

## 2 German Left or Italian Left?

(From *Réveil Communiste* to *L'Ouvrier Communiste*)

The Italian Communist Left did not remain indifferent to the existence of other lefts in the International during the 1920's. Considering itself an integral part of the International, it acquainted itself with the theses defended by the KAPD and its theoreticians Gorter and Pannekoek. In *Il Soviet*, it published the fundamental texts of the current of the 'German Left'. It was natural that there should be a certain convergence between the two currents in the face of the Comintern's attacks on 'extremism', defined by Lenin as an 'infantile disorder'. On the question of abstentionism, on the rejection of the United Front with social democracy (a tactic adopted at the Comintern's 3rd Congress), in their common rejection of a fusion with the German 'Independents' and the Italian 'maximalists', there was a clear identity of views.

However, this 'identity' remained highly relative, and was of short duration. After the Comintern's 2nd Congress (in 1920), Bordiga - assured of the International's support for the formation of a communist party through a split with the reformists and the maximalists, and firmly committed to the new world party of the revolution - put to one side his opposition on the parliamentary question. He put forward the idea that the divergence with the theses defended by Lenin and Bukharin on participation in elections was a matter of tactics, not of principles.

For Bordiga, who despite everything remained an abstentionist, the most urgent question was the constitution of a real communist party attached to the International. During the Italian elections of 1921, the new party applied the policy of the Comintern and put forward its candidates:

*For clear reasons of international discipline in tactics, the CP must and will participate in the elections. As abstentionists, we must also give an example of discipline, without evasions or hesitations. The Communist Party has therefore no reason to discuss whether it must participate in elections. It must participate.*

In fact, the Italian Left was liquidating the abstentionism which gave birth to it in 1918: “As a Marxist, I am first of all a centralist, and only then an abstentionist”. (Bordiga, *Il Comunista*, 14 April 1921).

A few years later, Bordiga would be one of the most ardent partisans of the electoral ‘tactic’, even criticising the Italian workers’ growing tendency to desert the parliamentary terrain:

*Every good communist has but one duty: to combat the tendency towards abstention by many workers, an erroneous conclusion drawn from their hostility to fascism. By acting this way, we will make excellent propaganda and contribute to the formation of a resolutely revolutionary consciousness which will serve us well when the moment comes - imposed by the facts and not by our will alone - to boycott the edifice of the bourgeois parliament in order to destroy it completely.*

Thus, the Italian Left distanced itself from the international opposition to parliamentarism which was appearing in the KAPD, the Dutch KAP, in Bulgaria, in England around Sylvia Pankhurst, in Belgium in Van Overstraeten’s PCB, in Austria and in Poland. For the Italian Left there could be no question of forming an opposition, and still less a fraction in the International, around this question. This is why it kept away from the ‘Amsterdam Bureau’ founded in 1920 for Western Europe, and particularly influenced by the theses of the KAPD and Sylvia Pankhurst. The same applied to the ‘Vienna Bureau’ grouped around the review *Kommunismus* and influenced by Lukacs (1).

## **Bordiga and KAPD before 1926**

Bordiga 's Fraction was extremely distrustful and reserved towards the German Left from 1920 onwards. It saw in the KAPD's abstentionism a syndicalist, anarchist deviation identical to that of the Spanish CNT and the American IWW:

*We share the opinion of the best marxist comrades of the KPD who judge that this is a hybrid petty bourgeois tendency, like all the syndicalist tendencies, whose appearance is a result of the loss of revolutionary energy by the German proletariat after the red week in Berlin and the Munich days. The result is an electoral abstentionism of a syndicalist type, ie, denying the usefulness of the political action of the proletariat and the struggle of the party, which by inclination and habit are confused with electoral activities. (Il Soviet, no. 11, 11 April 1920, 'The German Communist Party').*

Because of the struggle with *L'Ordine Nuovo* in Turin, which advocated the formation of factory councils and put the party in second place, Bordiga was led to assimilate the KAPD with the Gramsci group. In fact the German Left did call for the formation of factory councils (*Betriebsräte*) and 'Unionen' (AAUD), which may have made it seem that it was concentrating its work on the economic terrain alone. But in contrast to Gramsci, it vigorously fought against the trade unions which it denounced as counter-revolutionary, calling for their destruction in order to form workers' councils. Because of this, it may have seemed that it underestimated or even denied the necessity for a political party in favour of 'the idea of the councils'. But this was not at all the case; the KAPD defined itself as a centralised and disciplined party:

*The proletariat needs a highly formed party-nucleus. Each communist must individually be an irreproachable communist - that is our aim - and must be able to be a leader on the spot.... What compels him to act are the decisions that the communists have taken. And here the strictest discipline reigns. Here nothing can be changed, or he will be sanctioned or excluded (Intervention by Jan Appel (Hempel) at the 3rd Congress of the Comintern, Moscow, 1921).*

What really differentiated the two lefts was that one advocated the dictatorship of the party and the other the dictatorship of the councils. One wanted to lead the proletarian masses to victory through the development of the party, the other worked for the masses to lead themselves, by freeing themselves from any 'domination by chiefs'. Against the Bolshevik-type party which Bordiga wanted to create in Italy, the KAPD put forward the idea of a party which "is not a party in the traditional sense of the term. It is not a party of chiefs. Its main work consists in supporting, as far as its strength allows, the German proletariat on the road which leads to its liberation from all domination by chiefs" (Declaration of the founding Congress of the KAPD, 4/5 April 1920, Berlin).

This is why Bordiga, who followed the situation in Germany and the evolution of the KAPD very closely, could only be distrustful, after the Heidelberg split in 1919, towards a party which seemed to be working for its own disappearance in the heat of the revolution itself:

*The political party, says the opposition, has no preponderant importance in the revolutionary struggle. This must develop on the economic terrain without centralised leadership. This tendency rejects the importance of political action and party action in general, in other words it negates the political party as a central instrument of the revolutionary struggle and of the dictatorship of the proletariat.* (Bordiga, 'The tendencies inside the 3rd International', *Il Soviet* no. 15, 23 May 1920).

Thus, the Italian Left did not see the difference between the KAPD and the anarchists and syndicalists of the IWW variety. It saw the KAPD's theory as "a libertarian critique, leading to the usual horror of 'chiefs'". Poorly informed, it believed that the 'National Bolshevism' line of Wolffheim and Laufenberg was contained in embryo in the KAPD's conception and was the "result of a petty bourgeois degeneration from marxism" (*Il Soviet* no 15). It confused the KAPD with the AAUD-Einheit of Otto Rühle, for which "the revolution is not a party question" and which denied that there could be any such thing as a proletarian party — any party could only be bourgeois and an enemy of the revolution.

Nevertheless, Bordiga made contact with the KAPD and corrected his initial judgement, which had been based essentially on the arguments of the KPD which had bureaucratically excluded the left:

*The party centre was both for entering into the unions and participating in elections. The conference convoked in July in Heidelberg approved the Centre's programme. The opposition again questioned the conference's validity and demanded that another be called, after a broad discussion on the two questions in the party organisations.*

*The Centre on the contrary, fixed the date of the second Congress in October 1919 according to a strange criterion : the representatives who, on the two questions of parliamentarism and the unions, did not have a mandate in conformity with its directives, would be excluded from it.*

*Thus only those who had the same opinion as the Centre could come to the Congress, in particular a number of party officials, and the opposition was declared excluded from the organisation. The comrades of the KAPD have told me, quite rightly, that they had no intention of forming a new party, but that they were excluded by an incredible procedure, whereas if the Congress had been convoked in a regular manner, they would have had a majority.*

*In April 1920, seeing that all efforts to gain satisfaction were useless, they held the constitutive congress of the KAPD.*

Furthermore, Bordiga did not fail to note the proletarian character of the new organisation, and its combativity which he contrasted with the passivity of the KPD during the Kapp putsch:

*The new organisation is to a large extent more combative and revolutionary and has developed a broader activity amongst the masses; its partisans are the workers who tolerate neither the lack of intransigence which the old party has sometimes shown, nor its conversion to parliamentarism, which took it closer to the Independents, who are taking advantage of its tactic to gain credence in front of the proletariat and the International. (Bordiga, 'The situation in Germany and the communist movement', *Il Soviet* no. 18, 11 July 1920).*

While maintaining his reservations about the positions of the KAPD, Bordiga hoped that the

Comintern could resolve the crisis by reintegrating the KAPD into the KPD. For him, the main danger, as in Italy with Serrati, was represented by the Independents (USPD); and he clearly saw the similarity of the position of the International, which in Germany as in Italy was pushing for the integration of these currents into itself, thus threatening the left by creating a mass party amalgamating communists with 'centrists'.

His hopes were not realised in either case. The KPD fused with the left wing of the USPD; the PCI had to accept Serrati's 'terzini'. The 3rd International, after its 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress in 1921, excluded the KAPD, which it had originally accepted in its ranks as a sympathising party.

Contacts between the PCI and the KAPD came to an end. Until the end of his life Bordiga maintained an essentially hostile ("Leninist") attitude to the KAPD; he always considered it and its Dutch descendants to be 'anarchist'. Even in opposition within the Comintern, there could be no question of a convergence of views with the KAPD.

The PCI aimed to be the best party of the International, the most 'Leninist' on the question of the party against Zinoviev's 'tactical' opportunism. In order to avoid giving any substance to the accusation of 'ultra-leftism', but above all for more profound reasons, the 'Bordigist' leadership carefully distinguished itself from the German Left right up until its own elimination in 1926. While rejecting the United Front, Bolshevisation, the policies of the Russian state, it fundamentally accepted the theses of the 2nd Congress of the Comintern.

After the World Congress of 1921, Bordiga continued his attacks against the KAPD current on the union question. Although the latter wasn't 'trade unionist', since it called for the destruction of the old trade unions and the formation of 'Unionen' on the political basis of recognising the dictatorship of the

proletariat, Bordiga still denounced its 'syndicalist' standpoint:

*The trade union, even when it is corrupted, is still a workers' centre. Leaving the social democratic union corresponds to the conception of certain syndicalists who want to create organs of revolutionary struggle which are of a union and not a political character.* (Bordiga, 'Sulla questione del parlamentarismo', *Rassegna Comunista*, 15 August 1921).

Finally, the foundation of Gorter's KAI in 1922 marked the definitive impossibility even of any informal contact between the two lefts. By defining Russia as the principal enemy of the world proletariat, by characterising the October Revolution as bourgeois, the ideological break was complete. (Cf. *Proletarier*, Sondernummer, 1922, 'Die Thesen des I. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Arbeiter-Internationale').

### **Pappalardi and the Italian 'Bordigists'**

Despite this gulf, elements from the PCI left were to make individual contacts with the German Left. An initiator of this was Michelangelo Pappalardi (entered in the police records as Pappalardo). Born in 1896, from the beginning he adhered to the Abstentionist Fraction. In 1922 he emigrated to Austria; in 1923, he militated in Germany where he represented the PCI to the KPD. During this time he had long discussions with the KAPD. On 10 November 1923, he resigned from the PCI, a resignation accepted by the Executive Committee on 30 November in a letter sent by Tasca (Valle). Arriving in France, he settled in Lyon, from where he corresponded with Bordiga, inviting him to constitute a left fraction in the PCI and the International. With a few Italian immigrant workers, he presented the 'Lyon Theses' translated into French to the 5th Congress of the PCF at Lille (20/26 June 1926), under the heading 'Platform of the Left, draft theses presented by a group of 'leftists' (Bordigists) to the 5th Congress of the French Communist Party'. According to a former member of *Réveil Communiste* (Piero Corradi), Bordiga supervised the translation.

The members of the Italian Left were in fact in close contact with the French communist movement from the beginning. Bordiga represented the International at the Marseilles Congress in 1921. Damen, threatened with imprisonment after an armed clash with fascist squads, was sent as an official representative of the PCI in France, to preside over the organisation of groups of Italian communist émigrés, in order to co-ordinate political activity. He was nominated director of the weekly edition of *L'Humanité* in Italian until his clandestine return to Italy in 1924. 'Bordigist' ideas were therefore not unknown within the PCF. The overwhelming majority of Italian émigrés, even in 1926, held to the positions of the old left leadership; in some sections (Paris, Lyon, Marseilles), they were in the majority. This alarmed the new Italian leadership around Tasca, Togliatti, exiled to France after the party's total suppression by the Mussolini government in 1926, which made it impossible for the party to carry out its activity in Italy. His new leadership made contact with the French party in order to get the 'Bordigists' expelled or to force them to resign.

A certain number of them remained in the PCF and tried to defend Bordiga's positions within it for as long as possible. They were in close contact with the autonomous Italian communist group formed by expelled comrades in several French towns, as well as in Switzerland, Belgium and Luxemburg. Through the intermediary of their platform, they tried until around 1929 to remain in contact with the French communists and influence them ideologically within the 'cells'. This was done at the price of enormous difficulties, as can be seen from the preface to Bordiga's theses:

*Not being able to express ourselves freely in the official press of the party, we have decided to make our thoughts known of French communists through our own means* (signed : a group of members of the PCF).

Chased out of the International, the Italian Left had no desire to isolate itself. Frustrated in its hopes of forming an international fraction, it still sought to carry on political work in the communist movement,



in all the countries in which exile had compelled it to reside. It did not consider itself to be 'Italian', except for the fact that it was born in Italy, but as international. Its natural vocation was international work, everywhere it existed; its only 'homeland' was the International linking workers in all countries for a single ideal, a single goal: their emancipation in world communism.

The questions being posed in the French Communist Party could not therefore be reserved' only for workers of French nationality, any more than the latter could remain ignorant of the rich political experience of the Italian proletariat after the war, especially on the questions of fascism and of the party. The platform of the left added to the 'Lyon Theses' a whole chapter on 'French questions', dealing with the perspectives for French capitalism and the political orientation of the PCF

This chapter defined the economic situation as "a situation of crisis, which manifests itself through inflation and difficulties of the state budget". It said that "this crisis is not yet a crisis of production and industry in general, but it won't fail to become one before long". It underlined the consequent sharpening of social tensions, with "the opening up of the period of unemployment which will further aggravate the situation of the working class". Considering the bourgeoisie's policies in this context, it foresaw a change of orientation on the basis of the Italian experience: "It is very possible that, as the economic crisis grows, and the bosses' offensive develops, there will be a complete change of programme in the political domain. This phase of rightist policies could have analogies with Italian fascism, and certainly the appreciation of the Italian experience is very useful for the analysis of the present French situation".

However, the Italian Bordigists' did not envisage the immediate advent of fascism, because "there is a fundamental condition missing, i.e. a great revolutionary threat which gives the bourgeois class the impression of being at the edge of the abyss". Tempered by the Italian experience, where fascism engendered antifascism on the basis of the United Front, the Italian Left rejected in advance any

possibility of an antifascist alliance:

*What is essential is to understand that the fascist plan is in the first place a plan against the proletariat and the socialist revolution, and that it is thus up to the workers to halt or repulse its attacks. It is quite wrong to see fascism as a crusade against bourgeois democracy, the parliamentary state, the petty bourgeois strata and their political men and parties holding the reins of power... According to this idea, the proletariat can only sound the alarm, take the 'initiative' (...) in this antifascist struggle, fighting alongside others to defend the advantages of a 'left' government, considering the downfall of fascism in France to be a glorious goal...".*

In this period, which the 'Bordigists' saw as being unstable and uncertain, "the French working class because of its numerical importance and its historic traditions is the central element of the present situation and the social struggle". This necessary required the development of revolutionary tendencies within the PCF. On this point, the author of 'French questions' was highly pessimistic: "The party was constituted at Tours on too broad a basis.. As it is today, the PCF leaves much to be desired in its marxist ideological preparation, in its internal organisation, in its policies, in the formation of a leading centre capable of interpreting situations and their requirements". It was above all the internal regime that the Italian Left was criticising here - the disastrous results of its inadequacies had been to fuel "the French workers' traditional distrust for political action and parties".

In order to remedy this situation, the Left advocated a resolute policy of opposition to the Comintern's theses on 'the workers' and peasants' government', the 'united front', the 'antifascist struggle'. It proposed the development of a solid network of communist fractions in the unions, while working for trade union unity and a determined intervention in economic struggles, which were the basis for the political struggle against all bourgeois parties, right and left, against the state and not "for the dissolution of the fascist leagues by the state".

Where was the PCF going? Here the text, drawn up by Bordiga, did not come up with any definite conclusion. It remarked simply that 'Bolshevisation' had led to a real stagnation. Bordiga did not see this situation as the consequence of a right-wing danger; the exclusion of the Souvarine wing had served as a "phantom to cover up the blows directed against the international left". Faced with "opportunism and liquidationism in the French party", Bordiga did not see a left wing. He rejected the syndicalist theses of *Révolution Proletarienne* as "frankly erroneous and dangerous".

Bordiga did not hide "the difficulties of such a situation". He thought that it was above all the communist militants who could make improvements in the party's internal regime.

Clearly, the Italian Left did not modify its positions in 1926, despite its defeat at the Lyon Congress. It thought that the CPs were a privileged arena for its intervention. They were not seen as irrecoverable for the communist movement. The Bordigists thus excluded any possibility of founding a new party and remained in the context of the International. Their attitude was very different from that of the German Left which had proclaimed the bankruptcy of the Communist International and the necessity to form new communist parties.

Very quickly, with the defeat of the revolution in China as a result of Stalin's and Bukharin's policies towards the Kuomintang, a part of the Italian Left in exile, mainly in France, was to modify its position and proclaim the impossibility of redressing the Comintern, and rapidly moved towards the positions of the KAPD, via its contacts with Korsch.

### ***Réveil Communiste* 1927-29**

Under the influence of Pappalardi, an important minority was to detach itself from the Italian 'Bordigist' group influenced by Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi). The latter, fleeing from Milan, arrived in

Paris, where he lost no time opposing Pappalardi's partisans. The split was consummated in July 1927. In November of that year appeared the first issue of *Réveil Communiste* (2), "internal bulletin of the groups of the communist vanguard", whose centre was at Lyon. It defined itself as a "group of intransigent communists".

The aims of *Réveil* were not clear. It took no position on the formation either of new parties or new International. It sought "the unity of the lefts on the international terrain". This position, close to that of Korsch, was tempered by great caution: "no new international organisation until the process of developing a left one on the international terrain has been completed". In fact, this group saw no possibility of internal or external opposition towards a Comintern which they proclaimed still-born in 1919:

*The process of the germination of a new International, which had been attempted to push to a solution at Zimmerwald, even before the great Russian revolution, reached a premature conclusion in 1919 when, following this great historical movement which was initially proletarian, there was an effort to force the history of the revolutionary movement.*

*Réveil* supported the position of Rosa Luxemburg who was against the foundation of the Comintern and regretted the attitude of the delegate Eberlein who didn't vote against its foundation. According to *Réveil* this resulted in a "format unity" and not a "real" one. It was "to become fatal to the development of a real world communist party, and to suppress any possibly of regeneration in the Comintern".

*Réveil* argued that the cause of this was the excessive role of Russia in the International. While still qualifying the Russian revolution as "grandiose", especially during 'war communism', it saw the beginning of its decline in the NEP in 1921. It criticised the idealisation of the NEP by the 'Perronnists', who still supported Lenin's position at that point. The NEP was "a first ideological manifestation of a class or several social strata which were not the working class". What were these

classes? Here Pappalardi's group gave no reply. It asserted that in 1927, the degeneration of the Russian state was a fait accompli and that with "the bureaucratisation of the state machine" the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer existed:

*The bureaucratisation of the state machine, the total distancing of this state from the working class, the non-proletarian ideological manifestations in the apparatus itself denote that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia is no longer a reality in the country of the greatest revolution of the working class.*

Behind the question of 'degeneration' there lay in fact the problem of the state "which did not find a complete and definitive solution in the Russian revolution". Later on we will see that this question was one of the main subjects of theoretical discussion in the Italian Left in the 1930s.

While proclaiming "no return to the past, to positions that have already been liquidated", the 'groups of the communist vanguard' were still, in issue no. 2 of January 1928, attached to the tradition of Bordiga. They even described themselves as the most faithful continuators of "the great chief of Italian communism", as against the "so-called Bordigists or Perronnists who detached themselves from our group in July 1927".

They believed this Bordigist 'purity' meant the rejection of the "theoretical terrain of Leninism, i.e. of neo-Leninism". This was an illusion on *Réveil's* part, since Bordiga always declared himself *to* be the most faithful disciple of Lenin, even in the opposition within the Comintern.

This is why *Réveil* was not long in criticising Bordiga himself, reproaching him for having wanted to remain in the Comintern at any cost, "in order not to leave the terrain of the masses", and thereby remaining on the terrain of the "tactical use of compromise" advocated by Lenin. It reproached him for

his distrust in fractional groupings and for not having formed a fraction:

*“Two years ago (...) we proposed to comrade Bordiga the necessity to form an open fraction, because we said that Bolshevisation had already accomplished its work of social-democratising the Komintern, and we didn’t see any possibility of organising, on the terrain of discipline, a serious resistance among the Comintern rank and file.”*

*Réveil* ‘s attitude of the left opposition around Trotsky, was much clearer, seeing it as the continuator of ‘Leninism’ and the unconditional defender of the Russian ‘workers’ state’:

*“We must not submit to this ideological imposition of Trotsky. We do not contest the past revolutionary value of this comrade (...) even against him and his followers (...) we insist that it is an opportunist tactic to pass off as a workers’ democracy this tragic caricature of the proletarian dictatorship by the government of the Stalinists.”*

Rejecting the “Trotskyist heritage” and criticising “comrade Bordiga”, would the “groups of the communist vanguard” converge towards Korsch, who had been publishing *Kommunistische Politik* since March 1926? Two texts signed by Korsch were to be published in *Réveil Communiste*: ‘Ten years of class struggle in Soviet Russia’ (R.C. no. 1), and ‘The Marxist Left in Germany’ (R.C. no. 4). This did not however result in a community of thought between the two groups: “It goes without saying that this fact implies neither our organic fusion with Korsch’s group, nor the subordination of our clearly left-wing line to the Korschist directives for ideology and action, which tend towards a dangerous eclecticism”. *Réveil* even addressed a warning of the German group: “This eclecticism could divert our German comrades away from the real revolutionary one and take them back to obsolete maximalism”.

Pappalardi, who wrote a critical article on ‘Korschism’, reproached *Kommunistische Politik* for calling into question the proletarian character of the Russian revolution. He argued that “the bourgeois counter-revolution in the new Russia began at the same time as the proletarian revolution”, but that to deny the

proletarian revolution was also to deny that there was a counter-revolution in Russia, because “it’s obvious that if you deny the proletarian character of the October revolution, you also deny its dependence on the world crisis of capitalism”.

But above all, *Réveil* criticised Korsch for being an intellectual and for having compromised with Maslow and Fischer in 1926, for having led the proletarian elements who followed him into the void, with the rapid disappearance of his group and the entry of a part of it into the ‘Leninbund’ and social democracy. The last issue of *Réveil* (February 1929) thus invited Korsch of return of his “beloved studies”.

In fact, because of its ouvrierism and its distrust of political confrontation, the *Réveil* group increasingly isolated itself from the revolutionary milieu, at a time when the ‘Perronnists’ had formed the Left Fraction of the PCI (see below) and opposition groups were developing all over France. “We have not feared and do not fear today provisional isolation from the proletarian mass”, it asserted. While demarcating itself from sectarianism, the organ of the ‘groups of the communist vanguard’ defined itself as a “sect”.

Ideologically, these groups were absolutely isolated. They were the only ones communist groups in France who called for the workers of leave the Comintern and not to work inside or outside it for the triumph of a left fraction (“Out of the Moscow International!”).

At this time they were also the only ones who did not call for the ‘defence of the USSR’, which they defined as “the formula for the Union Sacrée in Russia”. At the end of 1928, *Réveil* had practically the same position as the KAPD on this question:

*...the proletarian dictatorship, instead of dying in the Marxist sense, has been gradually defeated in a monstrous*

*apparatus, where a caste Has grown up with the ideology of the new bourgeoisie. And this without Thermidor, without events reproducing the historic past”.*

*Prometeo*, in its issue no. 12, strongly criticised this position of *Réveil*. It replied that the term “caste” was not marxist and underlined the contradictions of a theory which affirmed both that the Russian government “is not a pure capitalist government” and that it is “a bourgeois government”. While defending the proletarian nature of the Russian state “on the basis of socialisation”, *Prometeo* opened the door to discussion, to which it invited the militants of *Réveil* (3).

*Prometeo*'s open attitude, as well as its loyalty to the Bordigist heritage on the Russian question, and to the theses of Lenin, were to lead to the departure from *Réveil* of a few elements, such as Piero Corradi, who went back of the Fraction of the Italian Left. These ones, though formed by Pappalardi, saw themselves above all as ‘Leninists’ and saw no reason to militate in a group which refused to form a Fraction. The Pantin Congress of February 1928, where the Left Fraction of the PCI was proclaimed, removed their hesitations, as Piero Corradi put it 50 years later. From new on, ideologically and organisationally, the only ‘Italian Communist Left’ was the one grouped around *Prometeo*.

But Pappalardi's tendency did not disappear after this split. It even had a new influx of elements like André Prudhommeaux, who ran a bookshop at 67, Rue de Belleville; these elements gave the group a less ‘Italian’ colouring, but they were more ambiguous vis-à-vis anarchism.

In August 1929 the first issue of *L'Ouvrier Communiste* appeared, defining itself as the organ of the “communist workers’ groups” and whose centre was at Prudhommeaux's bookshop in Paris (4).

**he infl en e of the KAPD: *L'Ouvrier Communiste* 1929 1**



The term “communist workers” was an explicit reference of the KAPD. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* no longer saw itself as part of the Italian Left, which it saw as an inferior tradition of that of the German Left:

*... we have participated in a revolutionary experience less complete than that of our German comrades (...) Anchored in the Bordigist tradition, it has taken us much effort to chase from our thinking the system of prejudices which still bid this reality from us, a reality drawn directly out of the struggle of our German comrades (L'Ouvrier Communiste no. 2-3, October 1929, 'Should the unions be conquered or destroyed?').*

Whereas in its issue number 2 (January 1928) *Réveil* was still criticising “elements like Pannekoek in Holland and Pankhurst in England” for founding a 4th International, “an absurd melange of the most disparate elements”, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* made an act of contrition and thenceforward considered itself as “a belated branch of the real marxist left, the one whose representatives in 1919 and 1920 were Pankhurst in England, and in Holland the Tribunist Gorter and Pannekoek” (O.C. no. 1).

The Pappalardi group therefore published in serial form in its paper Gorter's pamphlet, *Reply to Lenin*, which condensed the positions of the German Left. This publication emphasised the ‘anti-Leninist’ orientation of the “communist workers’ groups”:

*Gorter was right and Lenin wrong. The Leninist line has led of the worst defeats, the constitution of mass parties has formed a new opportunist and counter-revolutionary rampart in the camp of the proletariat. (O.C. no. 1).*

Contacts were made with the Dutch and German comrades of the ‘Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten’ (GIK), as well as with the AAU and the KAPD. These contacts did not reach the point of fusion into the same organisation - these groups remained very cautious about the very principle of this, and preferred to make their respective contributions in the ‘communist workers’ press. This ‘KAPDist’, ‘anti-Leninist’ tendency did not however remain isolated internationally: groups defending

the same programmatic positions were constituted around 1930 in Austria and Denmark (*Mod strömen*). But the basis of all this remained fragile: numerically weak, isolated from a working class milieu dominated by social democratic and stalinist ideology, they were neither homogeneous politically nor forged into a single international organisation community - something which seemed to them premature or useless, since they had got their fingers burned by the still-birth of the KAI in 1922.

Although isolated in France and numerically weak (15-20 militants), the 'communist workers' organisation did make the positions of the German Left better known, since they had always been tarred with the traditional clichés about 'infantilism' and 'extremism'.

The participation of Miasnikov and the 'Russian Workers' group' in *L'Ouvrier Communiste* was to confirm the latter's 'anti-Leninist' line. An old Bolshevik militant (5), Miasnikov found himself in opposition to Lenin from 1921 onwards, concerning the NEP and 'workers democracy' in the Russian Communist Party and the soviets. He called for the broadest freedom of criticism and organisation within them. He criticised the tactic of the United Front as a "tactic of collaboration with the declared enemies of the working class, who express the revolutionary movement of the proletariat with arms in their hands", and as being "in overt contradiction with the experience of the Russian revolution". He also rejected any banning of strikes in Russia, demanding that the proletariat "should really participate in the management of the economy" through the intermediary of the unions and factory committees. Considering Russia and the Russian Communist Party to be still proletarian, the Miasnikov group formed itself into a 'workers' group' of the Bolshevik Party "on the basis of the programme and statutes of the RCP, in order to exert a decisive pressure on the leading group of the party itself". (6)

Expelled from the party in 1922, Miasnikov had the *Manifesto* of his group translated into German by the KAPD, who added critical comments on the unions and the proletarian character of the RCP. Arrested in 1923, tortured, he was able to escape to Armenia in 1928, reaching Persia and Turkey. After

an intensive campaign, Korsch and *L'Ouvrier Communiste* succeeded in getting Miasnikov allowed entrance into France, at the beginning of 1930. At this point, he was more or less on the positions of the KAPD, and rejected Trotsky's efforts to form an opposition as doomed to dislocate or of fall into the hands of the bourgeoisie (7).

The experience of this Russian Left, non-Leninist and opposed to Trotsky, critical of the Russian experience, was thus to lead *L'Ouvrier Communiste* to defend vigorously the theses of the German Left, which had been the first to criticise the politics of the RCP and the Comintern. On five points:

- **the parliamentary question** Unlike Bordiga who saw antiparlamentarism as a question of 'tactics', O.C. saw it as a matter of principle and advocated the boycotting of parliament. Nevertheless, like the KAPD, it demarcated itself from syndicalist antiparlamentarism "which has nothing to do with the radical tendencies of marxist and communist anti-parliamentarism".
- **the national question.** On this point, and even more clearly than the Dutch Left which remained indecisive, it was affirmed that it was not possible of support national movements which "can only serve as a pretext for the development of international conflicts (...) and are even provoked artificially in order to unleash a war". Taking up the theses of Rosa Luxemburg, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* rejected the position of Lenin for whom "the proletariat could even be described as the champion of national defence, because it is the only class that fights of the end, notably against any national oppression". In fact, the article 'Imperialism and the national question' in O.C.nos. 2-3 insisted that: "The proletariat develops its movement, makes its revolution as a class not as a nation. Immediately after the victory of the proletariat in several nations, frontiers can only disappear".

There could be no progressive "national bourgeoisie" in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, because the bourgeoisie in these zones "is in its essence and its structure an artificial creation of

imperialism” (O.C. no. 9-10, May 1930). This is why, even tactically, there could be no question of defending “the right of peoples to self-determination”, as in 1917 - a slogan by which the national bourgeoisie went into hiding: “This disastrous experience shows that when the proletariat goes to the defence of its ‘country’, of its ‘oppressed nation’, there is only one result - strengthening its own bourgeoisie”. *L’Ouvrier Communiste* therefore rejected the Trotskyist slogan of the United States of Europe as being part of the same nationalist line: “Marxist communists do not want to build the United States of Europe or of the world; their goal is the universal republic of workers’ councils” (O.C. no. 2-3, op. cit.).

- **he nion estion** Here the “communist workers’ groups” took up the position of the KAPD, i.e. the rejection of any activity in the unions to ‘reconquer’ them and any attempt to found new union organs, even ‘revolutionary’ ones: “The unions cannot be conquered for the revolution, revolutionary unions cannot be built”. (O.C. no. 1).

Basing itself on the German experience, where the unions stood alongside Noske against the revolution, Pappalardi’s group called for their destruction. This meant the destruction not simply of particular unions, but of the union form itself, which had been made obsolete by the “modifications which the historic process had brought to the forms of the class struggle” (O.C. no. 1). The struggle couldn’t go through the unions because this process “had turned these former class organs into docile weapons in the hands of capitalism”.

Does this mean that O.C. rejected any intervention in the class struggle? No, because “the participation in all partial struggles of the proletariat is undoubtedly necessary”. The existence of permanent organs of struggle had become impossible: “the constitution of permanent organs based on inferior forms of class consciousness and struggle no longer has any *raison d’être* at a time when the revolution can arise from one moment to the next” (O.C. no. 4-5, ‘Faut-il conquérir les syndicats ou les détruire?’). In fact

this was a very 'spontaneist' vision because it saw the revolution as a permanent possibility. The struggle would find its spontaneous organs in 'factory committees', which could not be permanent. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* criticised the AAU in Germany who were transforming these factory committees into "forms replacing the classical unions". For O.C. the economic struggle could only be connected to the struggle for power. The form of proletarian power was the workers' councils.

• **Part and on ils** Having left 'Bordigism', the militants of the 'communist workers' left were more and more to see the party question as secondary, neglecting to study the concrete conditions for its emergence:

*... we are not rushing to form a new party, to enlarge our organisational base (...) our goal is to form a really revolutionary party, and to attain this goal we are ready to spend a long time as a sect.* (O.C. no. 1, August 1929, "Pour sortir du marais").

In reaction to Bordiga who asserted that consciousness could only exist in the party, and that the party must lead the class in order to establish a dictatorship of the Communist party after the seizure of power, O.C. put forward a 'Luxemburgist' vision:

*The role of the party is not one of eternal supremacy, it is a role of education, of complete the political consciousness of the working class.* (*L'Ouvrier Communiste* no. 1, "Récents progrès de la dialectique matérialiste chez Trotsky et ses épigones").

Here it must be noted that in fact this educationist role given to the party reduced its function of that of a small study circle, rather than an organ of struggle developing the workers' political consciousness. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* thought that this consciousness was spontaneous: the party was simply juxtaposed to it.

In fact, a whole 'councilist' conception was being developed here, putting the councils in place of the party. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* avoided the term "party", preferring that of proletarian elites" whose role "will be more and more absorbed by the masses as we move towards victory". (O.C. no. 7-8, "Sur le rôle des élites prolétariennes dans la révolution de classe").

- **ssia and the state** Recognising that the Russian revolution had been proletarian, O.C., like *Réveil*, saw the origin of the counter-revolution in the NEP and the crushing of Kronstadt in 1921:

*The basis of the present degeneration goes back to the NEP, to the compromise between the proletarian and the bourgeois elements of the Russian revolution, which created a gulf between the Russian revolution and the revolution in the West, which offered an economic base for the embourgeoisement of the proletarian apparatus, of functionaries, employees, etc.*

The nature of the proletarian state was thus turned into its opposite. Through state capitalism, the bureaucracy, which O.C. still call a "caste", was transformed into a bourgeois class:

*There is an objective basis for this caste becoming a class. This objective basis is state capitalism. ...and its relations with the free market created by the NEP. (L'Ouvrier Communiste no. 1).*

In fact there were two closely connected factors which determined this process: the external factor (the absence of revolution in the west, leaving Russia isolated) and the internal factor (state capitalism), both factors acting together to open up the counter-revolution. In its analysis, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* did not separate the two factors. But it saw the second as more pernicious, because the Bolshevik party remained at the head of the state and did not put itself alongside the Kronstadt mutineers:

*In 1921, there were only two choices for the Russian Communists: either a desperate and heroic struggle against the internal and external forces of reaction and 'very probably' defeat and death in the struggle, or a compromise with the*

*bourgeois forces, the abandonment of revolutionary positions without any resistance, the gentle absorption of communist forces into the new bourgeois relations of production introduced by the NEP.*

*L'Ouvrier Communiste* drew two fundamental lessons from the Russian experience:

*The proletarian dictatorship... can neither develop socialism nor preserve itself, if it does not develop the proletarian revolution on the international terrain. This is particularly true for an industrially underdeveloped country. The dictatorship of the proletariat is "the dictatorship of the councils and not the dictatorship of the party"; it is "the anti-state organisation of the conscious proletariat.* (O.C. no. 12, October 1930, in Italian).

Further on we will see that all these positions were to be discussed in the Fraction of the Italian Left, often leading to the same conclusions. But there was a fundamental distinction between these two branches of the Italian Left: one envisaged its work in the long term, in the framework of an organisation committed to intervention in the class struggle; it approached its theoretical work within this framework, and in a systematic manner. The other did not grasp the importance of developing a political organisation, which it saw as a secondary task, considering that the consciousness of the proletariat could develop at any time in a revolution that was possible at any moment. It developed its theoretical positions in less depth, and more through intuition, thanks above all of the German Communist Left. The absence of the revolution which it had expected of emerge out of the crisis of 1929, the growing influence of anarchistic positions developed by Prudhommeaux and his wife, were to lead to the group's dislocation around the end of 1931. Prudhommeaux and his wife had resigned before this: *L'Ouvrier Communiste* welcomed this in an Italian article as the elimination of the "intellectual petty bourgeoisie", looking for privileges and fame, seeking of "make their name on the back of the working class". (O.C. no. 13, January 1931, "Prudhommeaux et sa femme ont f... le camp, tant mieux").

This split, which wasn't really a split, had grave financial repercussions on the paper. The

Prudhornmeaux financed this one and owned the bookshop which was the organisation's centre. The publication soon had to stop appearing. *Spartacus*, under the wing of the two who had resigned and of Dautry, succeeded it in the same year. The Pappalardi group fell apart; Pappalardi became ill and had to abandon all political activity until his death in Buenos Aires in 1940. *Spartacus*, then *Correspondance Internationale Ouvrière* in 1932, only had an ephemeral existence. They were more the publications of a couple, with the addition of Dautry, interested in 'councilist' positions, and soon after that, libertarian ones, than the political organ of a real organisation (8).

In fact, the death of *L'Ouvrier Communiste* was not the product of contingent factors, but political ones. Although it went a long way and with considerable audacity along the path of questioning the schemes of the past, it did not develop a political and organisational coherence. It was more a federation of study groups than a real political organisation with a programme and a view of the present in order to prepare the future. Although it supported the need for a party, it moved towards the Italian anarchists (9) of *Lotta Anarchica*, calling for an anarchism "renewed from top of bottom, transcending itself and its traditional antagonisms". (O.C. no. 11, September 1930). Through its "workerism", it isolated itself from the 'political milieu', even though it was already isolated from the workers' milieu. The isolation of the German Communist Left, its crisis at the end of the 1920s, its weaknesses on the organisational level, the difficulties in maintaining international contacts did not allow it to hold on for very long (10).

This was very different from the history of the Fraction of the Italian Left, which went through many crises but which was guided by coherence even in its errors and stutterings, remaining attached to valid lessons of the Italian Left in the 1920s.

## NOTES



(1) For the history of the KAPD: Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus (1918-1921)*, 1969, Maisenheim am Glan; Fritz Kool *Die Linke gegen die Parteiberrschaft*, 1970, Freiburg; Didier Autier et Jean Barrot (Gilles Dauvé), *La Gauche communiste en Allemagne*, Payot, Paris, 1976.

(2) It is through lack of information that Jean Rabaut (*Tout est possible*, Denoël, Paris, 1974, p. 77-80) claims: 1) that Prudhommeaux-Dautry were the promoters of *Réveil communiste*; 2) that the latter first appeared in February 1929, whereas this was in fact its last issue (no. 5).

(3) "Risposta al 'Risveglio'".

(4) The report of the Italian police (13/12/1931) notes in the "workerist fraction...a small nucleus of 15 people" whose secretary was Ludovico Rossi, and the most noticeable members of which were Antonio Bonito (known as 'Dino') and Alfredo Bonsignori. This report only deals with Lyon (ACS CPC, Roma, no. 441/030600).

(5) Roberto Sinigaglia, *Mjasnikov e la rivoluzione russa* (Milano, 1973).

(6) *Manifesto of the workers group of the RCP (Bolsheviks)*, published in *Invariance* no. 6, series 2, 1976, with the KAPD's comments..*Réveil* had already published as a pamphlet (January 1928) *On the Eve of Thermidor*, by Sapronov and Smirnov, a group close to that of Miasnikov. The latter formed an ephemeral 'Communist workers party of Russia' linked to Gorters KAI.

(7) "There are only two possibilities: either the Trotskyists regroup under the slogan 'War on the palaces, peace to the cottages', under the flag of the workers' revolution - the first step that must be taken to make the proletariat the ruling class - or they will slowly fade out and pass individually or collectively into the camp of the bourgeoisie. These are the two elements of the alternative. There is no third way" (O.C. no. 6, January 1930).

(8) Prudhommeaux was very pessimistic about the possibilities of revolution. He saw the proletariat as the new 'Spartacus' whose struggle could only be "a desperate fight for the supreme revolutionary goals". Later on Dautry joined Souvarine's circle *Critique sociale* and then Georges Bataille's *Contre-attaque*.

(9) The same police report quoted above noted that the "workerists" had "moved towards the anarchists, to the point of working together". It pointed to "the participation in propaganda for the anarchist victims at Saint-Priest" and in "the Sacco-Vanzetti anarchist circle". It concluded: "they affirm that they don't reject any means of struggle, including terrorist acts".

(10) The split between the AAU and the KAPD in 1929 was rapidly to dislocate the German Left. The 'maintained' KAPD continued to defend the strictest positions on the necessity for the party, rejecting any revolutionary syndicalism, including in its 'Unionen' form. In December 1931 the debris of the AAU and the AAU-Einheit united in a Kommunistische Arbeiter-Union (KAU), characterised by theoretical weakness and an activist orientation.

In these conditions, the impact of the German Communist Left in France could only decline. After the desintegration of *L'Ouvrier Communiste*, the Spartacus group took its place in 1931. Composed of German militants for the most part (8

comrades), it was only able to publish its paper *Spartacus* thanks to money from Prudhommeaux who took advantage of this to put in articles outside any editorial control. For this reason Prudhommeaux was expelled from the group in September 1931 for “indiscipline” and “an absence of political and organisational consciousness” (letter by Heinrich to the Dutch KAP, 6/9/1931, in the Canne-Meyer archives, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociaal Geschiedenis, Amsterdam). Without any publication, the Spartacus group disappeared soon afterwards.

The Prudhommeaux-Dautry tandem then published the review *Correspondance Internationale Ouvrière* between 25 September and June 1933, in liaison with Dutch councilists and English anarchists. >From 1933 on, the Prudhommeaux and Dautry evolved towards anti-fascism. Jean Dautry participated to the French Resistance and became just after the end of the war member of the French Communist Party. The lessons of the revolutionary intransigence of the German Left were forgotten.