra Anticapitalista website [1] sums up the conference in this way:

Our objective was largely achieved. It was to avoid a ceremony of nostalgia and to provide on the other hand some ideas we can pursue to develop the theoretical and practical organisation of the class struggle at a time when war and the 'permacrisis' dramatically constrains the lives of the masses and the activity of the social movements in ways not seen since the time of the first industrial revolution and the advent of the workers movement.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 05 Apr 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/remembering-livio-maitan-but-looking-to-the-future/>
 - Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.
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Footnotes

[1] <https://anticapitalista.org/2023/04/03/livio-maitan-e-stato-un-successo-il-convegno-del-centenario/>