

The Italian Ex-Communists

ON NOVEMBER 22 AND 23, 1958, an unusual gathering took place in Rome: some 300 ex-Communists, representing various shades of leftist opinion among the hundreds of thousands of Italians who have defected from the Communist Party, met together for the first time in a national convention. The delegates included a large number of former key officials in the party hierarchy, as well as incumbent office-holders at all governmental levels, trade union officials, intellectuals and other notables. The purpose of the convention, as outlined by its organizers, was to discuss the political platform and organizational machinery most suitable to the task of "freeing from the ill-omened influence of the Togliatti-Amentola-Pajetta clan [the PCI top leadership] those proletarians, those intellectuals, those young people who were once at our side and who feel, as we do, the vital need for democracy as being inseparable from socialism, but who still are blinded by the Togliatti myth, by the duplicity of the Italian Communist Party, by the seemingly persuasive and righteous language of the Communist leaders."¹

This convention—and its outcome, which will be discussed shortly—has added a new element to the Italian political scene; for the growing body of defectors from the PCI must now become not only an object of bitter concern to the Italian Communist Party but also a potential political force to be taken into account by the democratic parties of both the government and its opposition—a force which aims at a reform of the left, in the process "compelling the Communist Party to become something more than a body alien to the interests of the Italian workers and to the life of the nation, a private club of fanatics and expounders of formulas."²

The Ranks of "the Disenchanted"

Considered merely from the standpoint of numerical strength, Italy's former Communists represent the most direct and significant proof of the political and organizational crisis which for years has beset the PCI, particularly since the double impact of Khrushchev's disclosures at the

¹"Libero Incontro" (Free Encounter). *Corrispondenza Socialista*, November 23, 1958.

²Eugenio Reale, "Relazione al I° Convegno degli ex Comunisti" (Report to the First Convention of ex-Communists), Rome, November 22-23, 1958.

Twentieth CPSU Congress and of Moscow's brutal actions in Hungary. A few figures will attest to this crisis: according to data supplied by the PCI's organization committee, party membership decreased by 435,478 during the period 1947-57; in the same decade 100,000 young persons who formerly belonged to the Communist Youth Federation allowed their membership to lapse.

The outflow of members has been felt most acutely in northern Italy, where the large industrial centers are located and the working class is active in politics. By contrast, the PCI has remained relatively unaffected in the south-central sections of the country, where the basic source of party strength has been day laborers and poor farmers, who were culturally unprepared to understand the great ideological and political problems posed by the Khrushchev report, the Hungarian revolution, and the events in Poland. A comparison of regional membership percentages confirms the varied course of the party crisis in different sections of Italy. Of the total PCI membership, the north's contribution of 56.95 percent in 1947 has dropped to 53.5 percent today, whereas the proportionate figures for the central and southern regions have risen respectively from 22.5 to 24.1 percent and from 20.55 to 22.4 percent.

The impact of the 1956 events on the party in north Italy merely accelerated a political and organizational crisis which had been going on for years. To cite a few figures, in Turin (where the Italian Communist movement was founded back in 1921) membership in Communist cells operating within factories fell from 31,107 in 1950 to 16,712 in 1955, "thus showing how seriously the organization in industry has been affected."³ In Milan, 15,713 party members defected from 1948 to 1953, while in the industrial centers of Liguria membership declined 8.5 percent in 1955 alone.

Further proof of the gradual withdrawal of the industrial proletariat from the Communist organization is to be found in the decrease of membership dues collected by party federations (provincial organizations). Last year the central administrative office of the PCI admitted that "with respect to 1955, fully 82 federations have collected

³Gillio-D'Amico, "Le forme di organizzazione del Partito nelle fabbriche" (The forms of organization of the [Communist] Party in the factories), *Quaderno dell'Attivista* (published by the CC of the PCI), No. 12, August 1, 1956, p. 9.

less membership dues; in twenty of these, the decrease is in excess of 10 percent"; more specifically, it pointed out that only 46 percent of the registered members in Milan, 58 percent in Turin, and 52 percent in Genoa had paid their monthly dues regularly.⁴

The same trend has been noticeable in the labor unions dominated by the Communist Party. For example, the Milan organization of the Communist-controlled Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL) shrank from 604,982 registered members in 1946 to 237,000 in 1957, and further to 200,000 in 1958.

Unable to ignore this enormous depletion in party ranks, the PCI leadership has attempted to explain it away with sophisticated excuses. Togliatti, for example, has maintained that "it is always possible for a strong, healthy and well-directed party to experience such a decrease"; he has also denied the existence of a crisis in the Communist organization with the argument that "a political party may be said to be experiencing a crisis only when it does not succeed in formulating and implementing a course of political action in keeping with its principles."⁵ Whatever else this interpretation may accomplish, it does little to soften the hard fact that more than half a million followers have, at various times, deserted the Communist organization.

Dissident Movements

In their political alignment, some of these former Communists have moved to the left, advocating a return to positions of Leninist intransigence; others have moved to the right, repudiating the party for its authoritarianism and pleading the need for democratic reform; on both sides of the line defectors have been influenced by ideological convictions and by the specific crises or experiences which induced them to abandon the party.

Chronologically speaking, the first group of dissenters to establish a splinter organization was the International Communist Party, founded in 1940. The platform of the Internationalists was one of strong opposition to Soviet domination and support of the revolutionary thesis and tactics which had been expounded by Karl Radek at the Third World Congress in July 1921; basing their stand on Radek's premise that "the Communist Party must be a workshop for revolutionary Marxism,"⁶ they charged

⁴ "L'applicazione dei bollini mensili nello scorso anno" (Application of monthly stamps during the past year), *Ibid.*, No. 5, March 20, 1957, p. 31.

⁵ Palmiro Togliatti, "Considerazioni su una crisi che non c'è e sulle crisi che ci sono" (Considerations on a non-existent crisis and on the existing crises), *Rinascita*, Nos. 1-2, January-February 1957, p. 41.

⁶ Karl Radek, *Directives on the organizational structure of Communist parties, on the methods and substance of their work*, published in Italian by the PCI Publishing House, 1921, p. 95.

the PCI with opportunism and maintained that it had "nothing to do with the teachings of Marx and Lenin."⁷

In the period 1943-45, the PCI leadership retaliated with a campaign of threat and violence against the Internationalists resembling in all aspects the Communist attack on anarchists and Trotskyites during the Spanish Civil War. When, on July 11, 1945, the organizer of the International Communist Party, Mario Acquaviva, was found slain, his comrades insisted that "the moral and political responsibility for the murder falls on the Italian Communist Party."⁸

Meantime the PCI was using similar tactics against another dissident group, "Red Star," founded in Piedmont during the war by the old-time militant Communist, Temistocle Vaccarella. Like the Internationalists, the "Red Star" group rejected the policy of the united front and supported Lenin's thesis of revolutionary war. In December 1943 the Communist Party issued a peremptory warning that "the small-fry adventurers belonging to 'Red Star' will be unmasked as *agents-provocateurs* of the Trotsky faction and will be treated as such."⁹ A few months after this warning—on June 19, 1944, Vaccarella was murdered in Milan under mysterious circumstances.

While the loss of its ablest leader brought about the dissolution of the "Red Star" group, the Internationalist Communist Party has continued in operation throughout the postwar period. Its present head is Professor Onorato Damen, a one-time Communist leader in the Italian parliament, who defected from the PCI in 1930 while serving a prison sentence for anti-Fascist activities.

IN 1948 A NEW WAVE of opposition swept through the PCI, this time as a result of the Cominform's condemnation of the Yugoslav regime. Then, as today, dissension was particularly rife in the federations operating in the industrial centers of northern Italy. In Milan, 994 members were expelled from the party as Titoist suspects during the period 1948-50; in Genoa, 159 members were expelled "for having had contacts with Titoist elements."¹⁰ In January 1951 two Members of Parliament—Aldo Cucchi, a wartime hero of the underground liberation movement, and Valdo Magnani—were thrown out of the party as "unprincipled renegades, enemies of the working class and the party, and tools of the enemies of communism, the Soviet Union and all honest defenders of peace."¹¹

⁷ *Prometeo*, February 1944.

⁸ "Atto di Accusa" (Indictment), *Battaglia Comunista*, July 28, 1945.

⁹ "Avventurieri politici" (Political adventures), *Il grido di Spartaco*, December 26, 1943.

¹⁰ *Rapporto organizzativo della federazione comunista genovese* (Organizational report of the Genoese Communist Federation), 1953.

¹¹ "Due traditori" (Two traitors), *Unità*, January 30, 1951.

This new wave of expulsions and resignations led to the formation of two additional splinter organizations—the Revolutionary Communist Groups and the Italian Workers' Movement. The former immediately identified themselves as followers of Trotsky and became affiliated with the Fourth International, while the Italian Workers' Movement, which later became the Independent Socialist Union, inclined toward a position of socialist autonomy. The Union survived for several years but was eventually dissolved in 1956-57; a group of its members followed Valdo Magnani into the Italian Socialist Party, while another group followed Aldo Cucchi into the Italian Democratic Socialist Party. The split was caused primarily by conflicting ideological viewpoints and differences in attitudes toward the new phase of crisis within the Italian Communist Party brought on by the aforementioned events of 1956.

The Current Phase of Defection

It was, of course, this crisis which led to the most recent attempts to create movements of ex-Communists in opposition to the policies and tactics of the PCI. Two factions have succeeded in organizing themselves, contributing to the process of disintegration which became apparent in the party after Khrushchev's anti-Stalin revelations and the events in Hungary and Poland. But as in the past, these groups are completely divergent in the ideological premises to which they adhere.

The first, an organization calling itself "Azione Comunista" (Communist Action) was established in June 1956 as "the expression of a class movement which has always existed within the PCI";¹² its leading founders were Giulio Seniga, a former deputy-chief of the PCI's "vigilance" committee, and Bruno Fortichiari, one-time member of the Executive Committee which first directed the party. The second and far more influential group was formed in January 1957 under the leadership of Eugenio Reale, former ambassador to Poland who was expelled from the PCI in January 1956 and who subsequently founded the newspaper *Corrispondenza Socialista* as a medium for publicizing his views.

Militant in posture, the Communist Action group preaches the pursuit of power through revolutionary tactics, as against the "legalistic" tactics of electoral and parliamentary activity. Reviving Stalinist postwar criticisms of Togliatti and Thorez of France for their "failure to ignore the political situation and to unleash the revolution," Communist Action has accused the PCI leadership of "having led the proletariat down the road to defeat and of having transformed the proletarian organizations into electoral bandwagons which, [in the effort] to obstruct the forward march of capitalism and clericalism,

¹² *Azione Comunista*, No. 3, July 31, 1956.

have nothing better to offer than rivers of parliamentary chatter."¹³

On the basis of this stand, and in the hope of attracting adherents from the growing ranks of party defectors, Communist Action attempted to form a coalition based on Leninist and revolutionary positions with the aforementioned International Communist Party and Revolutionary Communist Groups, along with an organization of anarchist tendencies called Proletarian Action Groups. In December 1956 all of these organizations merged in a so-called Italian Communist Left Wing, formed as the first step "toward the establishment of a class party" and "in opposition to the counterrevolutionary policies of the present leaders of the PCI."¹⁴ The alliance was short-lived, however: within a few months sharp ideological differences caused the withdrawal of the Internationalists and the Revolutionary Communist Groups; today a further split seems to be developing between the Communist Action militants and the libertarians of the Proletarian Action Groups. Moreover, the movement has been markedly unsuccessful in its appeal to latterday defectors from the PCI.

THAT THE CHAMPIONS of Leninist intransigence have failed in their efforts to organize a following is manifestly due to the nature of the PCI crisis itself. As has been noted, the bulk of recent defections from the party has taken place in the industrial north, where technical progress, new production techniques and economic improvements have opened the door to a gradual betterment of the workers' lot. This prospect, coupled with a realization of the systematic brutality of Soviet communism as revealed in Khrushchev's "secret" speech and in the suppression of the Hungarian revolt, has oriented a good many former Communists toward positions of reformism. To turn it the other way around, while the specific cause for the defection of hundreds of thousands of Communists was opposition to Stalinism and its methods, this sentiment has developed further, and on a wide scale, into a rejection of basic Leninist dogma on the seizure of power and the necessity of proletarian dictatorship, in situations where economic, technical, social and political conditions offer favorable prospects for a gradual change of class relationships within the framework of the democratic system.

This, in effect, is the position of the *Corrispondenza Socialista* group headed by Eugenio Reale, as expressed in a program oriented toward socialist autonomy and democratic reform of the left. In two years of propaganda

¹³ "Un voto di protesta" (A vote of protest), *ibid.*, No. 33, May 15, 1958.

¹⁴ Bruno Fortichiari, "Ricostruiamo l'Internazionale operaia rivoluzionaria non subordinata ad uno stato" (Let us rebuild the revolutionary International of the workers not subordinated to one state), *ibid.*, No. 9, January 1, 1957.

activity and polemical battle with the PCI, this group has effectively demonstrated its accurate assessment of the dominant trend of opinion among those defectors who, in its own words, "having joined the Communist Party because of a desire for freedom and in the certainty that it was the defender of the working classes' right to a larger measure of social justice, later had to desert it when they became convinced that the party, because of its ideology and leadership, could not satisfy any of these aspirations, any of these needs."¹⁵

Socialist Factionalism

The program and activities of the "reformist" ex-Communists are vitally related to the complex situation existing in the Italian Socialist movement, about which a few words must be said.

As may be known, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) is the only socialist political group in Western Europe which has not been admitted to membership in the Socialist International, because of its political and organizational ties with the Communist Party and its affiliated organizations. These ties date back to August 1934, when the two parties, despite a long history of differences, formed a common front against fascism and nazism in the form of a Unity of Action Pact. The alliance fell apart in 1939 as a result of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, but was resumed during the war years and formally reenacted in 1946, thereafter surviving alternate phases of cooperation and dissension, including the PSI factional split of 1947 which led to the formation of the Italian Socialist Workers' Party (later reconstituted as the Italian Democratic Socialist Party). However, under the impact of the successive shocks of 1956—first the Khrushchev report, then the developments in Hungary and Poland—the PSI was finally led to declare its wish for autonomy from the PCI, formalized in a resolution passed at its 32nd Congress held in Venice in February 1957. As a result of severe internal disputes, this action basically remained a mere paper declaration; the Socialists by and large continued to collaborate with the mass organizations controlled by the Communist Party.

Three factional trends have developed within the PSI. On the right, a group under the leadership of Pietro Nenni, party secretary, and Riccardo Lombardi, has demanded absolute autonomy from the Communists. On the extreme left, a group headed by party leaders Tullio Vocchiotti, Emilio Lusso and Dario Valori has sought even closer ties with the PCI in theoretical, organizational and policy matters; the role of these Socialists is akin to that of a number of East European leaders who are nominally members of the powerless Social Democratic party organizations, but actually strict adherents and transmitters

of the Communist Party line. A third faction of the PSI has ostensibly acted as mediator between the two extremes, but actually has devoted its energies to preventing the issue from coming to a head; it is headed by Lelio Basso, a party leader who is alleged to have used railroading tactics to preserve the PSI-PCI alliance in the 1947 crisis, leading to the secession of the democratic Socialists.

(Editors' Note: As this issue went to press, the PSI's 33rd Congress was convened in mid-January at Naples and resulted in important victories for the Nenni faction. A new resolution in support of party autonomy was adopted by a 3-2 vote, and Nenni supporters won a majority of seats on the PSI Central Committee, where party policies are effectively directed and where pro-Communists previously predominated. How the declaration of autonomy will be implemented is yet to be seen: while the formal PSI-PCI alliance has been clearly repudiated, the Congress established that Socialists would continue to work with Communists in local coalition governments and cooperatives, and also would remain in the Communist-dominated union organization, the CGIL.)

The Reformist Program and Tactics

In this situation the ex-Communists of a reformist bent have directed their activity toward a dual effort: on the one hand, they have urged the Socialists to sever their organizational and political ties with the Communists; on the other, they are trying to build up an organizational structure of their own based on the principle of socialist autonomy.

The first of these tactics has taken the form of an intensive propaganda campaign in support of the Nenni-Lombardi faction, exhorting the PSI to translate its formal separation from the PCI into a decree of "effective autonomy from the Communists and their Soviet bosses."¹⁶ This position is supported in part, certainly, by the logic that isolation of the PCI from its allies would help to expedite its collapse.

The second aim of establishing an organizational structure was, as was pointed out at the start of this paper, the main impetus behind the national convocation of ex-Communists last November, which the Reale group was instrumental in bringing about and in which it took a leading role. The main action of the convention was the launching of an organization called "Alleanza Socialista" (Socialist Alliance) based on the following programmatic principles: repudiation of the concept of the primacy of one state and one party; the validity of democratic practices and institutions as an end, method, and custom of governance; the resolve to contribute to the realization of socialist unity in one party dedicated to the ideals of

¹⁵ Eugenio Reale, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

socialism and democracy. This action was warmly adopted by the delegates present at the convention, with the exception of such militants as the representative of the Communist Action group, who declared himself in disagreement with the ends and methods of the Socialist Alliance.

Aside from these two main lines of effort, it might be pointed out that local groups of ex-Communists have made some attempts to oppose the PCI in electoral contests. As the result of the activity of a movement of some 2,000 members formed in Sardinia, the Communist Party lost 21,000 votes in the last regional elections. In Apulia, an organization of about 1,000 former Communists managed to win a few seats on local Communal Councils during administrative elections of November 1958. In Mesagne, a province of Brindisi, an entire local section of the PCI declared itself autonomous with the encouragement of ex-Communists. While such instances are far too few to permit speculation on the effectiveness of this type of activity, they indicate an additional channel through which former Communists may attempt to make their influence felt.

WHATEVER THE OUTCOME of these various efforts of Italy's ex-Communists on the "right", it is certain that their activity has been deeply disturbing to the Italian Communist Party. Using all of the propaganda and organizational means at its disposal, the PCI has counter-attacked with a vilificatory campaign which tries to write off the ex-Communist movement as simply "an attempt, already proven unsuccessful, of another type of anti-

communism to come to the fore."¹⁷ At the same time it has attacked the advocates of socialist autonomy (both within and without the PSI) as plotters of a "social democratic deviation,"¹⁸ and has brought heavy pressure to bear, through existing inter-party links and mass organizations, in support of the pro-Communist elements in the PSI.

What happens within the Italian Socialist Party will, of course, affect the future course of the Socialist Alliance founded by the ex-Communists. On the basis of their tactics and program to date, it seems reasonable to assume that the members of the Alliance sooner or later will turn toward the PSI—if it is able to assert its autonomy—or alternatively toward the Italian Democratic Socialist Party. As in France, where Communist Party defectors under the leadership of Auguste Lecoœur and Pierre Hervé have joined with the French Socialist Party (SFIO), so in Italy the crisis of communism seems to have led the majority of defectors inexorably toward a course of reformistic socialism.

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¹⁷ Maurizio Ferrara, "Tentativi revisionistici e fallimento degli ex" (Revisionist attempts and failure of the ex-Communists), *Rinascita*, January 1958, p. 47.

¹⁸ "Un articolo di Togliatti sulla politica del PSI" (An article by Togliatti on the policies of the Italian Socialist Party), *Unità*, No. 279, November 23, 1958.

IN FUTURE ISSUES —

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NOTE: The series of articles on communism in underdeveloped countries will be resumed in the March-April issue with discussions of Indian communism by Selig Harrison and Brij Mohan Toofan.