

**The Italian Left and the  
Formation of the Communist  
Party of Italy**

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The Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) emerged from the split with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) at Livorno in January 1921. It was the political expression of the desire for a definitive break with social democracy amongst a substantial minority of the Italian Socialist Party membership.<sup>1</sup> In one sense the Party's origins can be traced back to the struggle of the so-called intransigent revolutionary fraction, re-established in 1910 to cure the PSI of its reformism. Yet when this fraction was revived in July 1917 it was in quite a different context. World War had been raging for almost three years and the PSI had all but disintegrated under its impact, the intransigent fraction no less than the Party as a whole.

The new fraction was being clandestinely resurrected under the impetus of Amadeo Bordiga and the Naples section to which he belonged. It was at a time when news of revolution in Russia, already linked to the name of Lenin, for the first time offered war-weary proletarians a practical demonstration of the possibility of a revolutionary way out. The proletarian, October Revolution of course had yet to occur in Russia. Nevertheless Lenin was already arguing for the Bolsheviks - who in any case had been organisationally distinct from the Mensheviks since 1912 - to symbolise the proposed break with social democracy by calling themselves the *Communist Party in order to help ... clarify the mind of the proletariat politically*.<sup>2</sup> It was a different situation inside Italian Social Democracy. As yet Bordiga was not even thinking in such terms (much less was he in a position to engineer a definitive break.) Rather, he and his left-wing comrades were concerned with finding means to oblige the PSI to follow a consistent revolutionary policy, particularly of opposition to the War. Like Luxemburg in Germany, Bordiga would only slowly and reluctantly come to the conclusion that the

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<sup>1</sup> Out of a total of 172,487 votes at the PSI's Congress the Communist Fraction obtained a minority of 58,783 whereupon the Communist delegates proceeded to leave the hall for the Teatro San Marco where the founding congress of the 'Communist Party, Italian Section of the Communist Third International took place. Amongst those adhering *en masse* to the new Party was the Youth Federation which counted for a further 50,000 members. From PSI official report in *Dal Convegno d'Imola al Congresso di Livorno nel solco della 'sinistra italiana'* edizioni Prometeo 1971, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> See Lenin's *April Theses*.

very nature of social democracy meant it was impossible to revolutionise from within. It would require the stimulus of further events, inside and outside Italy, to forge a clear **communist** fraction which recognised both the necessity of a definitive break, and the political basis for that break.

That basis would not (and could not) be found under the old 'intransigent' umbrella. Despite the implacable sounding name - the term implies uncompromising adherence to the class struggle and the revolutionary programme - its practical connotation was more nebulous.

The first intransigents, associated with Carlo Smbucco, were so-called because they opposed the policy of tactical alliances with other parties. The issue dominated the 1896 Congress (Florence) and, though Smbucco's motion was defeated (128 to 83 votes), Giorgio Galli notes that this marked the beginning of the end of reformist hegemony in a party which had been formed only four years earlier on a reformist basis.<sup>3</sup> However, even at this early date, in the shifting kaleidoscope of Italian Socialist Party politics you did not have to be an 'intransigent' to be regarded as belonging to the revolutionary left. For example Enrico Ferri, who had opposed Smbucco's motion at the 1896 Congress and who had proffered the Party's support to the Zanardelli-Giolitti Government on the grounds that this represented the enlightened and liberal bourgeoisie in June 1901, was leading the 'revolutionary' current when the party divided into reformists and revolutionaries at the Imola Congress of 1902.

In fact the PSI was having difficulty avoiding a split. At the previous Congress it had only done so by agreeing to recognise the classical social democratic distinction between the maximum (revolutionary) and minimum (reformist) programme. While the former was interpreted as standing for complete non-cooperation with the bourgeois state and the dictatorship of the proletariat, the latter was seen as the achievement of reforms by legal means. For the time being no incompatibility was noticed. The position of the reformists had even been strengthened with the recognition of the parliamentary group as a separate body which had equal representation on the Party's political Directorate as those leaders elected by Congress.

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<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Galli *Storia del Socialismo Italiano* (Rome, Laterza) p.19.

This not only gave the parliamentary deputies a certain degree of autonomy but considerable weight over Party policy as a whole - a future point of criticism by Bordiga and the Left. Now, at the 1902 Congress the motion of one of those deputies, Ivanoe Bonomi,<sup>4</sup> was passed, allowing PSI sections to form alliances in local elections. There was little of intransigence about all this but it did not prevent the Party moving to the left. Filippo Turati, the PSI's reformist founding father, found himself side-lined.

The change in Party mood was of course indicative of what was going on in the working class movement as a whole. It was a movement with a turbulent history which owed more to Bakunin than Marx. If it is true that the *raison d'être* of the PSI was the "fundamental denial of the anarchoid"<sup>5</sup> it is also the case that the tradition of local uprisings continued well after the formation of the PSI in 1892. In 1895 the government clamped down on the Socialist Party after an uprising of agricultural workers and sulphur miners in Sicily had found some echo in localised 'unrest' in the North. In 1898 there was a short lived uprising (4 days) in Milan itself following a rise in the price of bread and demonstrations from North to South for democracy and against the high cost of living. In 1900 the assassination of the King at the hands of an anarchist (in revenge for the victims of earlier repressions) brought forth a wave of reaction. This was softened by the new king, Victor Emmanuel III when he saw the conciliatory and legalitarian position taken by the PSI's VIth Congress. Not, however, before a strike of Genoese dock workers had brought down the Saracco government.<sup>6</sup>

The PSI was thus a political expression, but by no means the only one of the Italian working class. Outside of parliamentary and local government politics (when most workers did not have the vote) it had to compete with first anarchism then syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism. Their influence amongst the working class was often more powerful. Whilst the former found it easy to put down roots amongst a population which traditionally recognised the state as an oppressor, syndicalism - with its view of the general strike as the gateway to revolution - appealed more directly to the growing

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<sup>4</sup> A theorist of right-wing reformism, he would be expelled in 1902, later became Minister of War and eventually Prime Minister in 1921.

<sup>5</sup> Gwyn Williams in *Proletarian Order* (London, Pluto Press) p.28.

<sup>6</sup> Details from Galli op.cit. p.30 and W. Hilton-Young *The Italian Left* (New York, Greenwood Press) pp.33-40.



industrial working class. In particular, the semi-mystical ideas of Sorel: the emphasis on the power of the 'will' and direct action coupled with the propagation of the 'social myth' of the general strike, were gaining ground, inside the PSI as well as without. Symbolic of this was the move of Arturo Labriola, a revolutionary syndicalist inside the PSI, from peripheral Naples to Milan after the 1902 Congress. In Milan he established *Socialist Vanguard*, a journal which aimed to counterpose Sorelian ideas - presented as following the footsteps of revolutionary Marxism - to Turati's reformism.

In 1903 the reformists lost control of *Avanti!*, the Party daily and Bissolati resigned as editor in favour of Enrico Ferri. The victory of the Left was confirmed at the Bologna Congress the following year when a motion of Ferri was passed in favour of 'alliance' with the syndicalist current.<sup>7</sup> Ferri, who not so long ago had offered PSI support to Giolitti was now effective leader of a Party whose Congress declared:

**... that the method of class struggle allows no support for any government tendency  
...that the complex work of the Party requires manifold forms of daily action.<sup>8</sup>**

One of those manifold forms was the general strike, which in the same year the Amsterdam Congress of the II<sup>nd</sup> International had cautiously sanctioned as a weapon in the class struggle. It was a weapon which the Italian proletariat would resort to in September as they protested against police violence during working class demonstrations. First of all the Milanese *camera del lavoro*<sup>9</sup> called a general strike in sympathy with workers who had been fired on in Sardinia and when police 'excesses' were repeated elsewhere the strike spread throughout Italy. This first nation-wide strike therefore represented the merging of local and regional 'general strikes' declared by *camere del lavoro*. It was not declared by the PSI leadership as such. On the other hand, militants from the Party's syndicalist wing were the moving force in the strike. After several days the strike petered out and Giolitti, whose tactic had been to stand back and wait, called a general election where the PSI lost six parliamentary deputies. (Down from 33 to 27.) For parliamentary gradualists like Turati the strike had been a predictable disaster and the syndicalists were regarded as

<sup>7</sup> 16,304 to 14,844, Galli op.cit. p.39.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p.40.

<sup>9</sup> Literally 'chamber of labour', the *camere* were local labour organisations which included, not just unions but cooperatives, savings associations and so on.

a bigger enemy than Giolitti (whom they were still prepared to support as a representative of the progressive bourgeoisie).

For a while Ferri managed to hold the Party together by means of the concept of 'integralism': the attempt to reconcile gradualism - the idea that socialism would come about via the development of bourgeois democracy - with the perspective that socialism could only be realised if the working class maintained its political autonomy from the capitalist class, however democratic, and was prepared to confront it head-on. The rift in the Party became increasingly obvious. In 1905 railway workers, heavily influenced by syndicalism, went on strike in protest at the government's nationalisation plans which included withdrawal of the right to strike. The strike was isolated and defeated after violent battles which resulted in dozens of wounded and five deaths. The nationalisation Act was then duly passed in parliament without a word of protest from the PSI deputies. This, of course, was no accident. Many social democrats interpreted 'socialisation of the means of production' to mean state control of industry by the existing, bourgeois, state. As Giorgio Galli points out, Giolittian measures such as this and the nationalisation of life assurance, were not steps towards socialism but rather "the creation of a state capitalist sector with strong bureaucratic overtones".<sup>10</sup> There was growing disillusion amongst the syndicalists who began to suspect that the PSI was more concerned to see a well-managed Italian capitalism than proletarian revolution. In 1907 a conference of syndicalists at Ferrara, partly prompted by Sorel himself, announced the intention of forming a truly "syndicalist party", to be "no longer confused with the Socialist Party generic".<sup>11</sup> Later the same year a syndicalist National Resistance Council was established in opposition to the CGL (*Confederazione Generale del Lavoro*).<sup>12</sup> By the time of the 1908 PSI Congress (Florence), which brought Turati back into prominence and declared syndicalism incompatible with socialism, the majority of syndicalists had already left. Those who had not were now expelled and while the PSI voted for closer cooperation with the CGL thousands of working class militants continued to be influenced by syndicalism.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p.60.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p.48.

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1906 in response to the rise of syndicalism. Its first secretary was Rinaldo Rigola whose political ideal was the British Labour Party. See Williams *op.cit.* p.27.

Until 1914, when syndicalism itself shattered over the issue of whether Italy should intervene in the War, the most militant class struggle in Italy was largely under the syndicalist umbrella.

In 1908, then, it looked as though the way was open for the consolidation of the PSI as the organisation of the reformist wing of the Italian workers' movement. Political 'intransigence', it seemed, would be the preserve of revolutionary syndicalism and outside the Party of social democracy. This was not to be. The re-emergence of a revolutionary intransigent fraction, this time with a more Marxist flavour, was announced in 1910 with the publication of *La Soffitta (The Attic)*, so-called in response to Giolitti's jibe that the PSI had relegated Marxism to the attic. Even before the debacle of war against Turkey over Libya there was opposition brewing inside the PSI to the policy of cooperating with Giolitti's plans for a reformist Ministry. The war itself only exacerbated the gulf between the Left and the Right. While reformists in parliament called for no disruption to national unity, socialists in the Romagna were ripping up railway lines carrying war supplies. At the 1911 Congress there was once again a division between reformists and revolutionaries. It was the last to be dominated by Turati.

At the next Party Congress, the following year in Reggio Emilia, the revival of the Left was confirmed. It was here that Mussolini first appeared on the national political scene, lambasting the parliamentary deputies who had supported Giolitti and calling for their resignation. In fact the Congress voted for the expulsion of the 'Right reformists': Bissolati, Bonomi, et.al. as well as for the ousting of 'Left reformists', notably Turati himself, from the leadership. Lazzari, an exponent of the 'old Left', was appointed Party Secretary while Mussolini, that most intransigent of intransigents, became editor of *Avanti!*. Under his editorship the paper "adopted a near insurrectionary tone"<sup>13</sup> and the readership increased dramatically as did Party membership generally.<sup>14</sup> The immediate pre-War years were a period of economic crisis and the working class was seething with anger at the increased cost of living

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<sup>13</sup> The words are Walter Kendall's in *The Labour Movement in Europe*, (London, Allen Lane) p.145.

<sup>14</sup> Estimates vary. Adrian Lyttelton, in *The Seizure of Power* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson) quotes a rise from 30,000 to over 58,000; Kendall, loc.cit. states 30,000 to 45,000.

whilst Giolitti's Libyan adventure had reinforced a strong sense of anti-militarism amongst wide sections of workers. Undoubtedly the new left course of the PSI reflected the general mood of the Italian working class and the new policy of cooperation with other working class political forces outside parliament, including anarchists and syndicalists, as opposed to deals with the 'enlightened bourgeoisie' inside parliament. (Even here though, all was not clear-cut since in some areas there was cooperation with radical 'non-class' political forces such as the Republicans.)

The formation of the Karl Marx Circle in Naples by Amadeo Bordiga and a group of like-minded comrades in April, 1912 was a reflection of this wider situation of discontent with the old PSI leadership and political practice. Ironically, given the new Left's closer relationship with the syndicalists, the formation of the Circle was initially provoked by an agreement reached between the local PSI section and the syndicalists. Whilst Bordiga and the Left had no objection to a clear working relationship with other proletarian organisations, and indeed went on to cooperate with both anarchists and syndicalists during struggles on the ground, they were opposed to the PSI abandoning its own socialist programme for the sake of electoral or other convenience. There was a deeper issue here. In theoretical terms the Left objected to the gradualist interpretation of Marx whereby, it was argued, the backward nature of capitalist relations in the *Mezzogiorno* demanded a preliminary period of alliances with the most dynamic sections of the Southern bourgeoisie. In reality this meant that PSI practice was indistinguishable from the *clientilismo* which characterised Southern politics generally, including infiltration by freemasons. However, despite the later association of Bordiga with abstentionism, he was not on principle against socialists participating in elections. In 1913 he criticised the abstentionism of the syndicalists whose disgust with the PSI and the general corruption of conventional parliamentary politics was leading them to apoliticism. In an article at times reminiscent of Lenin in *What is to Be Done?* he argued that,

**It has been demonstrated to us that the proletariat will never make the revolution by the sole strength of its economic organisations yet now syndicalism and reformism share the same concept of union apoliticism. The social revolution is a political fact and is prepared on political ground. The electoral struggle enters the overall conception of the party's political work as one of the many aspects of socialist activity. ... We do not hide from the serious difficulty of giving proletarian class**

politics, as carried out by the Socialist Party, a character profoundly different from bourgeois petty politicking. But true revolutionaries must make the effort to work in this sense and not desert the struggle. Abstentionism is no remedy. On the contrary, it is the renunciation of the only method which can give the proletariat a consciousness that is capable of defending it from the opportunist politics of the non-socialist parties. Electoral neutralism becomes neutralism of consciousness and opinion about the great social problems, which even though they are based - as we Marxists maintain - on an economic framework, are always clothed in political garb.<sup>15</sup>

This did not mean that the Karl Marx Circle meekly supported local PSI practice. In its early days the Circle was independent from the local Party section and acted in open opposition to the official party. At the beginning of 1913, for example, there were popular protests in Naples against the Government's proposed tax increases which would have meant a 25% increase in living costs. While the anarchists engaged in adventurist acts the 'official' socialists joined the agitation committee which consisted of a front of everyone from monarchists to clericals and 'laity', with local employers amongst them. Bordiga criticised the local PSI for its failure to stand up for independent class action and argued for the need to reflect and learn from the experience. Later on in the elections of the same year the Circle put up protest candidates in wards where the PSI had become part of a bloc and withdrawn their own separate candidate.

For Bordiga the Karl Marx Circle was not his only political training ground. He was also active in the PSI Youth Federation and had achieved some national standing when he took on and defeated another young socialist from Turin, Angelo Tasca, in the debate on socialist culture at the Youth Congress (1912). Tasca was a follower of Gaetano Salvemini, a disillusioned ex-PSIer from the South who blamed the PSI's political failings, particularly in the South, on the low level of education or 'culture' of its membership. He specifically criticised the poor theoretical quality of *Avanguardia*, the Youth paper. In a situation of heightened class tension and growing combativity of the working class it was hardly the key political issue, even if the new Left's rejection of gradualism was prey to activist rhetoric. Bordiga, however, was no mindless activist. Rather he took a firm Marxist approach, arguing that the class character of culture and schooling would not be changed by reformist measures.

**This is not to say that we are denying socialist culture, but that we believe the only**

<sup>15</sup> *Avanti!* 13.7.13. Quoted in Clementi op.cit. p.26.



**way to encourage it is to leave it to individual initiative without shutting it in the odious field of the education system. And that initiative can only be inspired by young proletarians experiencing the living struggle and social conflict which develops their desire to be more adept in the battle.<sup>16</sup>**

For Bordiga the PSI's faults were political and organisational, above all in its pandering to localism, and the "absence of any intention to unify amongst the socialists".<sup>17</sup> These points were reiterated at Ancona, the first national Congress where he played a significant part and where, alongside Mussolini, he represented the "most intransigent tendency" (Cortesi). The Ancona Congress followed a period of strikes and agitations throughout the country. In Milan the anarcho-syndicalists had organised a general strike, supported by Mussolini in *Avanti!*. He had been duly censored for this by elements of the leadership (Lazzari of the 'old Left', Agnini of the gradualists) and offered to resign as editor only to be applauded and reinstated by the Congress.<sup>18</sup> Not for the first time the PSI was accused of having deserted the masses and the blame put on Turati and the reformists in parliament.<sup>19</sup> But it was not reformism as such that became the issue at Ancona, even though the Left were trying to establish a coherent 'intransigent' policy for the Party as a whole. Mussolini spoke about the impossibility of opening socialist ranks to freemasons while Bordiga took up the theme of the necessity for the PSI to have a single unified policy in future elections. In this context he and Mario Bianchi, another member of the Karl Marx Circle, criticised the current, convenient notion of the need for alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie in the economically backward south.

**Even if the Southern bourgeoisie is not socially developed, politically it came to conquer over other classes almost at the same time as the bourgeoisie in the rest of Italy, having together with it obtained the democratic regime, which is the political regime of the bourgeois class. Similarly, when considering the development of the proletariat as a class, and also its economic organisations, one can expound a tactic which in a certain sense accommodates and directly reflects the influence of social conditions. However, when it comes to speaking of the PSI's position, that is the position of the political representative of the proletarian class, the thing is very different ... The Socialist Party cannot halt in front of the body of an impotent bourgeoisie which lies inert across our path. ... If the lack of quantitative, numerical development can be recognised in reality as part of the backwardness of the**

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from *Unità* 16.10.12 in Clementi op.cit. p.12.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Galli op.cit. p.72

<sup>19</sup> "They'll say the strikes were led by syndicalists. Of course they were led by syndicalists, and why? Because [Turati's group] haven't done what they should have done." Mussolini, quoted by Alastair Davidson in Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography (London, Merlin Press) p.66.

**formation of the proletarian class, the political position of our party - if our revolutionary ideology is to triumph - must have the necessary continuity without which we will be condemned to impotence.** <sup>20</sup>

In fact the party Directorate steered clear of passing a formal resolution on the 'Southern question' but the Congress was unequivocal about freemasonry (there was to be no truck with it) and future Party policy in forthcoming local elections (there was to be a single, 'intransigent' tactic). In response the Karl Marx Circle entered the Naples PSI section en bloc only to become a marginalised minority, but not for long.

Whilst bringing the PSI 52 parliamentary seats, the election at the end of 1913 signalled the end of the Giolittian system. The new government, under Salandra, adopted a more outright repressive policy against the working class who were facing a serious deterioration in their living and working conditions. In March there was a general strike in Rome, followed by Palermo and then a wave of class struggle throughout Puglia in the Spring. In June the movement reached insurrectionary proportions following an anti-militarist demonstration in Ancona organised by a committee of the Left, comprising anarchists (notably Malatesta) and Republicans as well as Socialists and militants from no particular party.<sup>21</sup> The red flag was raised on the Town Hall of Bologna and the Republic declared in Romagna and the Marches. It took 10,000 troops ten days to regain control of Ancona. In Naples the movement took the form of a general strike which claimed 200 of the 600 dead or wounded in Italy as a whole. When the local USN (*Unione Socialista di Napoli*, an amalgam of Socialists and anarcho-syndicalists) condemned the violence of the demonstrators and tried to use their 'moderation' as propaganda in the local election campaign there was widespread disillusion amongst the bulk of the hitherto 'moderate' PSI membership.

**... the Bordigan tendency conquered the leadership of the organisation. Amadeo Bordiga assumed the editorship of *Il Socialista* which continued publication up until the day immediately before Italy's entrance into the world conflict and at the same time became the expression of an intransigent campaign of opposition to the war**

<sup>20</sup> loc.cit. p.30. In the same speech Bordiga went on to describe the necessarily simultaneous character of the international proletarian revolution compared with the bourgeois revolution "... which first burst out in one nation and was then repeated in others. ... Socialist Party propaganda for the proletarian international is becoming increasingly extensive and universalised throughout the inhabited world. If we were to renounce this historical simultaneity of the revolutionary process, we would have renounced the real *raison d'être* of our party. [p.31].

<sup>21</sup> Galli op.cit. p.74; Williams op.cit. p.51.



from the standpoint of the extreme left of the political spectrum.<sup>22</sup>

If the experience of Red Week had highlighted the confusions and weaknesses of the Italian workers' movement - above all the lack of coordination and the absence of a clearly defined political programme - it had also shown to Italian ruling circles that there was a working class prepared to fight, often to the death, but **not**, for the most part, for *la patria*. Before the Salandra government could contemplate entering the War there had to be a change of mood amongst the workers and peasants who would be called upon to fight.<sup>23</sup> It received some assistance from inside the workers' movement itself. When Italy dropped out of the Triple Alliance and declared itself neutral there began to be a shift in what would nowadays be called 'public opinion'. From whole-hearted demands for neutrality the mood started to change with what Williams has called "a great surge of interventionist emotion" which affected the broad spectrum of the democratic Left. Anarchism and syndicalism in particular succumbed to the rhetoric of national 'revolutionary war' on the side of democratic and 'progressive' France against the old Austrian enemy. Meanwhile the PSI remained officially opposed to Italy entering the war (calling for "absolute neutrality") but without defining a concrete policy for the working class. Indeed, before Mussolini became a war-monger for capitalism he had called for a debate within the Party (via *Avanti!*) as to how it should respond in the light of the news that the German SPD had voted for war credits. This was given short shrift by the rest of the Party Directorate and Mussolini was left to formulate his own policy.

During Red Week Mussolini had shown that he was above all a populist demagogue searching to be at the head of mass 'action'. Even so, as editor of the PSI daily he held what many regarded as the most influential position in the Party. Yet when he published his article, *From an Absolute To an Active and Operative Neutrality* (18th October, 1914), where he began to argue for intervention there was still no debate and even his expulsion in November was carried out by his local Milan section, not by the central leadership. From Naples, however, there was a response. On 22nd

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<sup>22</sup> Clementi op.cit. p.35.

<sup>23</sup> This is apart from any hopes of Italian diplomats that Italy could make imperialistic gains from the war without actually participating. San Giuliano, who was Foreign Secretary in 1914, wrote: "... In a democratic country like Italy, it is not possible to make war when the will and feeling of the nation are opposed." Quoted in Lyttelton op.cit. p.543.

October *Il Socialista's* headline was, *For an Active and Operative Anti-Militarism*. The article's argument had to be repeated a few weeks later inside the Youth Federation when the Secretary, Caiani, proposed a motion in favour of intervention. Bordiga put forward an opposing motion which won the day. However, the fact that this was necessary in a sector of the Party which had previously been in the forefront of anti-militarist activity shows the extent of the crisis created by Mussolini's going over to interventionism.

The Youth Federation was heavily influenced by the ideas of Gustave Hervé who argued unsuccessfully in the II<sup>nd</sup> International for a general strike followed by armed insurrection in the event of war. Young Socialists had been amongst the most militant in the anti-Libyan campaign and this had been followed up by agitation and propaganda with army conscripts, trying to persuade them not to shoot at strikers or act as blacklegs. This was the kind of "experience in the living struggle" emphasised by Bordiga whose own contribution included an anti-war pamphlet (*The Soldier's Pay*) designed for distribution amongst conscripts doing military service. Unlike Hervé, who ended up volunteering for the French army, Bordiga had understood,

**There can be no distinction between 'offence' and 'defence' in modern war; everything depends on the cavilling of diplomats. A European war would never be the aggression of one nation against another but rather the consequence of territorial and financial greed from one part or another ... We socialists see in these [wars of conquest] the means to satisfy capitalism's imperialist voraciousness at the expense of the proletariat who give up their own blood and their own money for these undertakings without getting anything but bitter disappointment in return.<sup>24</sup>**

Now, in 1914 Bordiga sought to distinguish socialist neutrality in an imperialist war from the neutralism of the "monarchical and bourgeois state" which is obliged to remain neutral "under the pressure of the proletarian masses and the socialist currents who do not want the war":

**Neutrality means for us intensified socialist fervour in the struggle against the bourgeois state, accentuation of every class antagonism which is the true source of every revolutionary tendency.<sup>25</sup>**

There was no sign that this was how the Party leadership interpreted 'neutrality'. In

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<sup>24</sup> Clementi op.cit. p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from *Il Socialista* 3.12.14, loc.cit. p.39.

1914 there was little to distinguish the PSI's position from that of Giolitti and the majority of bourgeois parliamentary deputies who were opposed to Italy entering the war. By 1915, as Salandra prepared the ground for Italy to declare war - on the side of the Entente according to the secretly agreed Treaty of London - the PSI was divided along with the bourgeoisie. For four days, from 16th-19th May, the PSI leaders met to decide the Party's policy.<sup>26</sup> On the Right Turati and the reformists were arguing for no "alienation from the nation". The majority were still in principle opposed but only a few 'revolutionary intransigents' posed the question of what action to take. The outcome was Lazzari's "Neither support nor sabotage" slogan, hardly the basis for intransigent "accentuation of every class antagonism". In any case this was effectively undermined by the decision not to call a general strike but to leave anti-war strikes and protests to local initiative. It was not the last time that workers in Turin, already engaged in a violent general strike against the war, would find themselves isolated by the failure of the PSI leadership to give a concerted political direction to the movement on the ground. According to Bordiga's own account, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with this decision from "various exponents of the revolutionary intransigent fraction, including members of the Directorate itself and delegates from various federations, who would take up a position completely opposed not only to the parliamentary and confederation heads, but also to the hesitations of the Directorate."<sup>27</sup> The fact remains, however, that the revolutionaries were a minority in a Party whose leading organs were supposedly dominated by 'intransigents'. Once again intransigent social democracy had proved illusory.

On 22nd May *Il Socialista* appeared for the last time with the defiant headline, "War is Decided; Down With the War". Since the PSI had no illegal network there was no immediate possibility of the left fraction continuing to publish its views (though anti-war propaganda was later distributed in the army). Instead, as Clementi notes, Bordiga took refuge in the defence of principles and the strengthening of the Left

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<sup>26</sup> These included 20 parliamentary deputies, 9 members of the Directorate, 8 CGL leaders and delegations from fourteen of the most important federations. Galli op.cit. p.84.

<sup>27</sup> Storia della sinistra comunista Vol.1 (Milan, 1963] p.98. This history is published by Programma Comunista, the political group Bordiga helped to found in 1952 after splitting from the Internationalist Communist Party [PCInt.]. Though the work is published collectively it evidently owes much to Bordiga.

tendency inside the Party. In 1915, at twenty-six years old and isolated in Naples, he did not have the necessary national prestige and support to mount a serious challenge to the PSI Directorate. More fundamentally, he still believed that the Party could be won over to the Left if only the influence of the parliamentary group and the unions (CGL) could be broken. In 1915-16 there appeared to be some basis for this belief. Although Bordiga himself was not involved, the first of the international meetings of socialists opposed to the war (the Zimmerwald Conference, 1915) was initiated by the PSI. Mussolini's successor as editor of *Avanti!*, Giacinto Serrati, was himself an 'intransigent' and published the manifesto of the Zimmerwald conference as well as making figures like Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky known to *Avanti!* readers. At Kienthal in 1916 Serrati supported the resolution on peace presented by the Zimmerwald Left.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite Serrati's influential position, his leftward move did not reflect a coherent Party policy. In fact at Kienthal he was alone amongst the Italian delegation which was divided. At the same meeting, for example, Morgari decided to contact the Henry Ford Peace Foundation and by the beginning of 1917 Turati and the reformists of the parliamentary group were once again calling the tune. In February a Party convention in Rome approved the conduct of the Directorate by a large majority. At the same time, however, what Williams calls a "tough Bordiga motion",<sup>29</sup> although defeated, gained 14,000 votes. (There were 17,000 against it.) This motion focussed on putting an end to the war, not its transformation into a revolutionary class war.

**The convention believes that the PSI must direct all its efforts to the cessation of the war. ... It votes that the PSI's work for peace be concretised in the following provisions: intensification of propaganda and organisation of the party (so that) it is ready to take up its task in every eventuality; intensification of the women's and socialist youth movements ... the energetic work of international revival ... parliamentary action which is the sincere and explicit echo of socialist thinking ...**

<sup>28</sup> This stated, "The only peace programme of the Social Democracy is to call on the international proletariat to take up these struggles and to organise it for the assault against capitalism. Lower your weapons, and turn them against our common enemy - the capitalist governments. This is the International's message for peace."); and despite the Party's official adherence to the Third International shortly after its formation in 1919, the PSI as a whole never clearly saw that the prospect of revolutionary struggle against war and capitalist imperialism implied a firm break with those who chose to put nation before class. See Lenin's *Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (New York, Monad Press, 1984) ed. John Riddell p.510-511.

<sup>29</sup> Williams op.cit. p.311.

**without contact with the bourgeois pacifist currents.<sup>30</sup>**

This was the position of the far Left at the beginning of 1917. Essentially it is still on the shared ground of opposition to the war. Momentous events were to bring about a shift on both Left and Right leading to a sharper polarisation by the end of September. First there was news of the February Revolution in Russia, closely followed by US entry into the War. In April Turati took this as the signal to announce support for the Russo-American democratic bloc on behalf of the PSI and on 16th May, after reaching an agreement with the parliamentary group and the CGL, the Directorate published a manifesto outlining its aims for the post-war period. This was no revolutionary document, simply a demand for a democratic republic plus some nationalisation of industry.<sup>31</sup> While this temporarily appeased the disaffected northern federations (Turin, Vercelli, Novara, Alessandria) from Naples there came a resounding rejection of the manifesto:

**Socialists in every country must devote their efforts to the cessation of the war, inciting the proletariat and making it conscious of its power to provoke the immediate cessation of hostilities by means of its intransigent class action and attempting to push the crisis to a revolutionary socialist outcome. The section votes that in every circumstance the Party, rather than getting lost in ambiguity and uncertainty, should know how to fulfil its duty; assuming - with its organs and men - the task of disciplining and directing the agitations of the masses, putting itself in the vanguard of the proletariat, on the terrain of mass struggle and bourgeois militarism.<sup>32</sup>**

Though still couched in terms of its lack of independence from the parliamentary and trade union fractions there was sharp criticism of the leadership, showing that Bordiga and the Left in Naples were no longer prepared to wait for the Directorate to match up to the "demands of the situation". In July, along with the federations of Milan, Turin and Florence they organised themselves as a fraction - the intransigent revolutionary fraction - with the intention of preparing for battle at the forthcoming Party Congress. The meeting of "fifty extremists" in Florence produced a manifesto calling on the PSI to get rid of its ambiguity and repudiate the idea of the 'bourgeois fatherland' in order to take up a "strictly and sincerely revolutionary" tactic which should involve putting itself at the head of popular movements and recognising that

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<sup>30</sup> *Storia della Sinistra* op.cit. p.107.

<sup>31</sup> Galli op.cit. p.88.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p.304.



“violence is the midwife of every society pregnant with future life”.<sup>33</sup> If the PSI had adopted this it would have indeed been a revolutionising from within. It would have meant acknowledging that the Italian ‘nation’ was divided into classes and recognising a dichotomy of interest between the working class and the capitalist class who were prosecuting the war. It would have meant abandoning the policy of class conciliation for the duration of the war. In the event, however, the Party Congress was postponed for a year. Meanwhile, throughout the summer of 1917 it was the Left who most closely reflected the mood of the masses. In August a workers’ uprising in Turin was prefaced by an enthusiastic welcome and shouts of “Viva Lenin!” to a visiting Russian delegation of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. The uprising was put down at the (official) cost of 50 dead and hundreds wounded. Nearly 800 leaders, socialists and anarchists, were arrested including some, like Serrati, who had not been involved but accused of ‘moral responsibility,’ while a further 200 were sent off to the front. During the Turin events the intransigent fraction issued a circular, basically calling for the revolutionising of the PSI at the next Congress which should approve:

**...the right of the proletariat in all countries to install its own dictatorship, not only in the interests of one class, but for the progress and well-being of the whole collectivity ... (the Party must) keep up with and lead the agitations which have a revolutionary content in order to coordinate them and bring them to the goal of imposing an immediate peace and prosecuting the struggle against all bourgeois institutions, not only on the political level, but also by means of the socialistic forms of capitalist expropriation.**<sup>34</sup>

In September the Youth Federation which in June had already issued a call for Turati’s resignation and the dissolution of the parliamentary group, ignored the Party Directorate and aligned itself with the intransigents. At the Youth Congress Bordiga was appointed editor of *Avanguardia* and Lazzari, Party Secretary and author of the ‘neither support nor sabotage’ slogan, found himself arguing against a new understanding of proletarian internationalism; an understanding which approached Lenin’s concept of revolutionary defeatism. Lazzari denied that socialists could be against *la patria* or become, as he saw it, saboteurs against the Italian war effort.

**To deny the feeling of patriotism - he said to the youth who hardly allowed him to continue - is to struggle against a reality of life because it is useless to fight against the preference we all have for the place where we were born, for the language we**

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* p.316.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* pp. 315-7.

**speak, etc. To deny *la patria* is also to go against history, since our greatest predecessors, such as Carlo Pisacane, sacrificed themselves in its defence.**<sup>35</sup>

Then, at the end of October and early November, came the rout of the Italian army at Caporetto. In Williams' words, "the country was swept by patriotic fervour",<sup>36</sup> including large sections of the PSI. For Right-wingers like Turati and Treves it was the occasion to openly declare that the duty of the proletariat is to resist when the national territory is invaded. The government lost no opportunity to print millions of copies of Turati's speech in parliament to this effect - as propaganda for distribution amongst serving soldiers. However, at this stage in the war even the nationalism of the Right was tempered with war weariness. It was Treves who also declared, "Next winter, no one in the trenches!"<sup>37</sup> Against this background, and just before news of the October Revolution in Russia began to reach Italy, the 'intransigent revolutionary fraction' held another semi-secret meeting in Florence. Williams notes that this is often seen as the birth of communism in Italy and indeed it is the starting point of Paolo Spriano's history of the Communist Party but once again 'intransigence' was to prove a very elastic and nebulous label. Although Bordiga is said to have dominated the meeting of about twenty delegates, it was the arguments of Lazzari and Serrati for the Party leadership which won through. The outcome was a reaffirmation of the old 'neither support nor sabotage' policy and the earlier polarisation gave way to the usual equivocations. Only one delegate - Antonio Gramsci - supported Bordiga's call to action and was criticised for his voluntarism. In fact his first meeting with Bordiga does seem to have remarkably impressed the twenty-six year old delegate from Turin.

**Two 'rigid' delegates were chosen to go to Florence to put the views of the Turinese Socialists, but, when one suddenly could not go, Gramsci found himself on his way to the "secret" conference. Neither he, nor his newspaper, had ever been strongly revolutionary in any immediate sense but he was nevertheless chosen to represent the extreme left view at a conference of the left wing of the PSI.**<sup>38</sup>

Bordiga's own account does not mention the 'call to action'<sup>39</sup> and instead focuses on

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Spriano from *Avanguardia* 7.10.17 op.cit. p.10.

<sup>36</sup> Williams op.cit. p.64.

<sup>37</sup> Lyttelton op.cit. p.28.

<sup>38</sup> Davidson op.cit. p.88.

<sup>39</sup> Historians rely on the account of one of the delegates, Giovanni Germanetto, published in 1931. Spriano cites the following: "Bordiga analysed the situation in Italy. He observed the defeat at the front, the disorganisation of the Italian state and ended with these words, *It's necessary to act. The proletariat in the factories is tired. But it is armed. We must act.* Gramsci was of the same opinion. Serrati, Lazzari and the majority of those present declared themselves in favour of maintaining the old tactic: neither support nor sabotage." p.4.



the role the Florence meeting played in getting the Party leadership to distinguish itself from the Right-wing. It therefore emphasises that the November 1917 meeting “was not the left of the intransigent fraction but the whole fraction” and goes on to depict it as a starting point for the organisation of the ‘Italian Left’ proper.

**... the meeting signalled an important point and reached the goal, which at that time seemed pre-eminent, of putting a brake on the equivocal moves of the Right. ... From that moment the strictest, most decisive group in the meeting became increasingly well organised ... and began to delineate the platform characteristic of the ‘Italian Left’.** <sup>40</sup>

This interpretation confirms that at the end of 1917 Bordiga and the ‘far Left’ were still thinking in terms of revolutionising the PSI from within. It also shows that once again ‘intransigence’ had a very general meaning and could refer to anyone to the left of the outright reformists. What is less convincing is the idea that the ‘Italian Left’ in the sense Bordiga intends (i.e. the precursor of the Communist Party) began to organise itself and define itself politically at this point. As we will see, it would take some time for this to happen and the formation of a communist fraction inside the PSI was far from the steady progression implied here.

During 1918 the reformists found themselves increasingly isolated but the demarcation lines between the revolutionary Left and what was later termed Centrism became more blurred. Indeed by 1918 the **majority** of the PSI regarded itself as of the Left - variously known as ‘intransigents’ or ‘maximalists’. The revolutionary ‘far Left’, taking its leadership from Bordiga in Naples, were fewer but dominated in about a hundred of the local sections.<sup>41</sup> Yet the essential ambiguity of the PSI’s position remained and prevented a clear-cut split over the question of betrayal of working class internationalism and abandonment of the class struggle.

Through 1918 the leadership continued to steer an apparently leftward course but ignored the question of how to practically prepare and lead a revolution. At the same time the outright reformists with Turati were allowed to remain inside its ranks. Thus, as the war drew to a close, the Party’s XVth Congress (Rome, September 1918) greeted with loud applause a message from Lenin to “the intransigent socialists of all countries” and the leadership called for international meetings of “all socialists who

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<sup>40</sup> La storia ... op.cit. p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> Spriano op.cit. p.8.

are committed to breaking every truce with the ruling class". Spriano has described the situation just before the end of the war as "maximalism triumphant" and he is right. Significantly, perhaps Bordiga was absent from the Congress. (He had been called up).<sup>42</sup> In any case what at first glance appears to be a clear-cut triumph for the revolutionary Left on closer examination is nothing of the kind. In the first place, and adding to the confusion, the terminology has changed. The 'intransigents' are now in fact the Centre (later identified as maximalists). Their motion, basically applauding the Party leadership's policies through the war as being "in keeping with the fundamental principles of socialism" received relatively few votes.<sup>43</sup> By far the majority of votes - about 70% - went to a motion of the 'Extreme Left' presented by Luigi Salvatori soon to become a prominent Centrist. This was mainly directed against the parliamentary group which was criticised for not acting in accordance with the decisions of the February 1917 convention and for its general failure to carry out official Party policy. The Directorate was mandated to impose sanctions against cases of indiscipline from the parliamentary group, including the possibility of expulsions. For the first time expulsion of the reformists was on the agenda but as for the Party's wider 'revolutionary' aims these were limited to a reaffirmation of the old maximum (social democratic) programme - i.e for socialisation of the means of production and distribution. Given that the traditional social democratic division of responsibility between political (i.e. parliamentary) and economic (trade union) work had also just been revived with a Pact of Alliance between the PSI and the CGL, it is clear that the 1918 Congress represent nothing more than an attempt to revert to the *status quo ante* and there were no serious plans being made by the leadership to put itself in the van of working class actions. However, the prospect of a bright, though vague, revolutionary dawn which pervaded the party seems to have reduced the inclination of the revolutionaries to push for any further clarification of how revolution was to be brought about. The only voices of dissatisfaction from the Left came from two workers' leaders: Luigi Repossi and Giovanni Boero but they were drowned and Repossi himself went on to join the Party leadership alongside "much less extremist

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<sup>42</sup> Serrati and Lazzari were also absent, having been imprisoned after the August events in Turin.

<sup>43</sup> 2,507, almost exactly the same as the reformists who received 2,505. Galli op.cit. p.92.

men" (Spriano) like Serrati.<sup>44</sup> The war-time intransigent fraction had basically dissolved in a sea of confusion.

Subsequent PSI history continued in the same confused and contradictory vein. On the one hand the Party Directorate and Serrati, the acknowledged Party leader, were prepared to make bold revolutionary gestures, as in November 1918 when it declared itself in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat; or in March the following year when it announced its adhesion to the IIIrd, Communist International soon after its founding Congress. On the other hand, such gestures were made without any appreciation of the corresponding need to revolutionise the practical activity and political orientation of the party. On the contrary, the means whereby the "institution of the Socialist Republic and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" (specified as the prime aim in the Party's programme for immediate action in December 1918) would be brought about were not spelled out. To do so would have exposed the widely differing conceptions of what proletarian revolution was, in a Party where the range of political currents extended from the right-wing reformism of Treves and Turati through the various shades of maximalism (Gennari, Lazzari, Serrati et.al.) to the revolutionary views of Bordiga and the newly established journal *Il Soviet*..

As the *Biennio Rosso* (Two Red Years) of Italian working class history opened and the PSI leadership made no attempt to give a political direction to the "all manner of direct action",<sup>45</sup> including strikes, land seizures and food riots, which were occurring throughout the peninsula the pages of *Il Soviet* became increasingly exasperated with the failure of the PSI to break with its social democratic past. The first issue had called for the expulsion of the reformists and for the creation of a communist party (as yet not seen in terms of a split). By early 1919, as the Party leadership began to preoccupy itself with the forthcoming parliamentary elections, Bordiga was already focussing on abstentionism as the clearest way of distinguishing a revolutionary practice from revolutionary posturing. As we saw earlier, Bordiga had not always been in favour of

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<sup>44</sup> Clementi op.cit. p.58; Spriano op.cit. p.18. Repossi's intervention at the Congress ended with the words, "No more illusions. Class against class: on one side the bourgeoisie, all together, against us; on the other ourselves, alone, against the whole world: this is the task of socialists". In Galli op.cit. p.92. Boero was soon to join the abstentionist fraction and both would go on to join the PCd'I.

<sup>45</sup> The words are Williams op.cit. on p.312 of his useful chronology.

socialists abstaining from bourgeois elections, he was not an abstentionist on principle. However, during his period as editor of *Avanguardia* in 1917 he began to develop the ideas which were to become central to his thinking in 1919. In a series of articles he sought to trace the theoretical and historical roots of reformism and the accompanying collaborationism which prevented the Socialist party from carrying out its task of preparing the working class for revolution.

**In our conception ... the political party is not an organ for winning elections, for the intellectual leaders of the movement, but the political organ of a social class which only by uniting together in a collectivity that supersedes individuals, groups, categories, races, countries, will be able to give and win its decisive battles.<sup>46</sup>**

A year or so further on, Bolshevik practice in the Russian Revolution and Lenin's own arguments against the idea of socialism coming via parliament reinforced Bordiga's critique. In *Against the Ambiguities and Deceptions of Reformism: the Illusion of Elections*, he argued,

**In Russia the dictatorship of the proletariat has won and consolidates itself by destroying every bourgeois organ and preventing the formation of new organs created by the same bourgeois mechanism of electoral action. The Constituent Assembly, the product of electoral suffrage, was fought by the Bolsheviks in Russia first by propaganda, then suppressed by force. ... The election campaign approaches. The Socialist Party must establish if it should participate in this and with what programme. The proletariat must not be deceived and lulled to sleep by the electoral struggle; it must be convinced that nothing revolutionary comes from the winning of parliamentary seats and must understand which way to follow and how it can utilise its own strength.<sup>47</sup>**

Unlike Serrati and the majority of the PSI's leadership, Bordiga took internationalism and not 'Italy' as his first premise and tried seriously to relate to the revolutionary experience of the Russian working class. His adoption of an abstentionist position was directly linked to his reading of what distinguished the revolutionary course of events in Russia. Thus the abstentionist theme was developed in further issues of *Il Soviet* as a stick to beat the temporising of the party leadership, especially what was seen as the purely token character of its adhesion to the Third International, and again the authority of Lenin was invoked to drive home the criticism. In *Either Elections or Revolution* <sup>48</sup> Bordiga quotes from Lenin's *Letter to the Workers of Europe and America*

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from *Avanguardia* 23-30 December 1917 by Clementi op.cit. p.52.

<sup>47</sup> *Il Soviet* no. 8, 9.2.19

<sup>48</sup> *Il Soviet* no. 27, 29.6.19

where Serrati and Lazzari are listed amongst “those who have understood the need to finish with bourgeois parliamentarism” and where “Bourgeois parliament, even in the most democratic republic” is described by Lenin as,

**... none other than a machine of oppression against millions of workers obliged to vote for laws which others make and give them. Socialism allowed the parliamentary struggle solely with the aim of utilising parliament as a tribune for propaganda so long as the struggle had necessarily to be conducted within the frame of the bourgeois order.**<sup>49</sup>

Lenin’s misunderstanding about the Italian party leaders is understandable, says Bordiga, in view of their seeming commitment to the International and acceptance of its programme which is supposed to be “uniform internationally”. Yet, he argues, at a time when “Three communist republics already exist,<sup>50</sup> we are then fully on the historic course of revolution, outside of the period when the struggle is conducted inside the bourgeois order.” In this situation, calling for the proletariat to go to the ballot box is tantamount to saying that there “is no hope of realising revolutionary aspirations” and he asks “How can this fatal contradiction not be seen?”;

**How can it not be understood that today telling the proletariat to go to the ballot box means inviting it to give up any attempt at the revolutionary conquest of power?**

At this point Bordiga was not thinking in terms of a communist breakaway from the PSI. He still dreamed of its transformation into a genuine communist party by ousting the reformists. (He even joined the PSI’s commission to revise the party programme in July 1919, only to leave it a month later.) However, by concentrating on a single aspect of the issue and defining the problem of ‘revolutionising’ the party in terms of abstentionism<sup>51</sup> the fundamental question of the social democratic practice and outlook of the PSI as a whole was blurred over. This made it easier for Serrati to maintain control at the Bologna Congress (October, 1919) where, by putting forward a motion which recognised that the old Genoa Programme of 1892 had been “superseded by events”, which accepted the necessity for a “violent liberation struggle” on the part of the proletariat by means of “new proletarian organs” such as

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<sup>49</sup> Bordiga quotes from the censored Italian version which appeared in the journal *Riscossa* of Trieste. The English version, with slightly different wording, is in Lenin’s *Collected Works* (London, Lawrence and Wishart) Vol. 28. pp. 407-14.

<sup>50</sup> He is referring to the short-lived soviet governments in Hungary and Bavaria as well as Russia.

<sup>51</sup> The abstentionist fraction came formally into being on 6th July, 1919.



workers' councils in order to install "the transitional regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat" he swept away the revolutionary carpet from under the feet of the abstentionists. The motion ended by calling on the Congress to confirm the Party's adherence to the "world proletarian organism" of the Third International, whose principles it would advocate and defend. In the face of such revolutionary-sounding phrases the significance of the differences between Serrati's 'maximalist electionist' motion and that of Bordiga for the abstentionist fraction was not clear. As well as calling for the Party to change its name to the Communist Party, Bordiga's motion required the Party "to observe the discipline of the international communist congresses", the expulsion of the reformist Right (implicitly by calling the presence of those who reject the armed struggle as incompatible with party membership) and, of course, the Party's abstention from elections in favour of working for the "realisation of the entirety of the communist programme". In any event Bordiga's motion was roundly defeated<sup>52</sup> and, at the same time as announcing the formation of the **communist** abstentionist fraction, he characteristically agreed to submit to Party discipline and renounce abstentionist propaganda in the run-up to the parliamentary elections the following month. PSI **practice** continued to be defined by the Parliamentary group.

In the meantime, despite Bordiga's stress on the need for full compliance with the directives of the International, it was Serrati and the maximalists who enjoyed Comintern support. With the co-operation of Ljubarsky (Niccolini), the Comintern's representative in Italy, Serrati now launched a theoretical journal, *Il Comunismo* which was sub-titled "Review of the Third International" and he was able to use both this and *Avanti!* (which he edited) not only to demonstrate that the PSI had the support of Lenin and the International but to criticise first the abstentionists and then the growing factory council movement in Turin.<sup>53</sup> After Bologna, Comintern support for Serrati's 'do-nothing' policies was relatively short-lived. When the PSI leader

<sup>52</sup> By 48,411 votes to 3,417. Both motions are in *Dal Convegno d'Imola* op.cit. pp.63-65.

<sup>53</sup> In December, 1919 Serrati published Lenin's letter of 29th October (approving the PSI's participation in elections) in *Avanti!* and the Turin council movement was criticised in both publications. Though it should be added that Serrati did not maintain a monopoly of viewpoints (Bordiga, for example, also criticised the Ordinovisti in the pages of *Il Comunismo*). See Williams op.cit. p.315 and Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch *Lenin and the Comintern* (Hoover, 1972) p.453.

stubbornly refused to see the need to expel the reformists from the Party at the 2nd Comintern Congress (July-August, 1920) there was a definite turn-round in the International's attitude towards the maximalist leader. However, a combination of factors: the focussing on abstentionism rather than the more fundamental question of what being a communist party meant by the Left fraction, and the International's encouragement of Serratian maximalism - combined to delay the eventual formation of the Communist Party. When it finally did come into being it was as the outcome of the Italian experience itself, albeit in the wider context of the Russian example and the existence of the International - rather than backstage manoeuvres by Comintern emissaries or the perverse will of Lenin, as the Cold War historians at the Hoover Institute maintained.<sup>54</sup>

The abstentionist fraction was reluctant to press for a split without the approval of the Communist International. This is clear from Bordiga's letters addressed to the Central Committee of the International in November of 1919 and the following January which aimed to sound out the International's views, amongst other things, on splitting the Italian Party and further explaining the standpoint of their fraction. Equally clear, though, despite the reluctance to act without the direct mandate of the International, is the decision to work for a split.

**Even if so far we have remained disciplined inside the PSI and have submitted to its tactics, there is every possibility that within a short time, perhaps before the local elections which are to take place in July, that our fraction will break away from the Party which wants to keep many anti-communists in its midst in order to constitute the Italian Communist Party whose first act will be to give its adhesion to the Communist International.**<sup>55</sup>

As the inertia of the PSI leadership allowed the mounting demonstrations of working class anger to remain isolated incidents of spontaneous revolt the abstentionist fraction gathered increasing support around it. Spriano points out that, in spite of its

♦ 54 Lazitch and Drachkovitch, in the work cited above, make out that "the Leghorn split" was the result of Moscow's decision "being translated into action", a decision which they argue "did not originate with the Executive Committee" (of the International) but with Lenin. "So Lenin's will had prevailed..." pp.457-458. This is not to argue, of course, that the political influence of the Comintern, particularly the Russian leadership, was negligible.

55 Spriano op.cit. p. 39. Both letters were intercepted by the Italian police and never reached their destination. They have been published in English in the first volume of *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Political Writings 1910-20* (Lawrence and Wishart 1977) ed. Quintin Hoare, pp. 207-214.



Neapolitan roots, the 'Bordigist' grouping was not simply a regional or southern entity but was part of a movement which had fought for years against the 'opportunism' of the Party leadership. This eased the work of proselytising inside the Party's ranks after the Bologna Congress and,

**... explains how Bordigism made converts: amongst the Turin workers and socialists who had formed the "rigid" fraction during the War (Boero, Parodi, Gilodi, Rabezzana) against the old reformist "notables" in the section or the most right-wing trade unionists (Buozzi, Colombino, Guarnieri); amongst the most intransigent of the Milanese maximalists (Repossi, Fortichiari, Venegoni and others) who were in bitter struggle against Turatian hegemony; amongst the extreme left groups of Arezzo and Florence who, around the organ *Defence* during the War had formed one of the centrepieces in the campaign of opposition to the conflict; in Puglia where it had in part gathered round it the legacy of revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>56</sup>**

At the same time as winning over other revolutionary elements (not always anti-electionist) Bordiga conducted an elaborate polemic with Gramsci who was engrossed in the factory council movement in Turin. Gramsci, at two years younger, was the same generation as Bordiga, but with much less experience as a political militant and much less involvement in the internal debates and struggles of party life. Unlike Bordiga the question of political organisation, of the nature of the proletarian party, was peripheral to Gramsci's thinking at least until 1920 and he had quite different concerns and preoccupations. In 1913 he was a student of philosophy and linguistics at Turin University when he was persuaded by Angelo Tasca to join the PSI's local youth section. He shared Tasca's interest in culture and in 1916, via the pages of *Il Grido de Popolo*, the Turin Socialist Party weekly, he revived the themes Tasca had debated with Bordiga in 1912. Gramsci was always inclined to see socialism itself, not just the socialist political movement, as developing its strength inside the existing capitalist order. Before 1919 he saw the mainspring of that development in the potential of the working class for cultural and educational improvement. During the war he wrote advocating both universal free education<sup>57</sup> and the setting up of a 'cultural association' in Turin to discuss

**... problems - philosophical, religious and moral - which underlie political and economic action, but which economic and political organisations are not equipped to discuss or to promote solutions for.**

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<sup>56</sup> loc.cit. p.40.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, *Socialists and Education* written in 1916, reprinted in Hoare op.cit. pp.25-27.

Such an association, he argued,

**...would also solve, in great part, the problem of the 'intellectuals'. Intellectuals represent a dead weight within our movement, because they do not have a specific task in it, a task suited to their capacities. They would find it in the Association; and their intellectualism - their real intellectual qualities - would be put to the test.**<sup>58</sup>

In the same text he went on to cite the Fabian Society as an example of the sort of organisation he had in mind. This hardly puts Gramsci on the revolutionary Left but it reflects his essentially individualistic and subjectivist view of the development of class consciousness, something he equated with 'culture' and defined as "... the disciplining of one's inner self; the mastery of one's personality; the attainment of a higher awareness, through which we can come to understand our value and place within history". By this means socialist intellectuals are able to provide a critique of capitalist civilisation, the basis for class consciousness, much as bourgeois philosophers of the Enlightenment did for feudal society before the French Revolution,

**It is through a critique of capitalist civilisation that a unified proletarian consciousness has formed or is in the process of formation. And a critique is something cultural; it does not arise through spontaneous natural evolution.**<sup>59</sup>

In other words, the role of intellectuals is the key to class consciousness and the practical class struggle which workers become involved in through material necessity of little import. The political party's role as a means of uniting socialist theory and historical understanding with proletarian practice, i.e. the political expression of class consciousness, is absent from this scenario. All this is in keeping with Gramsci's own predilection towards intellectualism; his theoretical eclecticism, acknowledged by just about all his exegetists, which meant his Marxism was blended with philosophical idealism and influenced by a panoply of leading bourgeois intellectuals of the day (from Bergson and Bernadetto Croce to Gaetano Salvemini). It meant too that many of the issues and problems central to the thinking of an 'orthodox Marxist' (as Bordiga is invariably defined by Gramsci's epigones) were marginal questions for Gramsci. The most glaring example is that of the War. In 1914 he initially committed what Davidson has called the *faux pas* of defending Mussolini's 'active and operative

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<sup>58</sup> From *Socialism and Culture*, originally published in *Il Grido del Popolo*, 29.1.16, reprinted in Bellamy op.cit. p.9.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* p.11.

neutrality' (Basically arguing that the working class should let the Italian state get on with prosecuting its war aims since they were in no position to overthrow it). Far from showing that Gramsci "did not falter from holding unpopular opinions"<sup>60</sup> this wayward step from the mainstream PSI position was to create a mental crisis leading to his withdrawal from political life for over a year. On his return to active political life he, like Kautsky, never analysed the war in terms of capitalist imperialism, as something intrinsic to capitalism's economic development, as Lenin, Luxemburg and Bordiga had all done. On the contrary, he saw the war as a contingent phenomenon, as something of only passing interest for socialists, preferring to concentrate on cultural issues even while dismissing the growing popular opposition to the war in Turin as "proletarian and defeatist barbarity and stupidity".<sup>61</sup> Incidentally, this is Gramsci writing in March 1918, not long after he had supported Bordiga's call for action to put a revolutionary end to the war at the Florence meeting of the intransigent fraction! By September Gramsci identified himself with the 'Left' at the Rome Congress, that is with the **majority** which reconfirmed the maximum social democratic programme. Typically, even after the October Revolution which did have a great impact on him, his verdict on the 'Extreme Left's victory was nothing more urgent than that:

**The victory of our fraction must not delude us or induce us to slow down the work of culture and education. This, therefore, places major responsibility on us.**<sup>62</sup>

Still it was the gradualist, cultural theme that was central to Gramsci. Yet this was surely marginal to the situation of the Italian working class which was facing post-war dislocation, privation and increasingly ready - like masses of proletarians throughout Europe - to follow the example set by their Russian counterparts. The question was 'How?' As Bordiga returned from military service to publish *Il Soviet*, calling for the expulsion of reformists from the Party and the creation of a communist party, as the PSI leadership voted to adhere to the Third International (March 1919) Gramsci, along with Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini, was preoccupied with the project of setting up a weekly "review of Socialist Culture" to be called *L'Ordine Nuovo*

<sup>60</sup> Richard Bellamy op.cit. p.xiv.

<sup>61</sup> In 'The Club of Moral Life', March 1918, ibid p.51.

<sup>62</sup> *Il Grido de Popolo* 14.7.18 quoted Spriano op.cit. p.19

(The New Order). The first issue appeared on May Day 1919. There are no more telling words than those of Gramsci himself for the first few issues of the paper.

**What was *L'Ordine Nuovo* in its first numbers? It was an anthology, nothing but an anthology. It was a review like any other that could have come out in Naples, Caltanissetta or Brindisi, a journal of abstract culture, abstract information, with a strong leaning towards horror stories and well-meaning woodcuts. This is what *L'Ordine Nuovo* was in its first numbers: a mess, the product of a mediocre intellectualism, which sought on all fours an ideal place to land and march to action.** <sup>63</sup>

Then came the metalworkers' demands for greater workers' control which Gramsci and *L'Ordine Nuovo*, spurred on by what they knew of soviets in Russia, would encourage to become a movement for factory councils. In place of 'culture' as the means of building up the new order within capitalism, Gramsci now substituted the workers' councils. However, the way to socialism was even now seen in terms of a gradual building up inside capitalism. (".. the creation of the proletarian state is not a thaumaturgical act.").<sup>64</sup> There was still no recognition of the need for a co-ordinated assault on the capitalist state or of the revolutionary party's role in preparing politically for this. It is impossible here to detail the Turin events of 1919-20 which have been documented elsewhere.<sup>65</sup> The English reader can get some idea of the key arguments on both sides of the Bordiga/Gramsci polemic from the texts in Quintin Hoare's first volume of selections from Gramsci's political works. This selection was expressly not "motivated by strictly *historiographic* concerns" but the attentive reader will see that the Bordiga of the *Biennio Rosso* was not so much identifying "the dictatorship of the proletariat with dictatorship of the communist party" as Hoare

<sup>63</sup> From *On the Ordine Nuovo Programme* in Hoare op.cit. p.293.

<sup>64</sup> *The Conquest of the State* in 12.7.19, in Hoare op.cit. p.78.

<sup>65</sup> Although it is impossible to deal with the minefield of inaccuracies and overstatements that litter the works of Gramsciana it is worth noting here an example of one of the grosser inaccuracies. In his introduction to *Gramsci's Prison Letters*, (Zwan Publications, Edinburgh) Hamish Henderson astonishingly states that "Gramsci, who had joined the PSI in 1913, quickly emerged as effective leader of a party in disarray; he took over the editorship of *Il Grido de Popolo*, the party weekly, at the end of August 1917, and was soon pointing to the Soviet model of workers' and soldiers' councils as the way forward to proletarian revolution." (p.6) As we have seen, it was the editorship of *Avanti!*, the party daily, not a **local weekly**, which determined who was effective leader of the PSI. As a point of fact, until the factory council movement Gramsci was a little known figure, especially outside Turin where, apart from a period of temporary leadership of the section when most other leading PSIs were in jail or at the front after the August 1917 revolt, he was only elected to the executive in May 1919. Afterwards he was far from being recognised as a effective leader (as Henderson himself admits on the next page when he states that the "unquestioned leader" of the newly formed Communist Party was Bordiga).

states Bordiga was 'effectively' doing in his introduction,<sup>66</sup> as criticising *L'Ordine Nuovo*'s conception that workshop committees were embryo soviets - i.e. the basis for the "system of political representation of the working class" as a whole. Basically Bordiga was trying to convince Gramsci et.al. that overthrowing the capitalist state would require co-ordinated political action; that revolution was not simply a process of building up workplace democracy and proving that the working class could responsibly and 'efficiently manage production, but of a conscious political movement - identifiable by the existence of a revolutionary party - to overthrow the existing state power and establish the proletarian dictatorship, whose basis he never denied would be the soviets. On the contrary, he was quite clear "that the true organs of the proletarian dictatorship are the local and central political soviets, in which workers are not sub-divided according to their particular trade". Above all, he was arguing against what he saw as the dangerous misconception that there was no need to wage a political struggle because "The socialist state already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class". (Gramsci) On the contrary, Bordiga argued, "when it is a question of struggling against bourgeois power, political activity must come first."<sup>67</sup> In the context of contemporary Italian events it was the factoryist preoccupations of *L'Ordine Nuovo* which came to be seen as "fatally flawed" as the locked-out Turin workers were left in isolation and defeated when the PSI refused to assume political responsibility, never mind pose the question of political power in April 1920; and again in September when the factory occupations led, not to the challenging of state power but to a limited workers' control agreement between the unions and factory owners.

### **We would not like the working masses to get the idea that all they need to do to take**

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<sup>66</sup> Hoare op.cit. p.xv. What Hoare is in effect doing is a historically tarring Bordiga's arguments of 1919-20 with the same brush as Stalinism of the Thirties. By doing so the significance of the polemic with Gramsci at the time is lost. The possibility of a dichotomy of interest between party and class was only really appreciated by Marxists after the defeat of the Russian Revolution, when it was obvious that the Soviet State was 'soviet' in name only and had to take its place in the capitalist world. It is true that the later Bordiga and his followers in the 1950s and after steadfastly refused to see a problem with the abstract formulation that "the proletarian dictatorship will be exercised by the communist party" and can hardly be said to have advanced Marxist thinking on this key question, but even here the assumption is that the party will be exercising power through the soviets. In Italy of 1919-20, however, the problem was of a different order.

<sup>67</sup> The quotations from Bordiga are from *The System of Communist Representation, Is This the Time to Form Soviets?, Towards the Establishment of Workers Councils in Italy*, p.199, p.203, p.214 respectively. The quotation from Gramsci is from *Workers Democracy* p.65.



over the factories and get rid of the capitalists is set up councils. ... These futile and continual outbursts which are daily exhausting the masses must be merged together, organised into one great, comprehensive effort which aims directly at the heart of the enemy bourgeoisie.

This function can and must only be exercised by a communist party which, at the present moment, has not, and must not have, any other task than that of directing all its activity to making the working masses more conscious of the necessity for this great political step. This is the only direct way they will gain possession of the factory, while to proceed otherwise will be to struggle in vain.<sup>68</sup>

Whilst criticisms such as this from Bordiga had tended to fall on deaf ears in 1919, by January 1920 the Turin group appeared to be taking on board some of *Il Soviet's* critique of the Party leadership. At any rate the *Ordine Nuovo* group agreed to present a joint *Action Programme of the Turin Socialist Section* with the local abstentionists as the basis for a joint platform in the forthcoming elections to the local PSI section. This stated that "the Party has shown itself incapable of giving a firm and precise direction to the class struggle" and in *First: Renew the Party* Gramsci focussed for the first time on the PSI's failure to give a political lead ("Events occur and the Party is absent."). Bordiga visited Turin to speak to PSI members before the section election, the outcome of which was a victory for the advocates of the Action Programme **the majority of whom were abstentionists**. (They out-numbered the Ordinovisti by eight to one.) Of the four founder-members of *L'Ordine Nuovo* two - Tasca and Terracini - had broken ranks and stood for the 'official' list. (Terracini going on to join the PSI Directorate.)<sup>69</sup> As Williams observes:

**It is symptomatic that when Gramsci began to get to grips with the party problem in January 1920, he had to shift a certain distance towards Bordiga - expulsion of the reformists, denunciation of maximalists, formation of communist groups. And as soon as he did so, the *Ordine Nuovo* group began to break up.**<sup>70</sup>

However, Gramsci did not draw the practical corollary of the need for a split, though he was stung into denying that factory councils were the number one priority for the Turin workers. On April 1st, 1920 Niccolini, echoing Bordiga, directly criticised the "illusions" of *ordinovism* in an article on *Soviets and Factory Councils* which appeared in the Milan edition of *Avanti!*. Gramsci was quick to reply:

**Illusions? Certainly not those which Niccolini supposes. The Turin workers have**

<sup>68</sup> *Il Soviet* 22.2.20 Published in English in Hoare op.cit. pp235-6.

<sup>69</sup> See Clark op.cit. p.91 and Williams op.cit. p.181.

<sup>70</sup> loc.cit.

**understood that invading the factories and hoisting red flags is not enough to make the revolution, they know that the conquest of the factory can be no substitute for the conquest of political power nor precede it ...**<sup>71</sup>

This is at odds with the perspective Gramsci was putting forward to the strikers of Turin and Piedmont at the time,

**The Internal Commissions are the organisms in embryo of the new power of the producers. The industrialists want to crush them. The workers want to defend them, and above all they want to create an environment within and around them which makes possible their further development up to the day when new forms of social life will be established.**<sup>72</sup>

Unlike his reply to Niccolini, this is totally in keeping with the view that, “the socialist state already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited class” which was at the heart of Gramsci’s preoccupation with the factory councils and his hitherto lack of concern for a politically coherent party. It was a view which had not really changed even though there now came to be grafted on what Cortesi has called “a new acquisition for Gramsci”.<sup>73</sup> This was the recognition that “Non-communist revolutionaries must be eliminated from the Party, and its leadership, freed from the preoccupation of preserving unity and balance between various tendencies and leaders, must devote all its efforts to putting the workers’ forces on a war footing.” The quotation is from *For a Renewal of the Socialist Party*, theses originally **drafted** by Gramsci before the April general strike in Turin broke out. They were presented by Togliatti for the Turin section of the PSI to the Party’s national council which met in Milan during the strike itself. As well as the “new acquisition” the text criticises the PSI for failing to educate Italian workers on the international context and significance of their struggles “or to justify them in the light of the ideas of the Communist International”. It says **nothing** about the factory councils being the embryo of the new proletarian power.

It was this document (published in *L’Ordine Nuovo* in May, 1920) that Lenin voiced approval of at the 2nd Congress of the International. He, like many others after him, assumed that it ‘belonged’ to the *Ordinovisti* group and in particular to Gramsci. In

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<sup>71</sup> *L’Ordine Nuovo* 12.7.19.

<sup>72</sup> *Critica Sociale* 16-30 November 1919. Quoted in *Prometeo* 5, Series IV, September 1981.

<sup>73</sup> L. Cortesi *Le origini del PCI*, (Laterza, 1972) p.296.



fact, the original text had been **edited to satisfy the whole of the Turin section** - where, as we have already seen, the communist abstentionist fraction formed the majority and where they and the *Ordinovisti* were working together.<sup>74</sup> Whilst the abstentionists had agreed to the omission of anti-parliamentarism from the document the factoryist myopia typical of the *Ordinovisti* was also absent. In this sense it was "in conformity with all the basic principles of the Communist International".<sup>75</sup> How far this happy outcome conformed with the 'natural evolution' of Gramsci's own thinking remains open to doubt.<sup>76</sup>

It does, however, indicate a new willingness to come towards Bordiga programmatically once abstentionism was not made the central issue. In fact Gramsci attended the May pre-Congress meeting of the abstentionist fraction (as an observer on behalf of those who had expressed no confidence in the PSI leadership at the national council meeting), alongside Francesco Misiano who had attended the PSI meeting as a "non-abstentionist" communist, leaders of the PSI Youth Federation and even someone from the PSI Central Committee (Gennari). Also present was 'Niccolini', in his capacity as Comintern representative. It was probably he who read out the message from the International's West European Secretariat which concluded with an appeal:

**... to your fraction, dear comrades, there remains the task of staying in the Socialist Party as an opposition, to criticise, to monitor, until your own small differences, such**

<sup>74</sup> According to Onorato Damen, a participant in the events leading up to Livorno, "The majority of the Turin Section of the Italian Socialist Party adhered to the Abstentionist Communist Fraction and established a pact with the *Ordine Nuovo* group. Together they formed the Executive Council which proposed these theses, for brevity habitually designated: *The Theses of Ordine Nuovo*." Footnote to the *Tesi della Sezione Socialista di Torino, maggio 1920* in *Dal Convegno d'Imola ....* op.cit. p.78. The existence of an alliance is borne out by Giuseppe Berti, also a contemporary participant (at that time a close supporter of Bordiga) - who recounts that between February and July 1920 there was a bloc between the Gramscians and the Bordigists in Turin which held a majority on the Socialist Executive Commission there. *Appunti e ricordi, 1919-26: Introduzione al Annali del 'Istituto Feltrinelli*, 1966, (Milan) p.38. At the 2nd Congress Polano, then leader of the PSI's Youth Federation, argued not only that the abstentionists were in the majority in the Turin Executive but that the document approved by that Executive was the "work of that fraction, with the parliamentary question retracted". Quoted from the report of the 2nd Congress in *Il Soviet*, 3.10.20 by Spriano op.cit. p.73.

<sup>75</sup> Point 17 of *Theses on the Basic Tasks of the Communist International Adopted by the Second Congress* in Jane Degras ed. *The Communist International, 1919-1943*, (Cass & Co.1971), Vol.1 p.126.

<sup>76</sup> Perhaps the opening of Comintern archives will reveal more direct influence of Comintern emissaries on Gramsci's thinking at this crucial juncture.

**as abstentionism, are dispersed by forthcoming events and all the healthy and strictly revolutionary communist forces of the Italian proletariat are united in the Communist party which will lead the proletariat to the conquest of power and to the installation of the Italian Soviet Republic, as part of the world Soviet Republic.** <sup>77</sup>

It was a sign that the International had lost faith in Serrati and had begun to recognise the inevitability of a split. At the 2nd Congress, however, it was *L'Ordine Nuovo* which was singled out as the political fraction deserving of support. On the first day of the Congress (19.7.1920) there was uproar from the whole of the Italian delegation<sup>78</sup> when Lenin reached point seventeen of the *Theses on the Basic Tasks of the Communist International* which stated that "the proposals put forward by the Turin section to the National Council of the party and published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* of May 8th 1920 are in conformity with all the basic principles of the Communist International." From the abstentionist fraction the criticism was that this text was not based on the programmatic ground of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Apparently Lenin agreed not to go into the ins and outs of the origins of the document but he continued to mete out praise for *L'Ordine Nuovo* and in a speech three days later on the terms of admission to the International (a subject close to Bordiga's heart) he maintained,

**We must simply tell the Italian comrades that it is the line of *L'Ordine Nuovo* members that corresponds to the line of the Communist International, and not that of the present majority of the Socialist Party's leaders and their parliamentary group.**

**... we must say to the Italian comrades and all parties that have a Right wing: this reformist tendency has nothing in common with communism.**

**We ask our Italian comrades to call a congress and have our theses and resolutions submitted to it. I am sure that the Italian workers will want to remain in the Communist International.**<sup>79</sup>

Bolshevik emissaries had been in touch with Gramsci before the Congress and it is known that the report of one of them, V. Degot spoke warmly of "the colossal work which our Turin comrades are carrying out under the leadership of Gramsci".

<sup>77</sup> Spriano op.cit. p.41 and *Dal Convegno d'Imola* ... p.76.

<sup>78</sup> Representing a wide spectrum of political viewpoints: Serrati and Vacira for the PSI leadership, Graziadei, Rondani and Bombacci for the parliamentary group, D'Aragona, Giuseppe Bianchi and Emilio Colombino for the CGL, Dugoni, Pozzoni and Nofri for the National League of Cooperatives and Polano for the Youth Federation. The *Ordinovisti*, however, were not represented and Gramsci was not present at the Congress. Beside the 'official' PSI delegation Bordiga and his companion Ortensia de Meo attended for the abstentionist fraction - apparently on the insistence of Lenin that a representative of the fraction should participate - and took part in the work of the Congress though they had no vote. Spriano op.cit. pp. 64-65 and loc.cit. p.53.

<sup>79</sup> Lenin, *Speech on the Terms of Admission into the Communist International*, **Collected Works** Vol 31, p.252

Another, Riedel, had travelled to the Congress with some of the Italian delegation and brought with him the 'Turin' document which so impressed Lenin.<sup>80</sup>

This, despite Bordiga's impeccable revolutionary Marxist past and his systematic efforts to galvanise support for a split on clear communist lines; despite his being the architect (along with Humbert-Droz) of the twenty-first of the twenty-one conditions for admission to the International (Included to ensure that the PSI would be obliged to expel the reformists in order to remain in the International);<sup>81</sup> and, above all, despite his withdrawal of the fraction's *Theses on Abstentionism*.

The latter move was not political opportunism. The whole debate was about tactics and there was no disagreement amongst the speakers - Bukharin, Lenin and Bordiga - over the principle that revolutionary change could not come via parliament, the form *par excellence* of bourgeois dictatorship. Where they differed was over the validity of continuing with the tactic of using parliament as a propaganda platform - as the Bolsheviks had used the old Tsarist Duma - in a revolutionary period and in countries with a relatively strong parliamentary tradition (relative, that is, to Tsarist Russia). Bordiga's argument was that in Western Europe - "countries with a bourgeois democracy of long standing" - there was a need to break with the whole tradition of parliamentary work which was symptomatic of the degeneration of social democracy and where instead of concentrating on direct revolutionary activity "the party becomes a machinery of electoral committees entrusted only with the preparation and the mobilisation of the electors." Bukharin's response was that it was the party itself, not working in parliament as such that was important: "When you have a real Communist Party you need not be afraid to send some of your men to the bourgeois parliament, because they will act there as revolutionaries." The Italian abstentionists' theses were rejected by 11 votes to 3 and though Bordiga made it clear that "I still hold the same opinion, and I am more than ever convinced that the Communist International will not succeed in achieving really revolutionary parliamentary tactics" he accepted both the outcome of the vote and agreed with "Comrade Bukharin (that) this question cannot and must not be the cause of a split in the Communist movement..." In other words, he

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<sup>80</sup> Spriano op.cit. p.67.

<sup>81</sup> See E.H. Carr *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-23* Vol. 3, (Pelican edition) pp.198-199.

had accepted that the Communist Party of Italy would be formed on a wider basis than the abstentionist fraction as well as the discipline of the International.<sup>82</sup>

It seems that Lenin assumed that the expulsion of the reformist Right would be enough to induce the Italian Party to make a clear political break with social democratic maximalism or 'Centrism'. Perhaps Lenin saw the *Ordinovisti* as providing a wider basis for a split than Bordiga's positions, even without abstentionism, or maybe he simply did not want to 'reward' Bordiga's abstentionism at a time when he was preoccupied with the 'left-wing childishness'.<sup>83</sup> In any case it was hardly a case of Bordiga "being in the right place at the right time and just the man the International was looking for".<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Comintern support did not prevent the disintegration of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group. In June Tasca, who basically did not want to see workers organising outside of trade union control, finally broke with the *Ordinovisti* when he proposed fusing the factory councils with the trades unions. By July Gramsci had broken with Terracini and Togliatti who formed the 'electionist

<sup>82</sup> Quotations are from the speeches of Bordiga and Bukharin, reprinted in English along with the *Theses on Parliamentarism presented by the Communist Abstentionist Fraction of the Italian Socialist Party* and the *Theses on the Communist parties and Parliamentarism adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern in Programme Communiste* No. 66, April 1976.

<sup>83</sup> Lenin's pamphlet, *Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* was published in April, 1920 and circulated to all the delegates of the 2nd Congress of the International. In a footnote Lenin states that he is not well acquainted with the positions of the abstentionist fraction but maintains that they "are certainly wrong in advocating non-participation in parliament" whilst conceding that, "Comrade Bordiga and his faction are right in attacking Turati and his followers, who remain in a party which has recognised Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat, yet continue their former pernicious and opportunist policy as members of parliament." See Lenin op.cit. p.54. This theme is reiterated in an appendix on "Turati and Co." added in May. Otherwise the polemic is directed principally towards the German and Dutch left communists (associated with the names of Herman Gorter and Anton Pannekoek) who were opposed to communists entering parliament or the established trades unions, and Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain. In Germany the KPD had already experienced a split with the majority leaving to form the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany) on a left communist basis. In Britain Pankhurst's Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF) was refusing to belong to a communist party which participated in parliament and there was widespread opposition, including that of Pankhurst herself, the SLP (Socialist Labour Party) and John Maclean, to affiliation with the Labour Party. Faced with this fracturing of the communist movement Lenin wrote the pamphlet which has ever since been used by would-be 'Leninists' to justify an essentially social democratic political practice. Written at a time when the prospect for revolution in Europe was becoming a more distant one, Lenin was preoccupied with the danger that the communists would become isolated from the mass of the working class and that their organisations would remain in the position of a political sect. In this it heralds the united front policy adopted by the Executive Committee of the International and opposed by the PCd'I in the following year.

<sup>84</sup> Clark op.cit. p.198, as part of his presentation of Bordiga as a shrewd opportunist sectarian with plenty of energy. In fact the Comintern was backing more than one horse in Italy at this point and Serrati, by far the more established figure, was elected to the ECCI during the 2nd congress. (Spriano op.cit. p.76.)

communist' group in contradistinction to the abstentionists. They were opposed to working with anarcho-syndicalists as well as to a split in the Party and they took the majority of the *Ordine Nuovo* supporters with them. Gramsci was thus left in virtual isolation with his 'communist education' group of 17 workers in July-August, 1920. It meant that Gramsci had lined himself up with the communist cause but it also meant the eclipse of what had been central to his politics as the revolutionaries inside the PSI rallied to Bordiga's call for: "the formation of the political party of the class and the struggle for the revolutionary conquest of power."<sup>85</sup>

It was a cause which the Comintern's Executive Committee (or, at any rate the Russians) had begun to realise could not be achieved via Serrati whose central concern was to hold the PSI together at all cost. Even so, the Russian leadership still appear to have clung on to the hope that Serrati (who accepted that the Party should be 'purged' but through individual resignations not expulsions) would change his mind and agree to expel the right-wing 'reformists' and adopt the title of 'Communist Party' for the old PSI. It wasn't until after the Second Congress - after seeing Serrati's reaction to the draft of an open letter to the PSI signed by Lenin, Zinoviev and Bukharin in the name of the International (whose Executive Serrati had been elected to in August) that the Comintern leaders began to publicly change their tune.

As Serrati lost the prestigious support of the Bolshevik leadership and thereby the Comintern in the period between the 2nd Comintern Congress and the Livorno scission, it was round Bordiga, not Gramsci, that the communist fraction was forged. The fraction came formally into being on 15th October, 1920 at a meeting in Milan of various political elements who shared full agreement with the twenty-one conditions of adhesion to the International. As well as the abstentionist fraction itself these included intransigent communists who had not been abstentionists, such as Fortichiari and Repossi, 'maximalists' such as Bombacci, Polano of the Youth Federation, as well as the ex-*Ordinovisti* : Terracini, Togliatti and Gramsci himself. The meeting issued a manifesto addressed to "the comrades in all sections of the PSI". It opened by affirming the need for a concerted effort on the part of all left-wing elements in the Party to finally resolve the "intolerable" situation. Though it still spoke in terms of

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<sup>85</sup> Bordiga, *Gli scopi dei comunisti*, quoted by Spriano from *Il Soviet* 29.2.20, op.cit. p.41.



changing the name of the existing Party, redefining its programme and expelling all those who were against the programme of the Third International, there was no longer any doubt that a split was in the offing at the next Party Congress. The fraction gave itself an Executive Committee (Bombacci, Fortichiari and Bordiga)<sup>86</sup> and set up an office in Imola to prepare for the Congress and oversee the work of trying to persuade as many PSI members as possible of “communist principles”.<sup>87</sup>

The communist fraction now had the official support of the Bolshevik leaders in the International. On 23rd October Zinoviev had sent a letter to the fraction which was also signed by Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin on behalf of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. It stated that the fraction constituted the “only serious support for the Communist International in Italy” and that if Serrati really wanted to help in the formation of a communist party he had only to take up a place in its ranks. The next day Bordiga added the following note to *Il Soviet*:

**The communist fraction will have to act with and with complete resolve and with the most inexorable intransigence. The Communist Party must now spring forth and become what the Third International asks it to be. There must be no hesitation in denouncing the old party, this old amalgam that is incapable of regenerating itself, and in constituting the new organ that is necessary and indispensable for the proletarian revolution.”** <sup>88</sup>

It was not only Comintern support that impelled the revolutionaries of the PSI to finally come together. The communist fraction was formed in the wake of the September defeat of the Turin workers’ factory occupations and it was this which brought home to many PSI militants the “realisation of the need for a party which wouldn’t abdicate its function at the decisive moment” (Spriano).

Abstentionism was no longer the issue.<sup>89</sup> Establishing the political and organisational means for piecemeal acts of working class rebellion to be translated into a conscious

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<sup>85</sup> See Stefano Merli’s biographical guide, *Il partito comunista (1921-26)* p.661 in *Annali*, 1960 (Istituto Gianciomo Feltrinelli)

<sup>87</sup> *Dal Convegno d'Imola ...* op.cit. p.82. The information on Imola is in a footnote to the text of the manifesto.

<sup>88</sup> Spriano op. cit. p.92.

movement for the overthrow of the existing state **was**.<sup>90</sup> Increasingly it was social democracy as such that came under attack. Serrati and the 'centrists', not Turati and the right were the focus. The biggest obstacle to the revolution so far in Italy had been the gap between the revolutionary rhetoric and do-nothing (or worse) practice of the Party leadership. At heart this was not just a question of whether or not to work in Parliament, it was a question of whether or not the Party leadership wanted to lead a real revolution in Italy as the Bolsheviks had done in Russia. Serrati, it seemed, did not:

**In my view the task of the Socialist Party is not so much to lead the crowds in the street - as barricade romantics think - as to get ready all the forces of the socialist order which are indispensable to the new regime and for making possible its definitive triumph. In this work of "building up" the revolution the Italian Socialist Party is perhaps most prepared. We have a strong network of Sections, Unions, co-operatives ... We can say without fear of exaggeration that the great part of working class and proletarian Italy, that fully-evolved Italy is with us.** [emphasis JN]<sup>91</sup>

It was natural that the leadership of the battle against 'Centrism' should fall on Bordiga since only he and the abstentionist fraction had been consistently arguing that adhesion to the Third International meant the creation of a new type of party. In October 1920 he set about tearing Serrati's unitarian view of the Party to shreds.

At bottom Serrati and the Centrists could not stomach the thought of revolutionary change. However, in the name of "building up" the revolution he argued for keeping the reformists inside PSI ranks, since to lose them would mean the loss of capable

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<sup>90</sup> <sup>90</sup> Bordiga's acceptance of the outcome of the vote at the 2nd CI Congress is confirmed by the fact that on the eve of municipal elections in September the CC of the abstentionist fraction felt the need to issue a public communique to some of its more enthusiastic militants in Turin and Arezzo who wanted to launch a frontal attack on the PSI and form an 'Abstentionist Communist Party'. They were advised that acceptance of the line decided at Moscow meant that wherever the PSI put up candidates they should abstain "out of discipline from abstentionist activity". *Il Soviet*, 3.10.20 quoted in *Histoire de la Gauche Communiste* in *Communiste Programme*, March 1993. Acceptance of the 'discipline' of the CI did not extend to actively supporting social democratic and 'centrist' candidates put up by the PSI. Spriano and others are wrong to argue that abstentionism was being brought in by the back door, for example in the Milan manifesto which has as one of its guiding principles: "Participation in political and administrative elections on a basis completely opposed to the old social democratic practice ... The parliamentary group will be considered as an organ designated to carry out a specific tactical function under the central leadership of the party. It will not have the authority to make pronouncements as a deliberative body on questions which concern the general policy of the party." This in fact is only what the CI's theses maintained, e.g. in point 2 of the section on revolutionary parliamentarism which states "... the organisation of the parliamentary fraction must be completely in the hands of the Central committee of the Communist Party ..." Degras op.cit. p.154.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted from *Comunismo* 1-15th October 1920 by Spriano op.cit.

administrators and technicians in local municipalities, *camere del lavoro*, co-operatives and the like. At the same time he prevaricated and asked for more time in fulfilling the 21 conditions which he interpreted as asking for a few Right-wing individuals - or rather one, Turati - to resign. Not for him the wholesale jettisoning of the die-hard anti-revolutionary current. Bordiga was scathing. In *The Misdeeds of G.M. Serrati* <sup>92</sup> he pointed to the opportunities that had already been lost for Serrati to put his weight behind fulfilling the conditions and get rid of the Right, notably the Rome and Bologna Congresses. Moreover,

**When Serrati cites the posts of responsibility occupied by non-communists - he would be better saying the defeatists of the revolution - this is a situation that has developed and is getting worse precisely because of the Unitarians, it is precisely due to Serrati...**<sup>93</sup>

After Bologna the Party had concentrated on the elections and the parliamentary group again dominated Party policy. Now, the PSI was concentrating on local elections and strengthening its hold in local government. But where, asked Bordiga, has all this staggering numerical growth got the working class?

**The PSI is suffering from galloping elephantiasis - at more than 200,000 members we are proportionally larger than the Russian Party, with the simple difference that here the bourgeoisie kicks us in the arse ...** <sup>94</sup>

One of the undeniable consequences of this, he went on, was that "many of the best proletarian elements who are predisposed to struggle" rather than follow the "idiotic course of holding on to sinecures are with the anarchists". As for Serrati's argument that it is not the Party's role to lead the masses in the streets,

**There would be nothing to object to if, against a romantic conception of the insurrection, an alternative view was developed about the value of the party; its function as both the organ of consciousness and organised proletarian strength for the struggle against the power of the bourgeois class. The revolutionary process cannot be reduced to a dramatic fight on the barricades. In order to clear the way to the definitive victory of the revolution, the inevitable civil war between the proletariat and the power of the capitalist state, the Communist Party must first prepare the masses for the necessity to organise and discipline their struggle, so that, after the first defeat of the adversary, there can be a disciplined and organised exercise of revolutionary power through its own institutions; something which is obtained by spreading the consciousness of the necessity for the dictatorship of the**

<sup>92</sup> Il Soviet 31.10.20 in 'Histoire de la Gauche' in *Programme Communiste* op.cit.

<sup>93</sup> ibid p.25.

<sup>94</sup> loc.cit.

**proletariat and the soviet regime. But the conception of the editor of *Avanti!* is very different. He doesn't say that the Party must from now on have in view the process which links the overthrow of bourgeois power to the organisation of new institutions of the proletarian regime. According to him the present task of the Party does not lie in the insurrectionary struggle, does not consist in preparing for the revolutionary exercise of power, but consists above all in preparing elements who will develop the new socialist economic forms which should be technically set in place now.**<sup>95</sup>

In sum, the net effect of PSI policies had been to sabotage the working class movement and prevent it from developing its revolutionary potential. In 1919 the PSI had devoted most of its energy and resources to contesting elections, reinforcing the belief in bourgeois democracy. It had used the pact of alliance with the CGL as an excuse for refusing to accept political responsibility for the strikes which broke out in Piedmont and Turin in the Spring of 1920 and had deliberately refused to sanction their extension. Isolated outbreaks of class struggle throughout the peninsula, even insurrections, were usually condemned by the PSI leadership, especially when anarchists and syndicalists were involved, and instead of preparing politically and organisationally for a co-ordinated struggle that could challenge the tottering Italian state, Serrati and co. talked about technically "building up" the revolution. As for the Italian revolution being part of an international revolutionary process which had begun in Russia and which would end there if proletarian Russia's isolation was not broken by revolution elsewhere in Europe: Italian workers must be aware of the danger of a Soviet Italy being blockaded by France and England and brought to its knees for want of coal and iron while Soviet Russia would not be able to assist with grain shipments because the peasants would refuse requisitions.<sup>96</sup> So much for Serrati's sense of proletarian internationalism! Serrati would welcome the revolution when it fell peaceably from the sky, without any risk of social conflict or disruption to industry in Italy. Small wonder that the PSI's commitment to revolution did not go beyond the verbal.

This brings us back to Gramsci and the factory councils, for there is a similarity between Serrati's conception of technically or practically 'building up' the revolution inside the existing order and Gramsci's view of building up the revolution by extending

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<sup>95</sup> loc.cit.

<sup>96</sup> Spriano op.cit. p.97. The coal and iron argument was used in the autumn of 1920; the grain shipment came later, in August 1921 (Serrati had obviously not heard of the famine in Russia or NEP).

workers' control in the factories. By 1920, with the experience of the factory councils, he had come to see the need for the working class to replace, if not destroy, the capitalist state machine with new state organs of workers' democracy which he argued would be based on the factory. (This had not always been the case. In 1918, for instance, Lenin would have recognised something of the Menshevik in Gramsci's view of the proletariat's revolutionary role as the "accelerator of the capitalist evolution of society".)<sup>97</sup> However, he still believed that the struggle for workers' control in the factories, basically workers' self-management of production, meant that the construction of the proletarian (or sometimes the proletarian and peasant) state was already underway. Bordiga argued otherwise. He saw that so long as the working class was not posing the question of **political** power and directly challenging the whole legal, parliamentary and military set-up, workers' control of production could be accommodated by the industrialists and in fact turned to their advantage in that production could proceed more smoothly without disruptive strikes. This is exactly what happened during the month-long occupation of the factories. For Gramsci this was a positive thing because it showed the working class was capable of economic management, of bringing order out of chaos. There are echoes of Serrati in his concern that the proletariat must show itself to be technically capable of managing and achieving the smooth running of existing society without mentioning the need for a concerted assault on the capitalists' state.

For Bordiga the outcome of the September factory occupations (an agreement between the unions and Confindustria promising a limited form of trade union control over production which had the blessing of the PSI) only confirmed his earlier criticisms.

**...we have never had any enthusiasm for ... the famous "problem of control": from its early beginnings we easily foresaw that this terrain would open the way to new reformist expedients, and that workers' "control" over production, far from sustaining a revolutionary outbreak, would end up with some sort of legislative initiative by the bourgeois state... We do not want to say that this problem doesn't have a real content, that the factory councils and the occupation of enterprises are artificial organs and movements. On the contrary: these are fundamental manifestations of the bourgeois crisis in which the communists, the communist party, has the fundamental task of intervening precisely in order to introduce that**

<sup>97</sup> This paragraph on 'intransigence' continues with Gramsci describing the proletariat's 'historical mission' as being to force "modern states to carry through their natural mission as dismantlers of the feudal institutions that still, after the collapse of the former societies, survive and hinder historical development." from 'Class Intransigence and Italian History' [18.5.18] in Hoare op.cit. p.45.



revolutionary content which they don't "intrinsically" possess, even if they are not traditional trade union struggles. ...None of the small inroads into the bourgeois economic and legal order are ever revolutionary while the bourgeoisie does not oppose them with all its might, thus posing the problem of power...

When these postulates - and above all that of control - are accepted by the bourgeoisie their dialectic in effect becomes counter-revolutionary, in the sense that on the economic level they offer a way to counter-balance the anarchy of production, and on the political level they hold up the momentum of the mass movement against bourgeois power. ...

The truly revolutionary struggle will take place when the problem of political power, of the direction society is taking, is posed in an irrevocable fashion; when the fight is led by that conscious vanguard which is the Communist Party. ...

This party is necessary if the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat, towards which the masses are marvellously predisposed, is to be posed in Italy. ...

It is necessary to radically change direction, and without hesitation to get rid of dead weights. The Party is affected by a malady where each day the gangrene gains ground. The diagnosis from Moscow is exactly the right principle. The surgeon's knife is necessary and it must cut without false pity.<sup>98</sup>

Gramsci, however, remained confused. Having taken on board the 'need to renew the party' it is clear that he didn't really know why, especially as his initial reaction to the factory occupations was that they marked a victory, not a defeat. This is his view of the situation almost exactly the same time as Bordiga was writing the above:

**The factory councils have demonstrated that they are the historically most vital and necessary revolutionary institutions for the Italian working class. The workforce, left without leadership or a precise watchword by the Socialist Party and the unions, have found in the councils their organ of government. They are linked strongly and audaciously around the council, they have won because the council has disciplined and armed them, has made every factory a proletarian republic.**

The necessity of posing and resolving the question of workers' control over industry has been demonstrated, as a phase in the revolutionary process where the proletariat creates its apparatus for economic management and demonstrates to the great mass of the population that it alone is capable of resolving the problems posed by the imperialist war.

Our criticism of the Party and the Unions, the one paralysed by demagogic verbalism and the other by bureaucratic sclerosis, has yet again, unfortunately, been confirmed by events. The work of propaganda and organisation which has its centre in *l'Ordine Nuovo*, must be continued with tenacity and intensity: today this is facilitated enormously by the discipline imposed by the Party of the Communist International and by the forward thrust given to the working class by the experience of the factory occupations.<sup>99</sup>

Here the central question is still that of workers' control and since he sees this in itself as leading to a "proletarian republic" in every factory it is not clear why a political party is necessary at all. Yet hadn't the Communist International signalled that the

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<sup>98</sup> *Il Soviet* 3.10.20 *ibid* p.19.

<sup>99</sup> *L'Ordine Nuovo* 2.10.20.

formation of a communist party in Italy was the priority? And hadn't Lenin singled out *L'Ordine Nuovo* as the political basis for this? Gramsci, conscious of the need to submit to the discipline of the International, appears to have been trying to fulfil this agenda but it sat uneasily with his view that the revolutionary process was developing without the Party. It was not that Gramsci had a libertarian view of the revolution, like the German and Dutch council communists round Pannekoek and Gorter who had already rejected the need for a conventional, 'leadership' party and who were already beginning to criticise Russia as a party dictatorship. Whilst it is true that Gramsci's vision of the 'new order' being created and based on the factory councils left little room for the political party, he did not particularly identify with the council communists' view of the soviet state as essentially a semi-state which would disintegrate as non-proletarian layers were absorbed into direct production for human need and the economic basis of capitalism undermined. This of course is the revolutionary Marxist vision of the state, revived by Lenin in *The State and Revolution* and incorporated into the Platform of the Third International. Gramsci did not deny this vision but he largely ignored it and presented a picture of soviet power as a strong state which would bring order and discipline back to the productive process and enable the Italian economy to increase its productive capacity, thus increasing the living standards of the whole population. Just before the Livorno Congress Gramsci was still talking about the working class finishing off the bourgeois revolution in Italy and he never understood the difference between the concept of international revolution as a series of revolutions in one country and the necessity of an international revolution by a world working class. As Cammett pointedly puts it, "Gramsci, however, always stressed the "national" character of the future proletarian revolution.<sup>100</sup> Essentially it is not only a **national** picture, it is a productivist one which does not envisage the disappearance of the working class so much as their perpetuation in a society which has become "one immense factory, organised with the same precision, method, and order that [the worker] recognises as vital in the factory where he works". It is easy today to see parallels with Stalinism but in the Italy of 1919-20 the idea of socialism bringing order out of post-war chaos and undertaking the task of reconstructing of the economy was not uncommon among social democrats - Serrati would certainly have recognised it.

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<sup>100</sup> Cammett op.cit. p.70.

The point is not that it makes Gramsci a Stalinist before Stalin but that his view of the state is yet another aspect of his thought which is more in keeping with the social-democratic 'Centrism' than the revolutionary wing of Marxism. Politically he was in no position to lead the battle of the communist Left inside the PSI. Yet he became engaged in that battle and tried to take on board the arguments for a communist party. Thus, only a week after devoting *L'Ordine Nuovo* to the question of workers' control, he again took up the question of the party. In passing he comes up with a vision of the proletarian state which is certainly dictatorial but which has nothing in common with Marx's vision of the commune-style semi-state which will be the basis for the abolition of class society. Significantly, it is now the party, not the factory councils, which he assigns the task of founding the 'new order', defined simply as a "strong and respected state":

**Only the proletariat is capable of creating a strong and respected state, because it has a programme, communism, which finds its necessary premisses and preconditions in the phase of development reached by capitalism in the imperialist war of 1914-18. Only the proletariat, in creating a new organ of public authority, the soviet system, can impose a dynamic and fluid form on the incandescent social mass and restore order to the general development of the productive forces. It is natural and historically explicable that it is precisely in such a period that the problem of forming a communist party arises, a communist party which is the expression of the proletarian vanguard which has a precise consciousness of its historical mission, which will found the new order, which will be the initiator and protagonist of a new and original period in history.<sup>101</sup>**

Gramsci, doing his best to follow the perspective of the International and take up the argument for the necessity to form a communist party, comes up with a vision of a soviet state which is defined solely in terms of its strength, not its proletarian or transitional nature, while it is now the party, not the factory councils, "which will found the new order". The truth is that with the collapse of the factory council movement and the injunctions from the International to form a communist party, Gramsci's whole political framework had been undermined and in the lead-up to Livorno it was the thinking of the left Marxist current round Bordiga which defined the basis for the formation of the Communist Party "in conformity with the basic principles of the International".

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<sup>101</sup> *L'Ordine Nuovo* 9.10.20. A translation by Gwyn A. Williams is in *New Edinburgh Review*: 2nd of two issues devoted to Gramsci, undated.

Whether or not the Russian leadership of the Communist International understood that supporting the communist fraction in the run up to the Livorno Congress of the PSI meant endorsement of a minority split in the Party, Amadeo Bordiga had soon realised that the communists were unlikely to take the majority of the Party with them. Even though the political and organisational unity of the Left was no longer undermined by divisions over the issue of parliamentary abstentionism, Serrati's refusal to countenance a split from the reformists and his policy of party unity at all cost was a powerful brake on the influence of the Left in the ranks of the Party as a whole. Clementi has pointed out that amongst the signatures on the Milan manifesto (October 1920), which signalled the formation of a communist fraction, there was only one 'top-level' Party name — that of Bombacci.<sup>102</sup> All the others, including Bordiga and Gramsci, at this time could only be considered 'second-rank' leaders and he argues that this was the first sign that the forthcoming break with reformism would involve a minority split from the Party, rather than the majority electing to expel the right-wing minority. Even though the Milan manifesto spoke in terms of the "renewal of the Party", in an article published a few days later Bordiga saw that, "The mass of the party is today much more a prisoner of the Right than it was at the end of the war."<sup>103</sup> (Gramsci, it must be said, saw things differently at this point and was not only under the illusion that the majority of the Socialist Party was with the communists but that the "majority of the Italian people" were of the same mind.)<sup>104</sup> Even so, at the beginning of November Zinoviev could still report to the Comintern Executive that "The communists headed by Bombacci, Bordiga and Terracini ... state that they have 75-90 per cent of the party with them", adding "that in the present situation in Italy any compromise with Serrati and the 'unitary communists' would be extremely

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<sup>102</sup> Clementi op.cit. p.138.

<sup>103</sup> op.cit., quoted from *Il torto di G.M. Serrati in Il Soviet*, 24.10.20.

<sup>104</sup> On 24th October, 1920 Gramsci write in the Piedmont edition of *Avanti*: "As the mass of most conscious and most able workers, the organisation of the Italian communist forces is no different from that of the Socialist Party: it is the development of the Congress of Bologna, it is the immediate and genuine representation of the interests and aspirations of the great popular Italian multitude. Precisely for this reason, precisely because they sense that the majority of the Party and of the Italian people are with the communists, precisely because they understand that the majority of the Socialist Party, once it is led by the communists (that is, when it has become the Communist party), will finally succeed in channelling revolutionary passions which today have no shape or direction, that the bourgeois writers rage against the new fraction, that they do their utmost to try and demonstrate that the communists are isolated, that real workers' democracy is represented by the 'concentration' of Reggio Emilia..." Quoted in Spriano op.cit. p.98.

dangerous".<sup>105</sup> Whatever hopes Bordiga and the stalwarts of the Left may have held earlier, by the time of the communist fraction's Imola Convention (28th-29th November, 1920) the question of forming a revolutionary party in Italy had gone beyond winning a majority at the next PSI Congress. While the fraction worked hard to win over as many PSI members as possible between October and January they were prepared to split, whatever the circumstances, if the Party did not unambiguously confirm its allegiance to the International and get rid of those who continued to believe that the road to socialism could pass through any other way than an all-out struggle for power against the capitalist class. In contrast to Serrati, Bordiga's main preoccupation was programmatic clarity. As he put it,

**The recognition of the justness of the opinion expressed by the majority begins when there is homogeneity of programme and goal: we don't accept the majority view in the present class-divided society nor inside the 'proletariat' which is necessarily dominated by bourgeois ideas, not inside a party which includes too many petty-bourgeois elements and oscillates historically between the old and the new Internationals and which, therefore, is neither in terms of its consciousness nor its practice the "class party" of Marx.**<sup>106</sup>

The Left were no longer prepared to vacillate over the need to break with the old social democratic fudge. Doubtless their resolve was strengthened by the support they were receiving from the Comintern leadership, particularly from Zinoviev who, as late as 9th January 1921, thought that the 'Centrists' "will vote, in all probability, with the communists".<sup>107</sup> At Imola Bordiga insisted that the issue was a fundamental break between communism and social democratic 'maximalism', not the creation of a bridge between them by creating a 'communist-socialist' fraction.<sup>108</sup> In this he was supported by Gramsci, a support which Spriano argues enabled Bordiga's "extreme Left" line to form the basis of the final split. but which meant the sacrifice of that "vision of the communist movement which fully reflected the *Ordine Nuovo* experience" on the

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<sup>105</sup> loc.cit.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted by Clementi op.cit. p.140: from 'Verso il Partito Comunista' in *Avanti*, 20.12.20.

<sup>107</sup> At a meeting of the ECCI. Spriano op.cit. p.105: from *L'Internationale Comunista* 16.3.21.

<sup>108</sup> Graziadei proposed the amalgamation of those who were against a split - the 'unitary communists' (i.e. those who supported Serrati's line) with the rest of the communist fraction. Spriano op.cit. p.100.



“altar of unity and Bordiga”.<sup>109</sup> This argument that Gramsci sacrificed the *Ordine Nuovo* ‘vision’ for the sake of unity does not hold water. Spriano forgets that the group had already crumbled precisely because its founders did not share the same vision; whilst in the wake of what he was beginning to admit as the defeat of the council movement, Gramsci himself was in the throes of rethinking his political priorities. At this stage Gramsci was in no position - even if he had wanted to - of disuniting the communist fraction. His choice was either to join it or stay with the Centrists.

He chose the former but played no part during almost a week of debate at the Livorno Congress. Of the old Turin group only Terracini spoke from the platform: for the communist fraction, not for factory councils. (Tasca and Togliatti did not attend.) Formally the split occurred over how strictly the discipline of the International should apply to the Italian party. More fundamentally, the issue being debated was what kind of organisation constituted a revolutionary party and the very nature of proletarian revolution. Only Bordiga was in a position to elaborate a revolutionary Marxist framework for the new communist party. Independently of the debates in German or Russian Social Democracy he had spent his pre-war political existence battling for the PSI to adopt ‘intransigent’ Marxist principles, revolving round the need for the proletarian class party to maintain its political independence and opposed any compromise with capitalist parties. This puts him in the left Marxist tradition of revolutionaries like Lenin and Luxemburg who had fought against what they saw as the growing opportunism of social democracy before the World War. Like Lenin he had opposed the War from the standpoint of working class internationalism, not

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<sup>109</sup> Spriano is referring specifically to a motion carried at a meeting of the Turin section of the PSI the day before the Imola convention which confirmed that the communist fraction - comprising abstentionists, electionist communists and Gramsci’s communist education group - was by far the majority (249 votes to 84). This motion, in Spriano’s words, “having established that the point of no return had been reached between communists and social democrats ... put forward a vision of the communist movement which fully reflected the Ordinovisti experience. It glorified the factory councils as the soviet institutions of the Italian working class; conceptualised the process of the formation of the communist party as one of conquering workers on the shop floor; clearly distinguished itself from anarchism by “opposing energetically all propaganda which devalues the Party”, and highlighted the function of “education circles” as natural centres of the communist groups and commissariats in the field of factory councils. op.cit. p. 102. Clearly much of this was not peculiar to the *Ordine Nuovo* vision. The fact is that Gramsci’s new-found ‘partyism’ sat uneasily with his previous ‘councilism’ and it was very difficult to reconcile the two.

pacifism. Like Luxemburg, however, he had only slowly recognised the impossibility of a revolutionary transformation of social democracy and the hollowness of its revolutionary rhetoric. By contrast Gramsci, who before 1920 had never been on the Left except by 'accident', who had toyed with Mussolini's interventionism at the outset of the war, who had welcomed the October Revolution as a revolution "against *Capital*" (January, 1918) and whose 'Marxism' was influenced by the very idealist sources that Bordiga had derided, had only recently come to see the need to break with social democracy and now felt obliged to change his whole political perspective.

**... the reality was that at the beginning of 1921 the question of the Councils (which had seemed fundamental to Gramsci) had vanished to nothing, and the question round which the game had come to be decided was, rather, the question of the Party, of the group inside the Party, of the struggle of the fraction in the Party, a 'Jacobin' solution - to use the language of Gramsci - on which Gramsci had previously placed no importance.<sup>110</sup>**

In short, Gramsci's intellectual 'baggage' meant that he had nothing to contribute to the debate over the programmatic basis for the break with the old social democratic party.<sup>111</sup> Both he and the rest of the old Turin group's acceptance of Bordiga's leadership was an acknowledgement of this and belies the myth propagated by many anglophone historians like John Cammett that "the *Ordine Nuovo* group, of which Gramsci was the undisputed founder and leader, was recognised at Livorno as the intellectual center of Italian Communism."<sup>112</sup>

The long-drawn-out process of political debate, of abstentionist side tracks, of the

<sup>110</sup> Giuseppe Berti, *Introduzione agli Annali del' Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, 1966, p.57. This gives a concise summary of the different political backgrounds of Bordiga and Gramsci. (Although Berti began political life in 1918 as a staunch supporter of Bordiga by the time of writing this introduction he was by no means sympathetic to Bordiga - whom he had helped to expel from the Party in 1930.)

<sup>111</sup> There are various reasons advanced for Gramsci's absence on the platform, from simple shyness and reticence due to his physical appearance or lack of voice projection to political embarrassment due to his being tarred with the brush of interventionism during the War. The latter was indeed being made a political issue at Livorno by opponents of the Communist breakaway who wanted to emphasise the 'disunity' in the ranks of the communist fraction. Spriano says that "In the charged atmosphere of the Goldoni theatre the name of Gramsci had become almost synonymous with interventionism." (p.118) and Bordiga certainly had to rebuff hecklers to this effect during his summing up speech. (Published in *La Sinistra Comunista nel cammino della rivoluzione* Edizioni Sociali, 1976.) Possibly there is truth in all of this, but they do not explain why politically the old *Ordine Nuovo* was absent. (What Gwyn Williams points out for the Milan meeting in October holds for Livorno 3 months on "Gramsci and Terracini represented 'Turin' rather than any *Ordinovisti* specificity." p.286 op.cit.)

<sup>112</sup> John M. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism*, (Stanford 1967)

Comintern alternately temporising with Serrati and cajoling the revolutionary fractions and the bitter experience of PSI practice had finally led to the creation of a Communist Party with a leadership fully committed to the Third International and which shared a common perspective that the historical period they were living in was that of the proletarian revolution. It was an inauspicious beginning. Already the threat of attack from Fascist bands had obliged the communist fraction to hold their convention at Imola instead of Bologna and the Communist Party was founded at Livorno and not Florence for the same reason.<sup>113</sup> The Italian working class was being devastated by rising unemployment and a sharp increase in the cost of living and, while employers helped to finance Mussolini, it was the fascists who grew more confident as working class morale declined. The revolutionaries who had taken so long to politically distinguish and organise themselves were thus faced with a working class movement on the retreat. In this they were not alone. The Russian working class, exhausted and decimated by the civil war which had just ended, was hardly in a position to keep up the momentum of a revolution which the Bolsheviks knew must be international in order to secure its original aim. The soviets had declined in political importance during the civil war but the Bolshevik Party clung on to power in what they and revolutionaries outside Russia saw as their isolated proletarian bastion. As the European revolution failed to materialise the leadership began to come to terms with capitalism on the one hand and on the other to seek ways and means of breaking Russia's isolation by hastening revolutionary outbreaks elsewhere. 1921 was to be the year of NEP and Kronstadt, of Soviet trade treaties with capitalist powers, notably Britain, and the clamping down on opposition voices inside the Bolshevik Party. In Germany the prospect for the European revolution would once again diminish with the defeat of the March Action.

This situation would be reflected in the fluctuating policies and retreat to social-democratic practices by the Communist International which now had its only seat in Moscow and which, inevitably, was dominated by the Russian Party. There were ominous signs of things to come at Livorno. The Comintern's Russian delegates (Kabakchiev and Rakosi) voted for the split, even without Serrati. However, Paul Levi

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<sup>113</sup> *Da Imola a Livorno* loc.cit. and Williams op.cit. p.319.

of the German Communist Party (KPD), whose Open Letter, had already proposed a united front with Social Democrats (SPD, USPD) and other communists (KAPD), openly opposed a split 'too far to the Left', without Serrati and the Unitarians. His report to the ECCI condemning the Left (in his view 'sectarian') basis for the formation of the PCd'I was - quite rightly, since it was an argument for accommodation with Social Democracy and thus against the established principles of the International - criticised by the ECCI and earned him the loss of the chairmanship of the KPD. Nevertheless, in December 1921 the ECCI decided to revive Levi's united front policy for the whole of the International. This shift came with the defeat of the March Action and the discrediting of the offensive policy associated with it. (And despite Levi being expelled for condemning it as putschist.) Part and parcel of this policy, as understood in Moscow, was a reversal of the outcome of Livorno. The fledgling Italian Party was told to work for fusion with the party it had only shortly broken from. In fact Lenin had already hinted at this possibility in November 1920 when he argued for the temporary nature of the break with Serrati and the need for "flexible tactics":

**The trouble is that Serrati leans to the right when, in the present-day conditions in Italy one should lean to the left . To successfully accomplish the revolution and safeguard it, the Italian party must take a definite step to the left (without in any way keeping its hands tied or forgetting that subsequent events may well call for definite steps to the right).**<sup>114</sup>

The revolution had not been accomplished in Italy but for the desperate Bolshevik leaders this was even more reason to find a quick route to influencing the 'masses'. Thus, no sooner had the PCd'I come into existence than its left, 'Bordigist' leadership found itself fighting to maintain an 'intransigent' revolutionary policy inside the Communist International itself. Just over two years after Livorno, as the Russian leadership sought to strengthen its control inside Comintern, the arrest of Bordiga provided the opportunity to begin to "turn round" the PCd'I and appoint a more flexible leader - Antonio Gramsci - who, until his own arrest in 1926, would carry out the process of 'bolshevisation' of the Italian Party. Once again there would be a struggle for revolutionary 'intransigence', from the Italian Communist Left, against both the tactical contortions of Comintern and the attempts to follow them by the Italian Party's newly bolshevised leadership.

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<sup>114</sup> 'On Struggle Within the Italian Socialist Party', Lenin *Collected Works* p.383.

## APPENDIX

### Manifesto of the Communist Fraction after the 2nd Congress of the International

TO COMRADES OF ALL SECTIONS OF THE PSI

Recent events in Italy and the deliberations of the 2nd Congress of the IIIrd International have brought the crisis which has long been afflicting our party even more closely to your attention. As the National Congress of the Party approaches, a concerted effort by the left elements of the Party itself is urgently needed in order to finally resolve a situation which is intolerable and which works against the revolutionary struggle of the Italian proletariat.

All this has induced us to initiate a movement to prepare for the Congress and to reach an agreement amongst those comrades who genuinely think it's necessary for it to point to a definitive and energetic solution to the serious problem.

We will not spend a long time reminding you of the situation of our country. The terms on which it participated and left the Great World War, and the episodes of this turbulent post-war period, demonstrate even to our adversaries the multiple symptoms of irremediable disorganisation of the present regime and its incapacity to fight against its own disintegration from within.

On the other hand, the fever-pitch state of excitement and mass outbursts of rebellion from all strata of the proletariat are growing day by day, as manifested in the continual unrest, the ardour with which the battles in the class struggle are being fought and the aspiration, even though instinctive, that these conclude with the final victory of the proletarian revolution.

Even though it is conscious of its own impotence in the face of social disorder, the bourgeoisie is concentrating its utmost energy on the defence of its own social order against the revolutionary masses. On the one hand it is organising regular and irregular *corps* for the armed repression of workers' revolts, on the other it is carrying out an astute policy of apparent concessions and sham benevolence towards the demands of the masses.

The bodies which are leading the proletarian action and whose task it is to undertake a victorious opposition to the bourgeoisie's policy of self-conservation have shown time and again that they are inadequate to this task.

The trades unions are daily attracting wider layers of workers whose strikes and protests demonstrate that they see the necessity to widen the struggle and push forward to revolutionary conquests. But the bureaucratic union leaderships are investing the whole action with the traditional characteristics of the corporate struggle, confining it to the pursuit of gradual improvements in living standards for the proletariat.



As for the political party of the working class, the Socialist Party, which should be synthesising the revolutionary energy of the advance guard and giving a new character and new direction to the struggle for the attainment of the maximum goal of communism, this too reveals itself unfit for the task.

It is very true that when the Party adopted the new maximalist programme at Bologna and adhered to the Moscow International the majority believed that it had responded to the demands of the historic problem. As the Great War drew to a close, two antithetical conceptions of the proletarian struggle had everywhere come up against each other: the one, social democratic, dishonoured by the failure of the 2nd International and its complicity with the bourgeoisie; and the other, communist, with a strength originating from Marxism and from the glorious experience of the Russian Revolution. This latter was to organise itself in the new International and launch the revolutionary watchwords for the proletariat: violent struggle for the overthrow of bourgeois power, for the proletarian dictatorship, for the rule of workers' councils.

But in reality the Party, perhaps deluded by the legitimate satisfaction of having taken up a very different stance from the other parties of the 2nd International, did not understand that a formal change in the programme should necessarily involve a corresponding profound renewal of its structure and functions.

Subsequent events have demonstrated, through circumstances which it would be superfluous to recall, that the Party was still far from being equal to the revolutionary task which the historic situation had conferred upon it.

In essence it has changed none of its political criteria. Its activity is above all parliamentary and it has settled down to the traditional pre-war methods, often playing the game of the bourgeois government.

At moments when crucial decisions had to be made, men who are behind the times and who the Party did not know how to remove from union and parliamentary activity remained in charge of the situation and thus it fell back into the old ways of making deals and compromises. Disillusioned, the proletarian masses in part turned towards other militant revolutionary currents outside the Party such as the syndicalists and anarchists whose conception of the revolutionary process could not be shared by communists, and came together with the very just criticism of the contrast between the demands of the revolutionary situation and the revolutionary language of the party leaders.

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