Italy's Red Decade

Social struggles & political power 1968-80

An ISN pamphlet

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From 1968 onwards, a vast upsurge of popular activism challenged the structures of corporate and state power in Italian society. The New Left in Italy had a bigger influence than anywhere else in the west, and inspired huge mobilisations in factories and communities. But the leadership of this movement was claimed by Italy's Communist Party. Its failure to channel the forces that exploded after 1968 doomed the era of collective action to failure

Between the end of the war and the mid-sixties, Italy changed as radically as any society has ever done in such a short space of time. The economic "miracle" of these years saw per capita income more than double, bringing Italy within range of countries like Britain and France. Although this new wealth was distributed unevenly between the social classes, ordinary Italians saw their standard of living rise, and had access to consumer goods for the first time. Televisions and motor cars were no longer privileges of the wealthy.

The same period saw huge waves of migration from the South to the North, and from the countryside to the city. Year after year, hundreds of thousands of people uprooted themselves for a new life. They were usually crammed into shoddy housing blocks. The social services of the northern cities, already inadequate for the needs of the existing population, were stretched to the limit by the influx of southern migrants.

While many expected that the Italian "miracle" would end the social radicalism of Italy's post-war years, the new society created by the boom soon developed its own class conflicts. At first the southern migrants were timid and compliant – often used by employers to undermine working conditions and break strikes. But over time they found their voice and became the backbone of labour militancy after 1968.

The PCI after 1956

The main force in the Italian workers' movement was the Communist Party (PCI). The Communists had over a million members and were supported by a quarter of the electorate. But after losing the decisive post-war election of 1948, the PCI had been ghettoised by Cold War politics. In the meantime, it gradually moved away from Soviet-style communist ideology.

1956 was a traumatic year for the Communist movement all over the world. When the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a tyrant and a mass murderer in a famous speech, Communist activists who saw him as a hero were shocked. To compound things, Khrushchev and his allies in the Soviet leadership then sent the Red Army into Hungary to crush a reforming Communist government.

The PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti welcomed the criticism of Stalin (although he side-stepped his own responsibility for misleading PCI members about Stalin's crimes). He took advantage of the crisis to claim autonomy for his party from Moscow's instructions. But he cracked down on PCI dissidents who wanted to commit the party wholeheartedly to democracy.

Despite this, the PCI shifted steadily towards the idea of a democratic road to socialism over the next decade. By the late sixties, it was fair to say that the PCI had a stronger commitment to democratic liberties than the ruling Christian Democrats (DC).

The Soviet invasion of Hungary

But this commitment didn't mean it had embraced free discussion within its own ranks – although there was more room for dissent than in many Communist parties, the leadership still kept a tight grip when it came to important decisions.

The Centre-Left alliance

The events in Hungary also prompted a shift in the policy of the Socialists (PSI). They had been the junior partners of the PCI since 1945, but now their leader Pietro Nenni condemned the Soviet invasion, and the Socialists decided not to renew their unity pact with the Communists.

This provided the PSI with the opportunity to argue for a different brand of socialism, one that rejected the Soviet model and emphasised the need for personal and political liberties.

There were certainly many in the ranks of the PSI who wanted to follow this course. But instead, Nenni guided his party towards an alliance with the Christian Democrats. The idea of a "centre-left" coalition was floated for the first time.

Some DC leaders began warming to the idea. They were attracted by the prospect of a safe parliamentary majority, and also liked the idea of isolating the Communists in opposition. But the right wing of the party and sections of the business class remained hostile. As a result, the gestation of the centre-left coalition took a long time – the Socialists didn't finally enter the government until 1964. In the meantime, two different approaches to social reform had been clarified – corrective reform and structural reform.

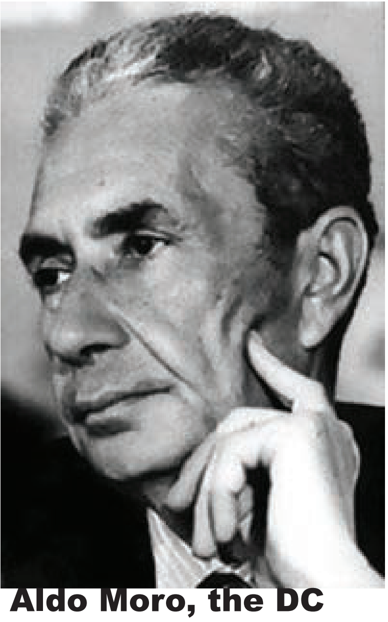
Reform: structural and corrective

Those in favour of corrective reform included more enlightened members of the DC, as well as smaller parties within the DC-led coalition. Their aim was to achieve reforms within the framework of capitalism. In other words, the social structure would remain basically the same, but there would be progress made in health care, education, town planning and so on, for the benefit of the majority of Italians.

The idea of structural reform was put forward by the PSI, and was much more ambitious. A "structural reform", in this view, was a reform that helped pave the way for socialism. Such reforms would strengthen the anti-capitalist consciousness of the popular classes and prepare them to govern society themselves.

This strategy had much to recommend it. After all, it seemed unlikely that Italian capitalism could be uprooted in a matter of weeks or even months – there was little chance of repeating the Russian revolution in the Italy of the 1960s. It was more likely that a transitional period – during which the left would battle for structural reforms, pushing forward at every opportunity - would be required.

But the PSI leadership wrongly gave the impression that this process could be stretched out indefinitely, avoiding the need for any direct confrontations with the capitalist class and its allies. Nenni summed up this optimistic view: "If you want to pull down a tree, it is not always a good idea to use a rope. If you pull too hard the rope might break. Better then to dig all round the tree so as to make it fall down." His ally Riccardo Lombardi spoke of "conquering the state from the inside."


Aldo Moro, the DC premier during the centre-left alliance

Their perspective was entirely lacking in realism. A programme of structural reform would inevitably be resisted by the business elite – to expect them to sit idly by while the system that protected their interests was dismantled, piece by piece, was sheer fantasy. It would require all the strength and resources of the Italian Left to prevail in such a battle. It was absurd to suggest that the PSI could do so, without the support of the Communists, while part of a ruling coalition with the Christian Democrats.

Those Christian Democrats who favoured an alliance with the Socialists knew exactly what they were doing. They had no intention of paving the way for the demise of Italian capitalism. The rhetoric of Nenni and Lombardi proved to be just that and nothing else.

The left wing of the PSI understood this, and they broke away when the leadership decided to join the government. Their chief spokesman Lelio Basso told parliament: "There is only one thing that cannot be done, and that is to sacrifice the autonomy of the working-class movement, to subordinate its political choices to the overall plan of the dominant class. And it is exactly that overall plan that we now see in the Moro government."

The failure of the Centre-Left

It still remained possible, though, that the centre-left alliance could achieve corrective reforms. Such reforms would not lay the basis for a socialist society, but they might deliver real if modest improvements in living standards for working-class Italians. But the centre-left never delivered.

Sections of the business class remained hostile to the presence of Socialists in government, and responded with capital flight and an investment strike. The DC premier Aldo Moro insisted that reforms would now have to wait until the economy was sorted out. Nenni went along with this. Every proposed reform was watered down or abandoned altogether – usually after opposition from one privileged interest or another, with its allies in the DC exerting pressure on its behalf. Neither housing, nor health care, nor town planning, nor local government, nor education saw any of the reforms promised by advocates of the centre-left.

By the late sixties, it was very clear that no serious programme of reform, whether corrective or structural, could be achieved in alliance with the Christian Democrats. The DC had links with every vested interest in Italian society, from the construction industry to the Catholic Church, from the civil service to the Mafia. Only the united forces of the Left could hope to change Italy – whether through reform or revolution.

Amendola and Ingrao

After the death of Togliatti in 1964, the PCI debated alternative strategies. Because freedom of discussion was limited, the debate was neither as open nor as wide-ranging as it might have been. But there was a clear division between different camps, Right and Left.

The spokesman of the Right was Giorgio Amendola. He argued that the failure of the centre-left government provided the PCI with a great opportunity. It could now put itself forward as the real party of reform. The PSI should break its alliance with the DC, and merge with the Communists to form a new left-wing party. This party would fight for a programme of reforms including full employment, higher wages and salaries, and improved public services.

Although Amendola still talked about the transition from capitalism to socialism, in practice his vision did not go beyond the capitalist system. If successful, his reform programme would have been similar to the British Labour government of the 1940s, which delivered significant reforms for the working class without attempting to abolish capitalism.

On the Left of the party, Pietro Ingrao put forward a very different strategy. He urged the PCI to put itself at the head of a movement for structural reform, to be fought for by mass mobilisation. The Communists should give leadership to agitation in the factories. They should use their bases in local government to create embryonic forms of direct democracy. This would lay the basis for a socialist transition.

Pietro Ingrao

Ingrao realised that the PCI would have to change if it was to play the leading role in this process. He called for an end to "democratic centralism", and urged the Communists to embrace free discussion of ideas and autonomy for the lower levels of the party. The PCI should be a model of what democratic socialism might look like in practice.

This was anathema to the party leadership. At the party congress in 1966, when the debate came to a head, Ingrao and his supporters were defeated. Because of the way the party was organised, they had been unable to form an open faction and argue for their positions in the PCI. The outcome was never really in doubt.

As a result, when a mass protest movement erupted from below in 1968, the PCI was completely out of step with the new mood.

Student protest and the "hot autumn"

Like France, Britain and West Germany, Italy was rocked by massive student protests in 1968. Influenced by the radical climate of the time, student occupied their universities in protest against over-crowding, woeful facilities and authoritarian college structures. Mass assemblies were held in universities and left-wing ideas were widely discussed.

The student radicals managed to spark off a much broader protest movement that rocked Italian society for the next decade. A wave of militancy spread throughout the workforce from 1968 onwards, reaching its peak in the so-called "hot autumn" of 1969. Beginning with the traditional union strongholds of the northern cities, this militancy reached sections of the workforce that had never been organised before.

The factory movement developed largely without the help or encouragement of the trade union leadership. Workers set up base committees to co-ordinate their efforts and put forward demands that clashed with the logic of the capitalist system (summed up by the popular slogan "more money for less work"). They usually demanded flat-rate wage increases, narrowing inequalities within the workforce. The divide between blue- and white-collar workers was challenged. These egalitarian demands reflected the key role played by semi-skilled migrant workers in the protests.

But what really worried the Italian business class was the challenge to authority on the shop-floor. Workers demanded changes to the pace of assembly lines and sought to control conditions and safety regulations in the factories. Foremen were often unable to impose their will on the workforce.

In order to sustain the movement, workers invented new forms of organisation and struggle. Strikes were co-ordinated by mass assemblies. New ways of disrupting production were pioneered, usually with the aim of decentralising strike action and empowering workers at the base. Factories were often taken over. In the summer of 1969, FIAT workers in Turin led a mass demonstration chanting the slogan “what do we want? Everything!” and fought running battles with the police.

Riding the tiger

The strike wave was also a challenge to the leadership of Italy’s trade union movement. After some hesitation, they decided to “ride the tiger” of worker militancy and put themselves at the head of the movement. The union movement was divided because of Cold War politics, with the Communist-Socialist CGIL and another major federation, the CISL, linked with the Christian Democrats. The CISL shifted dramatically to the left under the influence of the factory movement (sometimes out-flanking the CGIL) and the two federations formed an alliance.

During the autumn of 1969, the metalworkers’ unions took the lead in the battle against the employers. One and a half million workers came out on strike, and they won a forty-hour week and equal pay increases for the whole workforce. They also won the right to hold mass assemblies in their factories, paid for by the company, for up to ten hours a year.

CGIL leader Luciano Lama

Their victory inspired other sections of the working class to take action. Not only chemical and building workers, but white-collar staff and technicians went on strike. Many of those joining the movement had never gone on strike before. They were usually successful: in 1970, average wages for industry were 23% higher than the previous year.

There was a massive increase in union membership during these years: from 4m in 1968 to 6.7m in 1975. The unions helped establish factory councils to give representation to the rank-and-file. Delegates were elected from every shop or department in a factory. Every worker, whether a union member or not, was allowed to vote in the elections. The meetings of the council were open to all workers.

Employers responded to the factory movement by cutting down investment. But they couldn’t tame the workforce. Although struggles often became defensive, there were still 4.5m workers involved in strikes in 1972, and 6m the following year. The business federation tried to confront the unions at the end of 1972 over the metalworkers’ contract, but it was defeated. The new contract went further in reducing inequalities, and granted metalworkers 150 hours of paid study leave every year. The courses were organised by the trade unions themselves, and were often highly political.

Collective action spreads

At the same time, collective action spread beyond the factory gates into civil society. All kinds of radical initiatives were launched. Young judges organised themselves into Magistratura Democratica (Democratic Magistrates) and challenged the nature of the legal system: they brought cases against leading business and political figures who had previously been immune from prosecution. Tenants’ committees were formed to organise protest campaigns against the dire housing conditions of the major cities.

The most significant of these social movements came a few years after the peak of worker militancy. The Italian feminist movement emerged in the mid-seventies. As well as challenging the sexist ideologies and structures of Italian society, its activists often had to challenge traditional concepts of gender roles within the trade union movement and the organised Left. But the broader collective-action movement empowered women, who often found an active political role for the first time. Its most significant victory came in the struggle for legalised abortion at the end of the decade.

The New Left

Many if not most of these developments, from the earliest strikes to the campaigns for gender equality, were catalysed by the activists of Italy's New Left. After its initial flowering in the universities, the New Left had gone out into Italian society to rally support for its vision. The post-68 generation of revolutionary activists was bigger than anywhere else in Europe, and had a much greater and more sustained impact. The three largest New Left groups each had 15,000 members, and their activists were central to campaigns that involved much broader layers of people.

But for all its energy and creative thinking, the Italian New Left still left much to be desired. Its groups were often highly dogmatic and factionalised, wasting time throwing insults at each other. They were influenced by political models imported from societies quite unlike Italy: in thrall to Lenin, Mao or Che Guevara, they failed to work out a realistic strategy for Italian conditions.

After the initial explosion of 1968-9, the revolutionary groups had exaggerated hopes that the whole social structure (including the traditional left-wing parties and the trade unions) could be swept aside very quickly. Most revolutionaries rejected participation in elections, leaving the stage clear for the PCI.

The aftermath of the Fascist bomb attack in Milan in December 1969

It's impossible to say what the outcome might have been in the 1970s if there had been a united organisation of the New Left, with a more realistic programme for transforming Italian society. It would still have been very difficult for the revolutionary left to challenge the dominant position of the PCI. But as it was, the majority of working-class Italians who wanted serious political change remained loyal to the Communists.

The PCI response

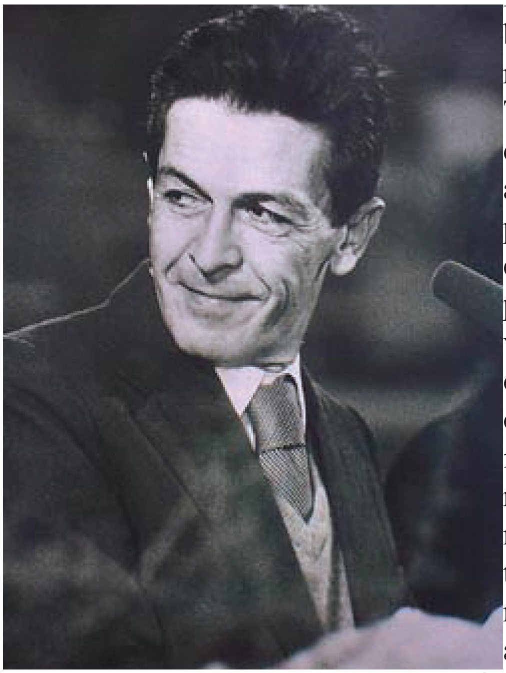
If the New Left proved unable to replace the PCI, nor could they join forces with it. The strategy outlined by Pietro Ingrao would have been very much in tune with the new mood after 1968. But it had been rejected out of hand by the Communist leadership. Some of Ingrao's supporters, including members of the Central Committee, set up a magazine called *Il Manifesto* to articulate their positions. This was too much for the leadership to tolerate, and the dissidents were expelled in 1969.

The Communist trade union leaders Luciano Lama and Bruno Trentin, the dominant figures in the CGIL, were able to respond to the factory movement because they demanded autonomy from the PCI leadership. Their initiatives were usually distrusted by the party hierarchy. The PCI's leaders certainly had no intention of placing themselves at the head of the new social movements and "riding the tiger" in the same way.

This timidity owed much to a fear of alienating the middle classes. Ever since the days of Palmiro Togliatti, the need to win over Italy's *ceti midi* had been central to the PCI's strategy. The *Manifesto* group had challenged this orthodoxy. They argued that while students, intellectuals, technicians and white-collar workers were indeed potential allies of the working class, it was unrealistic to expect small businessmen to support a transition to socialism, no matter how gradual. But they were kicked out of the party and the orthodox view remained in place.

With the New Left unable to establish itself as a credible political force at a national level, capable of spearheading a movement for social change, the PCI reaped the fruits of the post-68 mobilisations. The factory movement had initially prompted the centre-left government to attempt reform again, this time with much more energy. A Workers' Charter was passed in 1970, giving Italian workers a range of legal rights that could be upheld in the courts. Divorce was finally legalised, and a housing reform bill was passed.

But the housing act was sabotaged by vested interests in the DC and the state bureaucracy, demonstrating once again that serious reform was impossible as long as the Italian state was controlled by conservative forces. The failure of the centre-left strengthened the position of the Communists.



Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the PCI from 1972-84

The strategy of tension

Meanwhile, the wave of protest prompted a mobilisation of right-wing forces determined to protect the status quo. At its most extreme, this mobilisation involved an alliance between the extreme right and elements in the army and the secret services to overthrow democracy. The so-called "strategy of tension" began in December 1969, when 16 people were killed by a bomb attack in Milan. Although police initially claimed that anarchists were responsible, it soon became clear that neo-Fascists were to blame. The bombers had been in close contact with a colonel in the secret service.

The government and the senior ranks of the judiciary did everything they could to prevent a thorough investigation of the links between the far right and the secret state. It was left to investigative journalists and junior magistrates to uncover a shadowy network of contacts. The state apparatus had never been purged after 1945, and contained an alarming number of unreconstructed Fascists. Moderate conservatives were unwilling to confront these enemies of democracy: indeed, many felt that the threat of intervention by the far right would be a useful bogey-man with which to intimidate the workers' movement.

At the time, southern Europe was dominated by authoritarian right-wing regimes. The pre-war Fascist dictatorships in Spain and Portugal still held power, while the Greek colonels had seized power in 1967 after a very similar "strategy of tension". The threat of a right-wing coup in Italy seemed quite real. Although it never materialised, far-right terrorists carried out a number of bombings against civilian targets over the next decade, culminating in the horrific attack on Bologna train station in 1980 that killed 85 people.

This "black terrorism" was a much greater threat to the Italian people than the "red terrorism" which dominated politics in the late seventies. But the Italian state was half-hearted in its campaign against the Fascist gangs: they had allies throughout its institutions. To add to the sense of crisis, Italy was hit by a severe economic recession from 1974 onwards. The global crisis of the mid-seventies had an especially deep impact on the Italian economy. Inflation spiralled higher and higher, while production stagnated and employment fell.

The Historic Compromise

It was against this background that the PCI's general secretary Enrico Berlinguer launched the idea of a "historic compromise". In October 1973, he proposed an alliance between the Communists and the DC. He took the recent coup against the Allende government in Chile as his starting-point. Warning that a similar tragedy might occur in Italy if social polarisation continued to grow, he urged the Christian Democrats to join forces with the Left to "secure national economic development, social renewal and democratic progress".

Although the Chilean coup prompted Berlinguer to put the "historic compromise" on the agenda, the idea had been taking shape for some time. It was a natural development of the PCI's strictly parliamentary road to socialism. The Communists aimed to take power through the ballot box and use the state apparatus to change society. But the Italian state had been colonised by the DC since 1945.

Their allies controlled all the important positions. Berlinguer rightly noted that winning 51% of the vote would not be enough for the Left to be able to govern Italy. Any left-wing government bitterly opposed by the Christian Democrats would find its attempts to reform Italian society frustrated at every turn.

Berlinguer was alarmed by the coup against the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile

Faced with this likely outcome, Berlinguer decided that it would be wiser to reach an understanding with the DC and win them over to the project of reform. This involved a great deal of wishful thinking. Despite the experience of almost thirty years of DC rule, despite the failure of the centre-left government's reforming ambitions, Berlinguer continued to insist that the DC could be a progressive force. He was forced to delude himself in this manner because the PCI's approach to politics left no alternative.

There was another path open to the Communists. They could have set out to form a left-wing government that excluded the DC, but readied themselves for a drawn-out struggle with conservative elements in the state bureaucracy after taking power Transforming Italy would be impossible without transforming the state itself. Initiatives like Magistratura Democratica showed that it would be possible to find allies among the employees of the state for such a project. Even the army could not be written off as a staunch defender of the status quo: the revolutionary groups had targeted conscript soldiers with propaganda, organising strikes over conditions. When the first anniversary of the Chilean coup was marked by a protest in Rome, 200 young soldiers in uniform joined the demonstrators.

But the PCI was unable to commit itself to a project of democratising the state – not least because its own structures were far from democratic. Ingrao's call for the party to transform itself, the better to transform Italy, had been rejected. The response of the PCI to the "zone councils" shows what this meant in practice.

"Zone councils" were meant to be the neighbourhood counterparts of the factory councils, broadening the protest movement and building solidarity outside the workplace. Delegates were to be elected by every locality. But the political parties were afraid of losing power and influence and demanded that delegates should be nominated in ratio to the local strength of the parties. The PCI fully supported this demand. Far from developing into an alternative to the existing political system, the zone councils became an extension of that system. Most citizens ignored their existence.

Swing to the Left

The regional elections of 1975 saw the full impact of the protest movements on national politics. The PCI won 33% of the vote – an increase of 6.5%. The Socialists also did well, and the combined left-wing vote was 47%. The Socialists had broken the alliance with the DC the previous year: their new leader Francesco De Martino was sympathetic to the Communists, and quickly formed alliances with the PCI in local government. Most of Italy's major cities and several northern regions were now governed by the Left.

Italy became the focus of world attention, as the prospect of a Communist-led government appeared very real. The PCI established close links with the Spanish and French Communists to promote "Euro-Communism". They issued statements committing their parties to parliamentary democracy and distancing themselves from the Soviet Union. US government officials issued statements firmly opposing a Communist presence in the Italian government – even though Berlinguer had pledged to keep Italy in NATO.

The national elections of 1976 were eagerly anticipated. Some opinion polls showed the PCI well ahead of the Christian Democrats. When the results were in, the PCI had made further gains, with 35% of the vote. But the DC held on, with 39%. The smaller right-wing parties had all lost support as conservative voters rallied round the DC. The revolutionary groups had joined forces to run candidates for the first time, but they got just 1.5% of the vote.

The Communists had done better than ever before. The mass mobilisations in the years since 1968 had created a whole new layer of Italians who wanted the country to change radically. They had rallied to the banner of the PCI, which seemed like the most credible vehicle for those hopes: both the Socialists and the revolutionary left lost support to the Communists. Changes to the electoral law also had an important effect: it was the first time people aged between 18 and 21 had been allowed to vote.

Berlinguer with the new PSI leader Craxi, who was to bring his party sharply to the right in the 1980s

The PCI had the opportunity to build a united left-wing opposition around a programme of structural reform. With almost 47% of the vote, the Left was within shouting distance of taking power through the ballot box. But Berlinguer rejected that option out of hand. He stuck with the project of the "historic compromise".

The Socialists were disappointed with their own performance, and the pro-Communist leader De Martino was forced to step down. He was replaced by Bettino Craxi, who came from the right of the party. Craxi decided that it was essential to safeguard the future of his party by taking a more independent line. The PCI leadership reinforced this tendency by largely ignoring the Socialists over the next three years, as they focused on their would-be alliance with the Christian Democrats.

The revolutionary groups were bitterly disappointed to win just 6 seats. Many of their activists dropped out of politics altogether, worn out by eight years of constant activity. The surviving elements of the far left regrouped as Democrazia Proletaria, a party that survived into the 1980s and had a real though limited impact on Italian politics. But unity and a greater realism came after the high point of the protest movement, when collective action was already in decline.

Although the Left was stronger than ever before on the electoral stage, industrial militancy was beginning to fall off. The economic crisis had a big impact, shifting the balance of power in favour of employers. But the trade union leadership also played a part. The unions moved to reassert their own power when they had the chance, and decision-making was increasingly transferred from the base to the leadership. The factory councils lost much of their energy, and full-time officials took control.

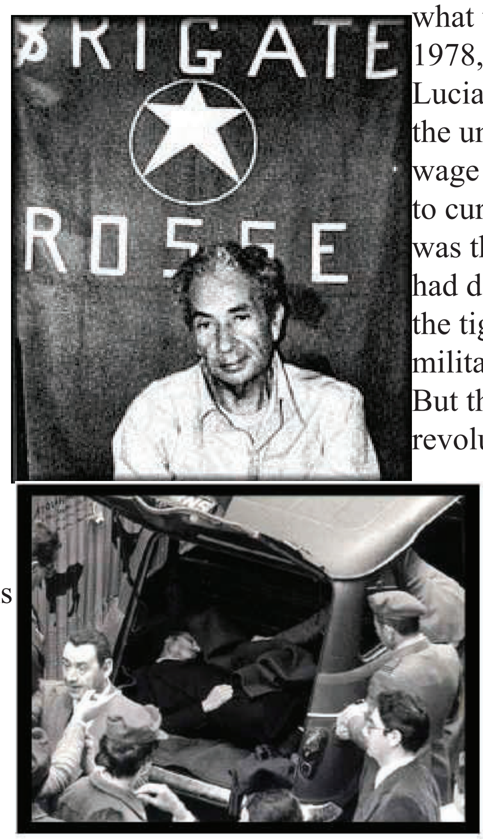
"National Solidarity" - 1976-79

Soon after the elections, a government of "national solidarity" was formed. Although the left-wing parties did not take up positions in the cabinet, they did not vote against it, and were consulted on its programme. The arrangement was to last until 1979.

The aim of the DC was clear. They wanted to incorporate the Communists into the political system and ride out the economic crisis without having to change the status quo in any major way – just as they had done with the Socialists a decade earlier. According to Berlinguer, the aim of the PCI was very different: “A profound change in the economic and social structures, in the functioning of the state and the whole public sector, in relations of power, in the way of life and habits of the country.”

It was no surprise that the conservative vision won out. Berlinguer never explained how such a “profound change” in the Italian social structure could take place in alliance with the DC, and there was certainly no attempt to introduce structural reform in practice. Even corrective reform proved to be a false hope.

The fate of health reform summed up the problem. A national health service was established for the first time, and local health boards were given big budgets. There were suggestions that the health boards be directly elected by the public, so that hospital administrators were under democratic control. Instead, local councils were given control over the boards. The DC (and eventually the Socialists) took advantage of this, giving posts in the administration to their supporters so they could use the health boards as another source of patronage.


Aldo Moro as a hostage (above) and after the BR murdered him (below)

Reform of housing and town planning met a similar fate: laws that looked good on paper were sabotaged by the state bureaucracy and the building industry. Without transforming the state, there could be no serious reform – and the DC would not permit the state to be transformed if they could help it.

Berlinguer had also spoken of “making sacrifices” to drag Italy out of recession. It soon became clear what this meant. In 1978, the CGIL leader Luciano Lama urged the unions to accept wage restraint in order to curb inflation. Lama was the same man who had decided to “ride the tiger” of worker militancy after 1968. But the failure of the revolutionary groups to sustain their challenge to the old union leadership made it possible for Lama and his allies to change course dramatically.

The CGIL largely accepted the capitalist explanation of Italy’s economic trouble, and agreed to restrain wages and discourage strikes. It put forward no alternative economic strategy of its own. Reform was meant to be the trade-off, but it never materialised. Working-class people who had supported the Communists saw their own living standards hit hard by a government austerity programme – a programme that had the full support of the PCI. As ever, the burden of “austerity” fell on the poor and the working class – the upper classes were not asked to tighten their belts. On top of this, the “partnership” between the employers and the workers’ movement discouraged grassroots activity and demoralised union members. The position of the trade unions was further weakened, soon encouraging the business elite to go on the offensive.

The Red Brigades

The main focus of the “national solidarity” government, though, was on terrorism and civil unrest. With the virtual collapse of the revolutionary left, a vacuum had opened up to the left of the PCI. It was partly filled by the so-called “autonomists”, a current that led increasingly violent protests and attracted support from unemployed youth.

The recession had created a generation of young people with very limited prospects. The PCI cut itself off from this social group by allying with the DC. It reinforced their alienation by supporting repressive legislation directed against left-wing protesters. The youth movement peaked in 1977, with violent clashes between protesters and police in many cities. The PCI condemned the autonomists, but had nothing to say about the (sometimes lethal) brutality of the police.

The Red Brigades (BR) then assumed centre stage. The BR had been founded in 1970, inspired by Latin American urban guerrilla movements. Although they never had wide support, by the mid-seventies they were confident enough to launch a “strategy of annihilation”: by terrorising the ruling elite, they hoped to bring the state to its knees.

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The PCI changed its name and ditched Marxism for good after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989

They put this strategy into effect in March 1978, kidnapping Aldo Moro and demanding the release of imprisoned comrades in return for his release. The kidnapping caused a major political crisis, with divisions over the correct response. The PCI argued for no compromise with the terrorists, and the DC agreed. Moro was killed after 54 days.

Most Italians were repelled by the murder. There was dissension within the ranks of the BR, and the organisation was gradually broken up by the police over the next three years, with many former members testifying against their comrades.

The “red terrorism” of the BR probably did more to damage the Italian Left than the “black terrorism” of the Fascists. Their attempt to speed up the course of history accomplished nothing, other than creating division and demoralisation among radical activists. They also gave the Italian state an excuse to pass “law and order” legislation that had much broader targets than the BR itself.

1979-80 - From compromise to defeat

The government of “national solidarity” came to an end at the beginning of 1979. The PCI had little to show for its efforts. Berlinguer took them into opposition, and fresh elections were scheduled. The Communists lost one and a half million votes, falling back to 30%.

The PCI leadership recognised that the experiment had been a failure. Berlinguer soon announced that the “historic compromise” was over, arguing instead for a “democratic alternative”. He urged the Socialists to join forces with the PCI in order to remove the Christian Democrats from power.

But the new strategy came three years too late. The Socialist leader Craxi was already determined to form a new alliance with the DC that would put his party at the heart of power. The Communists paid the price for ignoring their supposed left-wing allies over the previous three years. Craxi formed a lasting partnership with the DC, serving as Prime Minister for 4 years in the 1980s, and became the most corrupt politician in Italian history.

The following year, the business class went on the offensive in the workplace, confident that the tide had washed out for the Left. FIAT took the lead, announcing plans to make 24,000 workers in Turin redundant. They included most of those active in the movement of the previous ten years.

The metalworkers’ unions responded with a strike that proved to be as critical as the British miners’ strike of 1984-5. It lasted more than a month, but the workers were defeated, and FIAT’s triumph set the stage for industrial relations in the next decade. The era of collective action was finally over.