

Trade union independence and the Communist Party:

The Italian experience

CHRIS GILMORE, of the CGIL international department, describes how activists emerged from the underground in Italy after the Second World War, to form trade unions and a legal mass communist party, and to draw up a new democratic constitution. He explains why the unions finally came to adopt the principle that no trade union leader could at the same time be a leading official in a political party.

As the Nazi and fascist troops retreated north out of Rome in the early days of June 1944, they threw the lifeless body of socialist trade union leader, Bruno Buozzi, out of the back of one of the last trucks leaving the capital. Before he was captured, tortured and executed, however, Buozzi had seen the signing of an agreement between the major parties in the anti-fascist resistance (the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrat Party) to set up a single, united trade union confederation in post-war Italy. Thus the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour) was born - or rather re-born, since its predecessor, the CGL, had continued to organise underground during the 20 years of fascism and war.

In fact the great majority of trade union leaders, and not

only the leaders, had been active in the resistance movement. Many of them literally hung their weapons behind the door before sitting down to try and sort out the needs of a new, democratic trade union movement. Many of those weapons had been used by the workers to defend the factories from the Germans' attempts to destroy them as they retreated.

CGIL



Splits in the CGIL

However, the unity that had been established in the resistance to fascism soon came under pressure. By 1948, the anti-fascist alliance was breaking up at world level and the Cold War was starting. This division on a world level between communism and capitalism was reflected in Italy in a violently contested election campaign. It was won by the Christian Democrats after a vicious anti-communist campaign directed at the Communist and Socialist parties, who fought the elections on a single platform. The tensions between the different political tendencies inside the CGIL were daily becoming greater.

In July, following an attempt on the life of Communist leader, Palmiro Togliatti, a general strike

The Constituent Assembly

After the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the fascists, a Constituent Assembly was convened to draw up a democratic constitution for Italy. Trade unionists of different political persuasions who were members of the Assembly had a key role to play in drawing up the new Constitution of the Italian Republic.

This Constitution, which is still valid today, was for years far in advance of daily political and social reality of Italian society, and to some extent it still is. Not by chance, the current statutes of both the CGIL and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) state that their members have to uphold the Constitution - whose first article states that: "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour".

Fundamental clauses in the Constitution protect the rights of working people to belong to trade unions (and hence the duty of employers to recognise trade unions), and the right to strike, and forbid the use of the lock-out by employers. The communists had played a major (if not *the* major) role in the resistance, and they were very powerful in the Constituent Assembly. Indeed, PCI founder member Umberto Terracini was president of the Assembly. However, despite their strength, neither the communist trade unionists, nor those of other parties, tried to impose compulsory trade union membership on workers, nor the constitutional recognition of a single trade union federation.

Not that the temptation was not there. The fascist 'labour front' had been a form of compulsory trade unionism. It had a large bureaucracy, lots of property, state funding and providence funds (holidays, health care, pensions etc). The question was extensively debated among the left (Communist, Socialist, Action) parties. Finally they decided to reject the legal imposition of a single 'official' union federation, and to allow workers the freedom to join or not join the trade union of their choice.

The leading trade unionists of the day, however, were quite clear that while they rejected the idea of a single, compulsory trade union federation, they were still deeply in favour of a strong and united trade union movement. This was to be gained and won, however, by correct policies and dynamic action, not by legal protection. The risk of splits in political alliances, and of pressures from strong external forces endangering the unity of the trade union movement, was always present. But it was a necessary evil that had to be faced day-to-day, not shovelled under a legal carpet. In other words, after 20 years of fascism freedom of association had to be respected in letter and spirit.

began developing throughout the country. The Christian Democrat trade unionist minority in the CGIL accused the majority of using the trade union movement for political ends, and formed the CISL. A second, smaller, split took place a short time later, when trade unionists attached to the newly-formed Social Democratic party (a right-wing split from the Socialist Party) and the Republican party also broke away from the CGIL to form the UIL.

Certainly external forces were in large part responsible for this situation. The Cold War was getting into full-swing. McCarthyism was becoming rife in the United States. In all countries a hysterical anti-communism was growing. NATO was being formed with Italy playing a key role. Capitalism was everywhere re-asserting its strength and dominating the political as well as the economic scene, after years of subordinating itself to state controls in war economies.

Just as, in Italy, the unity of the CGIL had not survived the new situation, so at international level, that noble dream of a single world trade union centre was shattered when the 'Western' oriented trade unions broke away from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) to form the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). In fact, in the Western countries only the CGIL and the French CGT remained in the WFTU. CGIL leader Di Vittorio remained the president of the WFTU until his death in 1957.

Were the unions independent enough?

But can everything really be blamed on 'external' forces and pressures? Can it all be blamed on the new era of post-war capitalism and the bourgeois political parties, on the Cold War and the judges, administrators, and intelligence agents operating to persecute individuals and divide organisations?

Certainly with hindsight, and in the light of the recent ignominious collapse of 'socialism' in Eastern Europe, the left must take a good look at those post-war years too. After all, they were the years when the regimes of Eastern Europe were established and put into place, and they were years in which Stalinist hegemony in the world communist movement was virtually total.

During the period from 1945 up to the split in the trade union movement in Italy in 1948, the concept of trade union independence from government, employers and political parties was firmly established in the CGIL's Statutes and policies. But while independence from the employers was firmly established in practice, the same cannot be said about independence from political parties.

Unionists were political leaders

For many reasons this was inevitable. For 20 years political parties, as well as real trade unions, had been banned, and

there was a deep desire among all people, especially activists, to participate in political life. In addition those political groupings who had most actively participated in the anti-fascist struggle were the best-equipped to ensure that democracy was established and defended. On the left, the number of comrades who understood the complex national and international situation and were capable of playing leading roles was limited.



Party leader Palmiro Togliatti

Photo: Novosti Publishing House

Moreover, the leading trade unionists were political leaders too. Di Vittorio was not only General Secretary of the CGIL, he was also a Member of the Constituent Assembly (and after 1948 a member of Parliament) member of the Political Committee of the PCI, and, of course, President of the WFTU.* Other leading trade unionists, both of the left and centre, were in a similar position.

On the left, these comrades had emerged from years of exile and/or underground work. Many were internationalists who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, who had also fought their way through the Italian resistance war of 1943-45. They were courageous men and women, often highly developed theoretically, and they were prepared to operate in the democratic political perspective outlined by Togliatti in his famous address on returning to Italy from Moscow.

Armed resistance and mass democracy

But they had little or no experience of mass democracy, and in their intellectual baggage they had years of Stalinist 'theory' and practice, and the Leninist concept of the 'transmission belt' relationship between party and trade unions.

For many of the union activists the passage from the high hopes of the immediate post-war period to the grey world of 'bourgeois' democracy under capitalism, was understandably a depressing one. The US was hegemonic in the Western world, and Italy was governed by the conservative Christian Democrats. The fascist penal code was still in force, and the riot squads, commanded by police officers who had served long under fascism, were more and more frequently used against trade union demonstrations.

* He was also one of the most genuine worker leaders: he grew up as a farm boy in Puglia in the south-east of Italy, and was almost entirely self-taught, learning a great deal of his considerable vocabulary by studying a dictionary he had bought second-hand, and learning the words section by section

employers, many CGIL comrades were killed and thousands lost their jobs.

Neglecting the shopfloor

In all this, day-to-day trade union issues on the shopfloor were a bit neglected. Certainly the great majority of the working class of the northern industrial triangle of Turin-Milan-Genova were in sympathy with the goals and traditions of the CGIL, as were the workers and artisans of the Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria, the 'red' central regions of Italy. But with the enormous financial resources which the US flooded into Italy under the Marshall Plan, the 1950's saw a new surge in industrial production - the Italian 'economic miracle'. It also saw the influx of a new labour force coming from the agricultural South of Italy into the factories of the North, a labour force knowing and caring little for the industrial and political traditions of the CGIL.

These fresh workers were often recruited through the network of Catholic churches, and the CISL, with its links to the catholic world, was a more natural trade union environment for many of them. In addition, the CGIL was slow to adapt its policies to the immediate needs of the shopfloor and continued to concentrate

its activities on broader political issues. This allowed the CISL, and to a lesser extent the UIL, to establish a base in the industrial sector.

Losing at FIAT

1955 was the year of truth for the CGIL. In the elections for the workers representative council at FIAT the CGIL was defeated for the very first time, after a massive anti-trade union, anti-CGIL and anti-communist campaign. FIAT is the giant company of the Italian economy - it occupies a similar place to Anglo-American in South Africa. The fact that a sweet-heart union, created by FIAT itself, was the winner, was beside the point. The writing was on the wall, and it was clear that if class trade unionism was to survive and have a future in Italy, a new approach was needed.

At international level too, despite the continuation of the Cold War, the events in Hungary in November 1956 were deeply worrying. The PCI, however reluctantly, supported the Soviet intervention,* but many communists left the party. The CGIL took a far more critical position, led by Di Vittorio himself, still a member of the Political Committee of the PCI and a communist member of Parliament.**

Back to the factory, back to the workplace

The CGIL therefore dedicated itself to a 'return to the factory, to the workplace' during the second half of the fifties and early sixties. The unions also realised that, if they remained divided, the massive restructuring of Italian industry would take place entirely at the cost of the workers. Hence the search for unity in action between the three trade union confederations, CGIL, CISL and UIL, which gained increasing momentum as the sixties wore on. This unity blossomed in the high days of modern Italian trade unionism, the militant 'Hot Autumn' of 1969.

Inside the factories workers faced massive exploitation. Taylorism was in complete command, with high-speed production lines, and repetitive work. The owners and their foremen were the bosses, and the unions were marginal. At the same time, a great mass of the workforce consisted of those recruited directly from the land, from the South of Italy, with no industrial or class tradition behind them. However, these new workers were totally alienated by their hostile working environment, and while illiterate in political theory, they had learned directly about capitalist exploitation on the shopfloor.

* Although at the Eighth Congress of the PCI, held in 1956, the first outline of the 'independent' positions of the PCI vis-a-vis the Soviet model can be clearly seen

** In 1969, with the intervention of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries in Czechoslovakia, both the PCI and the CGIL were extremely clear in their condemnation of the actions of the Soviet Union and its allies. The fact that the WFTU and the great majority of its affiliates agreed with the intervention was yet another factor which encouraged the CGIL to disaffiliate from the WFTU shortly afterwards. Today the CGIL is affiliated to the ETUC, the European trade union body, but has remained independent of international trade union groupings



Italian workers demonstrate on May Day in the 1950s, calling for a day of struggle for 'peace, work and freedom'.

Photo: COSATU

Workplace Councils

One of the first tasks was to overhaul the system of worker representation at plant level. The system which emerged was based on the concept of a Delegate's Council in each workplace. Delegate's Councils had played a crucial role in the trade union battles in the 1918-21 period in Turin, and not surprisingly it was the Turin metalworkers that called again for the election of Delegates' Councils. This call was backed by the metalworkers' unions of the three confederations (FIOM-CGIL, FIM-CISL and UILM-UIL) who were the most advanced on the unity front.

One of the key principles in the formation of the Councils, was that each delegate (similar to a shop steward) should be elected by all the workers in their department, irrespective of what union they belonged to. Indeed, only the candi-

dates' names should appear on the ballot form, not their unions; even though everyone probably knew perfectly well what union the candidate belonged to, the principle was important (just in case there was the danger that the majority organisation would swamp the others, a parallel system was also devised under which each union had the right to nominate one or two seats on the Council directly).

1968/9 - years of action, unity

This system was not designed on an intellectual drawing board, it was born out of struggle. 1968-69 were explosive years in Europe, the break with many things, and years of hope for radical change. The student movement, with its rejection of the capitalist values which had so dominated Europe after the war, was an important political force in

France, Italy, West Germany, Holland, and to some extent Great Britain. In France, this movement coincided with an equally important movement in the factories, although the two never found a real cohesion.

In Italy, however, while the student movement was important, the workers' movement in factories all over the country was literally enormous. Communist trade unionists and delegates were in the forefront of the workers' struggles, but alongside them were trade unionists and activists from other political persuasions: Catholics, left independents, socialists, and those whose political positions were extremely unformulated. The workers demands were very advanced, and strikes were widespread and full of energy and creativity. It seemed that the re-unification of the trade union movement, too, was really on the cards this time.

Nor were the actions limited to shopfloor or sectoral claims. The first great national General Strike in Italian post-war history, was called jointly by the three trade union confederations in 1968 to demand a new pensions deal for retired workers. In fact, Italians now have one of the best pension systems in Europe. This has been followed over the years by a number of important united actions. In these actions the three confederations have acted together in support of common demands against all employers and the government of the day.

In the militant struggles of the 'Hot Autumn', workers on the shop floor and trade union activists were in the forefront of building unity and movement in the workplaces, in the towns and cities of the country. To them it began to seem ridiculous that at the top of the trade unions there should be leaders who were at the same time leaders of rival political parties.

A new principle

Activists on the shopfloor therefore proposed that the unions should adopt the principle of 'incompatibility'. This meant that it would be incompatible for a trade union leader to also hold a political office in a political party or government institution. This principle was easily accepted by the union leadership, starting with the metalworkers unions.

Speaking recently in Johannesburg, the General Secretary of the CGIL, Bruno Trentin,* spoke of the sense of liberation he felt when the incompatibility rule was introduced. The problem he described was one of roles: the trade union movement has its own internal democracy in reaching policy positions. Its policies are not the same as those of a political party, even of a communist party. The CGIL today has over 5 million members, while the PCI has 1.5 million. Clearly the great majority of CGIL members are not members of the PCI. Many are members of the Socialist Party (PSI), some



Bruno Trentin at a joint meeting between the ANC & COSATU

Photo: COSATU

belong to other small left-wing groups, and others to the Christian Democrats. But the great majority do not belong to any political party at all.

The CGIL often formulates and pursues policies together with the CISL and UIL on a whole range of social and economic issues, which are of immediate interest to all Italy's working people. These policies are presented to all the democratic political parties, to parliamentary commissions, as well as to the government of the day. Frequently - one hopes often - these policies coincide with those of the PCI, but this does not always happen. Furthermore timetables may be different, as may political agendas.

Pluralism and accountability

When major trade union leaders were also leading

members of their respective political parties, there was the regular spectacle of them voting against each other on party political lines in parliament. This emphasised the differences, instead of narrowing them. And now that so often the three federations take major policy decisions jointly, the problem would be much worse.

Another factor is that of time. It would be extremely difficult for a leader to perform his or her duties properly if he/she tried to take on leading trade union and political positions at the same time. To many people, to many workers, it would seem an unjustified concentration of power in the hands of the same person, so putting not only the principle of pluralism into question, but also the principle of accountability (to whom, and by what criteria?).

By early 1970, the incompatibility clause had been accepted throughout the Italian trade union movement, and leading trade unionists at all levels had made their choices - either the political or the trade union role. Under the terms of the clause, no trade unionist may hold elected office in a state body or local authority, or in a political party, while at the same time holding an elected trade union position. Indeed if an elected trade union official stands for election for political office, he or she must resign from the

* In 1969, Trentin was General Secretary of the metalworkers union (FIOM-CGIL), member of the Central Committee of the PCI and Member of Parliament. Trentin was active in the resistance in Italy and France, in a non-communist brigade. He only joined the PCI in 1950, as part of the 'new generation' of communists encouraged by Togliatti.

trade union position at the moment he/she declares his/her candidacy - not after hearing the results of the election!

The union and the party

Obviously this does not prevent a trade union leader from being active in his or her party branch, or being elected as a delegate to party congresses and making an important contribution. The majority of the leadership of the CGIL is made up of activists of the PCI or, to a lesser extent, the PSI. The General Secretary of the CGIL is invited to meetings of the Executive and Central Committees of the PCI, and the Deputy General Secretary to those of the PSI. Their views are valued and they make their positions known, but they do not have voting rights.

The same is true of activists and leaders at all levels of the organisation. When there are major debates in the parties the trade unionists play their full part. In the same way, a shop-steward who is a PCI member, will play his or her part as a party activist in the work of the local or factory-based branch of the party.

The secretary of the PCI local or factory-based branch will play his or her part in the workers assemblies and workplace congresses and meetings of the unions. Each will be respected in his or her role, and neither should seek to take over the role of the other.

Another factor that Trentin underlined when he spoke to COSATU was the differing nature of the roles of the trade union movement and the pol-

itical parties in society. He questioned whether there is a strict division between the issues a union takes up and the issues a party takes up.

In the view of the CGIL all questions which effect the worker as a worker or as a citizen are the legitimate concern of the trade union, whether we are talking about wages and working conditions, pensions and social welfare, housing, women's rights and issues, racism, education, defence and foreign policy, etc.

The same applies to a democratic political party. Clearly trade unions and political parties each have their own major concerns, but neither organisation has exclusive rights to deal with particular issues. The difference lies in roles: the political party in a democratic country acts through the institutions of the state or the local authority, even though it may be a mass party, and even though it may, and should, campaign for its policies outside the strictly parliamentary forum. However, it has the right and duty to take those policies into the legislative process.

On the other hand the trade union, using its mass strength in the workplace, brings the needs and interests of the working people to the 'counterpart', be it employer, government or political parties. It then uses its very nature as a negotiating machine to pressurise the counterpart to accommodate those needs and interests.

The struggle for union rights

A good example was the struggle for fundamental trade union rights, which supplement those laid down in the Constitution. The metalworkers won these rights in their National Agreement of 1969 - protection from surveillance, protection from workers' political, religious or other beliefs being recorded by the employer, the right to have union offices at the workplace, the right to hold union meetings at the workplace, including a certain number of paid hours per year, the right of trade union organisers to enter the workplace to speak to the workers, the right to put up union and political party notices at the workplace, rights against dismissal for trade union activities, etc.

After months of a very hard battle, these and other rights were incorporated into the metalworkers agreement of 1969. In May 1970 they were adopted by parliament, as the Statute of Workers Rights, which is today the basic law in Italy on this question.

For the CGIL, the independence of the trade unions is a fundamental aspect of a pluralistic society, without which real democracy, and hence socialism itself, is unobtainable. The sad experience of the countries of Eastern Europe, the countries of 'real socialism', whose regimes have collapsed like a pack of cards, and whose trade unions were massive bureaucracies totally subservient to the ruling political parties, should be a lesson to us all. ☆