

1933-39

Bilan

Milestones on the road
to defeat

4. The Weight of the Counter-Revolution

In the last issue of the *Bulletin d'information de la Fraction de Gauche Italienne* (February 1933), Vercesi wrote: "...the victory of fascism in Germany marks a break in the revolutionary course which appeared in 1917, and which could have ended in the triumph of the world proletariat. This victory also marks a turning towards the capitalist outcome of the present situation: towards war."

In November 1933 appeared the first issue of the 'Theoretical Bulletin of the Left Fraction of the PCI' : *Bilan*. The legal editor was Gaston Davoust (Henri Chazé) of Union Communiste, who lent his name so that the review could be published legally, given the lack of any French citizens in the Italian Fraction. It was printed in the French language, in Brussels. On the cover appeared the words: "Lenin 1917 - Noske 1919 - Hitler 1933". Published once a month, there were 46 issues of *Bilan* up till February 1938, when it ceased to appear. *Bilan* succeeded the *Bulletin d'information*, on the cover of which was the slogan "The future belongs to communism".

Bilan announced that it had not been the Fraction's wish to bring out this international bulletin on its own; it had hoped to edit it jointly with the French and German Opposition, with the aim of bringing clarification to the whole revolutionary movement:

Our Fraction would have preferred it if such a work could have been carried out by an international organism, convinced

as we are of the necessity for political confrontation between those groups capable of representing the proletarian class in several countries. Thus we would have been very happy to have entrusted this bulletin to an international initiative guaranteed by the application of serious methods of work and by a concern to hold a healthy political polemic.

With the Trotskyist Opposition, the parting of the ways had already come. *Bilan* would publish in its columns contributions from members of the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes, like Mitchell and Hennaut; it even opened them to the Dutch Communist Left. But it would no longer publish texts by Trotsky, as it had done in *Prometeo*.

1917-33: two key dates: one opening a revolutionary course, the other dramatically closing it. The goal was thus to draw the lessons of this period of 16 years, so rich in world-wide and decisive events in the history of humanity. Was this an over-ambitious enterprise? was aware of the enormous difficulties involved, and it defined its tasks very modestly:

Our Fraction, in publishing the present bulletin, does not believe that it can present definitive solutions to the terrible problems posed to the proletariat of all countries.

To be sure, our Fraction can refer back to a long political past, to a profound tradition in the Italian and international movement, to a totality of fundamental political positions. But it does not intend to use its political antecedents to demand agreement on the solutions it puts forward for the present situation. On the contrary, it calls on all revolutionaries to subject the positions it now defends to the verification of events, as well as the political positions contained in its basic documents.

There were two possible methods for re-examining past experience: either sticking to Lenin's texts as though they were a bible, or "placing the Congresses of the Comintern and the different parties in the

crucible of criticism and in the light of events'. The Italian Fraction chose the second method. "While basing itself on the foundations of the Comintern", it would be seeking a profound understanding of the causes of the defeats without "*any taboos or ostracism*".

It was in this open spirit, free of dangerous prejudices, that *Bilan* proposed to "complete the work bequeathed to us by the Russian Revolution". It declared that "*to draw a balance-sheet of the post-war events is... to establish the conditions for the victory of the proletariat in all countries*".

'Midnight in the Century'

What was the result of this political and theoretical reflection? The fruits were bitter. Although by entering into crisis, capitalism had provided the objective conditions for a new revolutionary period, the subjective factor was totally missing. A period of counterrevolution had opened up; the proletariat had been beaten:

It was not thanks to a change in the historic situation that capitalism was able to get through the turmoil of post-war events; in 1933, even more than in 1917, capitalism is definitively doomed as a system of social organisation. What has changed between 1917 and 1933 is the balance of forces between the two fundamental classes in the present epoch: capitalism and the proletariat.

Outside Russia, the proletariat had not been able to forge the militants its parties needed. This delay had "determined the series of defeats suffered by the proletariat in the post-war period"; it was above all the weight of the Russian state, absorbing the Comintern to the point of making it its own instrument, which was the decisive cause of the defeat. This took place in three stages:

- **1923**, in Germany, where “the interests of the proletarian state were no longer connected to the struggle of the world proletariat”;
- **1927-8**, a key date in the process towards the transformation of the Communist Parties into counter-revolutionary organs, through the abandonment of internationalism (“socialism in one country”) and the exclusion of the Communist Left, a subjective element which had determined the crushing of the revolutionary wave in China;
- **1933**, the culminating point, which was only the final consequence of the betrayal of the Comintern, “which died with the victory of fascism in Germany”.

It took a long discussion in the Italian Fraction to determine that the Comintern was dead and that its parties had betrayed by becoming parties of national capital. This idea was condensed into the formulation “*the party does not die, it betrays*”.

For a long time, this position was not accepted. Although a majority was pushing to proclaim the death of the International, the executive commission, via Vercesi, had sent a long letter to the leadership of the PCI, in 1933, on the eve of its congress. Here it explained why it had constituted itself into a Fraction and demanded to be allowed to take part in the congress. This proposal provoked an animated response from the New York Federation, and the majority of the Parisian Federation. After a discussion, it was concluded that it was impossible to have any activity towards the CPs, as parties, as long as the ‘redressment’ had not taken place.

However, up until the war the definition of the CPs remained hesitant. They were still considered as

'centrist'. In the terminology of the Comintern, at the beginning, the centre had been the left fraction of the IInd International which, like the USPD and the PSI, balanced between the latter and the Comintern. Later on, 'centrism' referred to Stalin's centre which was fighting both Bukharin's right wing and the left led by Trotsky. This concept was thus more the heritage of a previous period than a new theory. It provided the Italian Left with a definition of the parties to the Left of social democracy, considered either as 'centrist workers' parties or as traitor parties'.

It was thus the left fractions which represented the continuity with the old revolutionary movement. It was they who assumed the continuity of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. "The Fraction is the sole organism in which the proletariat realises its organisation as a class, being the organism which derives from a past historic period and which prepares another."

Given the "numerical weakness" and the "present theoretical inadequacy of the Left fractions", which expressed "the incapacity of the world proletariat to oppose capital's attack in the conditions of the economic crisis", the foundation of parties was not on the agenda. The Italian Fraction was completely opposed to Trotsky's attempt to create a IVth International in 1933 by linking up with left socialists (SAPD, Sneevliet's RSP, the Norwegian party). For the Fraction the party could not be created out of nothing but had to be prepared by a solid work of theoretical reflection: "This party will pose the problems that the historical conditions enable it to pose. This party will carry out its tasks on the sole condition that it is able to foresee the problems that are going to arise." (*Bilan* no. 1, 'Vers l'Internationale deux et trois quarts?'). It was not possible for one man, even a Trotsky "despite the services he has rendered to the cause of the proletariat", to force the movement of history. The individual, however prestigious, could not be a guarantee:

... loyalty to Trotsky's work can be expressed by fighting against his current errors, because it is absolutely false that a personal continuity is a guarantee for the ulterior struggle of the proletariat. On the contrary, this continuity can only be based on political positions. The question therefore is to see whether or not comrade Trotsky's new positions correspond to the necessities of the proletarian struggle. (Bilan no. 1, ibid.).

The perspective of revolution had moved into the distance, and only the victory of the fractions could prevent the march towards war; and then revolution could only come out of the war:

If the fractions do not succeed, in opposition to centrism, in leading the proletariat to victory, no individual will can avoid the other outcome of the situation: war; and it would only be during the course of the war, or after it, that the fraction, by transforming itself into the party, could then lead the proletariat to victory.

The most probable outcome of the crisis of 1929 was war. On this point, in 1933, the position of the Fraction was hesitant. Sometimes it would say that “the alternative posed in the present phase of capitalism is revolution or war”; sometimes it said that war was inevitable with the defeat of the German proletariat and the death of the Comintern: “...the proletariat is perhaps no longer able to prevent the unleashing of a new imperialist war through the triumph of the revolution.... if there are any chances for an immediate revolutionary resurgence, they reside solely in an understanding of past defeats” (Bilan no. 1, Introduction).

What would be the decisive factor in mobilising the class for war? Ideologically, the capacity to mobilise the European workers for war depended on Russia's position in the international arena. Already in February 1933, the Italian Left declared that Russia would integrate itself into one of the imperialist blocs, and that this could include the German bloc:

“...centrism has suppressed the fundamental role that the Russian state can play in case of war, ensuring that the Soviet state, instead of being the front-line of support for the world proletariat, has become an element at the disposal of one or another group of imperialisms. We must recognise right now that the only outcome of this situation is the one that will lead centrism to betray the interests of the revolutionary proletariat and, in case of war, to justify the position taken by Russia.” (Bulletin d’information no. 6, ‘Le fascisme au pouvoir en Allemagne’).

And it added that “it is quite probable that in the long run it will be the bloc of fascist states which will prevail in making an alliance with Russia”. However, it did not exclude the possibility that it would be the ideological mobilisation for the defence of ‘democracy in danger’ which would be the decisive factor: “the bourgeoisie which, through its economic conditions, can still allow the vestiges of democratic freedom to survive, could call the proletariat to war in the name of ‘democracy’ and for the struggle against fascist states.”

Little by little, these two hypotheses were to be verified. Thus, the Italian Left recognised Russia’s integration into the game of the great antagonistic powers. This meant that “...the workers’ state is being incorporated into the world capitalist system, submitting to its laws, its evolution.”

There was a contradiction in this analysis. On the one hand, the Russian state, qualified as ‘proletarian’, was capitalist on the international arena; on the other hand on the internal level this state was described not as capitalist, but socialist on the strength of the socialisation of production’.

The strength of the Italian Left was that it grasped every phenomenon first of all in an international context; but its attachment to the USSR, once the country that hosted the revolutionary Comintern,

prevented it for a long time from making a more rigorous study of the nature of the Russian economy and of its state superstructure. It took the Second World War for a part of the Italian Left to abandon definitively the concept of the 'proletarian state'.

In order to deal with these hesitations, from 1934 until the war, and even during it, the Italian Left put the question of the state in the period of transition on the agenda, and thus the problem of the attitude of the proletariat and the communist party towards the state.

In general, all the basic theoretical questions were subjected to the fire of criticism. From the contact with the LCI in Belgium, and particularly with Mitchell (Jehan), the Italian Fraction rediscovered Rosa Luxemburg's texts dealing with the decadence of capitalism. The Fraction began to take an interest in economic questions, which it had previously paid little attention to. Out of this came a more developed theoretical analysis of the phenomena of the crisis and also of the economic problems of the period of transition.

From Rosa Luxemburg, the Italian Left also took up the refusal to support national liberation struggles, defined as the field of manoeuvres for different imperialisms, and on the theoretical level, the affirmation of the impossibility of any bourgeois revolutions in the period of capitalism's decadence.

Guided by its principles and by its enormous work of theoretical reflection, *Bilan* was to confront events as crucial as the Popular Front, wars, and the convulsions in Spain. Working against the stream, its isolation was to grow in direct proportion to the march towards war.

There are two clear periods in the history of the Fraction: one between 1933 and 1935 in which it was

consolidating its positions; the other between 1936 and 1939 which saw the total isolation of the Italian Left, the breaking off of contacts with the political milieu and splits in its own ranks.

Bilan confronted with anti-fascism and the Popular Front

The period between 1933 and the Popular Front was a dramatic one world-wide. The economic crisis continued, bringing with it factory closures and massive unemployment, which in some countries hit 20-30 % of the working class. It was a period of austerity and impoverishment. Anti-crisis plans which went from inflation to deflation, or which maintained jobs through laws decreeing wage-cuts (e.g. the Laval decrees reducing state employees' wages) could not halt the world crisis. The year 1933, the year of the New Deal and German rearmament, was the beginning of a long series of economic measures, which to a greater or lesser extent in different countries, re-launched production by setting up a war economy - either directly, by the transformation of the economy, or indirectly, through policies of public works which developed a whole infrastructure of transport and heavy industry. This tendency was to accelerate after 1936.

The state, the economy's last resort, revealed itself as the ultimate defender of the capitalist system. In France and Belgium 'national plans' began to develop. In Belgium the De Man plan expressed this attempt to take hold of the economic mechanisms that had begun to break down, advocating a series of nationalisations. In the USA, Roosevelt put through the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was concretised in the formation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Under Hitler and Mussolini, the state had assumed direct control of the whole economy. In Russia, the Five Year Plans, followed by Stakhanovism sought to build up heavy industry (steel, energy, etc.) with the avowed aim of developing Russian military power. All over the USSR labour camps were set up; industry developed at the price of

the exhaustion and death of millions. The world seemed to be in the grip of madness, of the most primitive barbarism, hiding behind the most sophisticated products of modern technology. Everywhere, in the beautiful but terrible words of Victor Serge, it seemed to be “midnight in the century”.

This economic offensive of world capitalism was expressed on the political level through a brutal or gradual transformation of the most ‘democratic’ regimes into openly authoritarian, dictatorial ones. The legislature, parliament, lost its importance to the benefit of the executive. The consequence was a vigorous control over social life. Arbitration laws were passed in order to control and limit strikes, which threatened to break out on a massive scale in response to the wage freeze. In countries like Belgium and France, following the Anglo-Saxon example, the unions became privileged partners in the state, the latter’s final dyke in time of social conflict - as politicians and trade union spokesmen did not fail to point out during this period.

However in 1933 it seemed that the strengthening of the state would be realised not through ‘democratic’ methods but through the development of the fascist movement, which was fast becoming a universal trend. In all the European countries parties were growing who modelled themselves on Hitler or Mussolini and whose programme was the strengthening and concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a one party state. Their development coincided with a vast anti-working class offensive by the state, based on a repressive apparatus backed up both by the army and, when necessary, by the troops of the fascist parties. This offensive had begun well before Hitler came to power. The main theatre had been Germany 1928-1932; in 1929, for example, the police under the command of the social democrat Zoergiebel had fired on a crowd of workers demonstrating on the first of May.

In 1932, during the miners' strike in Belgium, the government sent machine gun carriers and assault cars to occupy the pinheads. Reconnaissance planes were used to locate concentrations of strikers and send the gendarmes against them. On the radio, it was forbidden to talk about the events. The strike was broken essentially by the unions and the POB (Parti Ouvrier Belge) who called on the workers "not to allow themselves to be taken in by irresponsible agitators who may be in the pay of the bosses" (*Le Peuple*, the POB's daily, 22 June 1932). This big strike showed the need for stricter union control. The Bondas report advocated - and this was taken up by the new left-leaning government - compulsory union membership, through reserving certain advantages to those who were unionised, such as indemnify in the case of strikes, and social security benefits (1).

Keeping up the democratic framework, whose content was becoming more and more empty as state organisms developed in a dizzying manner, was only possible in the industrialised countries least bit by the crisis. The growth of social discontent had, even before the Popular Front, been reflected in a succession of left or coalition governments. In all cases, planning and nationalisation expressed the same tendency towards a strengthening of the state on a singularly restricted economic foundation.

In countries that were less industrialised, like Austria, Spain, central Europe, the offensive of bosses and state took on a more brutal form. It was the army based on the local Nazi party which in February 1934 crushed the desperate uprising of the workers of Vienna. The same year the Spanish Republican government sent Franco's troops to put down the fierce resistance of the Asturian miners. From Rumania to Greece there was a growth of fascist-type organisations, which with the complicity of the national state took on the job of dealing with any working class reaction. Whatever its constitutional form, dictatorship became overt, and most often took on the shape of Hitler's or Mussolini's 'model'. It was All the more overt for the fact that the state, which was economically and politically weak, drew

support from a broad mass of discontented petty-bourgeois; that the absence of any sizeable working class reaction pushed this mass into the hands of movements which promised them a bright tomorrow.

All these movements had undoubtedly been born out of the long series of defeats suffered by the European proletariat since 1923. Each set-back in the workers' struggle was necessarily followed by an offensive by the capitalist state which grew stronger each time.

The crisis, which was no longer a 'classical' cyclical crisis as in the 19th century, was leading inevitably towards world war. If the 20's had been a period of arms limitation, the 1930's was an of war economy. From 1933-34 this was advancing rapidly, above all in Germany and Russia. After 1936, all the other countries followed suit, whatever the form of their political regime. In a world which seemed too narrow to contain the expansion of the most modern apparatus of production, and after a period of reconstruction which had barely lasted six years (1923-29), war became for each state the last resort in the face of the bankruptcy of the world economy. With no new markets to conquer, all that remained was to redivide the world market; in this situation the weaker capitalist states were necessarily the most aggressive ones (2).

The establishment of a war economy made many of the economists of the time dream of reviving production without falling into a generalised conflict. Even revolutionary groups, including the Italian Left, did not escape from this illusion.

In fact, the Italo-Abyssinian conflict in 1935, then the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, were decisive steps in preparing the world war. The weapons that had been produced had to be used in local conflicts, had to have real military value, because they had no real commodity value in the accumulation

of capital.

In a bleak period for the class struggle, defined by the Italian Left as the long night of the counter-revolution, fascism and war seemed to be everywhere, while Russia and the parties linked to it were being increasingly integrated into the international manoeuvres of capitalism, through the League of Nations and the policy of national defence.

The whole of social and political life seemed to be crystallising around the question of war, in the name of the most varied ideologies: fascism and anti-fascism, democracy and totalitarianism.

The strikes in France and Belgium in 1936 seemed to bring a breath of hope to a working population that had been subjected to the most drastic austerity measures. But what hope could the revolutionaries of the time have when they saw that each strike took place under the banner of the Tricolour, and took the Marseillaise as its hymn? When the sound of the accordion was replaced by the whistle of bullets at Clichy in 1937? When wage rises were followed by inflation, and the continuing slide of revenues into the abyss of the war economy?

Democracy, fascism and Stalinism seemed to be moving towards the same goal with different methods. For the Italian Left, which had known the enthusiasm of revolutionary events in Italy, Russia, or Germany, this period of 1933 to 1936, then 1936 to the war - in which it nevertheless believed the revolution to be imminent - was the blackest in its existence, but also the richest in theoretical reflection.

Was there a difference in nature between fascism and democracy? Was fascism going to develop in all

countries? In this case, how could one explain the appearance of left governments of the Popular Front variety? What capacities to react did the different fractions of the working class still have; to what extent could they still resist a generalised offensive? Were the emerging strikes revolutionary in nature? Were they purring off the perspective of generalised war? Those were the kinds of questions facing the Italian Left, and that had to be answered not only on the theoretical level - as in its platform, which was based mainly on the Italian and German experience - but in practice, from day to day, in the rush of events that would either confirm or refute its analyses.

For *Bilan* as for the PCI before the elimination of Bordiga, there could be no question of seeing fascism as anything other than a form of capitalism. If there was any difference in the two methods of running capitalist society, it lay in the change in historic period opened up by the first world war. In the period of capitalist ascendancy in the 19th century, 'democracy' was the mode of operation of the ruling class, which attempted to regulate the conflicts between its different factions through the parliamentary system. But "there is an irreducible and irreconcilable opposition between democracy and the workers' position... the condition of life for the democratic regime consists precisely in forbidding the power of specific groups". On the other hand, "the foundation of an organisation of the working class is a direct challenge to the theory of democracy"; and, "from a historical point of view, the opposition between 'democracy' and workers' organs has expressed itself bloodily". If at that time the workers' movement had an orientation "towards the conquest of rights allowing the workers to accede to government or state functions... 1914 turned the page on this revision of Marxism and betrayal" (3).

Fascism was a typical product of "capitalism in agony". It marked the disappearance of parliamentarism as the real government of the bourgeoisie, whose internal contradictions had broken out in a generalised crisis. War and revolution were pushing the ruling class towards political disintegration.

This was the explanation for fascism's physical attacks against the representatives of liberalism or the Socialist Parties - "which were no longer part of the workers' world, but, since 1914, of the capitalist world, a fact which they proved by massacring the revolutionary proletariat immediately after the war". The peaceful game of 'democratic rules' had been irremediably disturbed: "If, in the past, the conflicts between right and left took place in the parliamentary arena, today the decline of capitalism demands that they take on a more violent form." (*Bilan* no. 9, July 1934, 'La situation en France').

The development of the fascist parties, their coming to power in Italy, Germany, and so in Austria, was not the expression of an antagonism between 'fascism' on the one side and democracy on the other. The two played a complementary role in opening up the counter-revolution. Fascism had been engendered by democracy, which ceded power to it legally:

In Italy, it was a government containing the representatives of democratic anti-fascism who stepped aside for a ministry led by the fascists, who thus gained a majority in this anti-fascist and democratic parliament even though the fascists had only had a parliamentary group of 40 out of 500 deputies. In Germany, it was the anti-fascist Von Schleicher who stepped aside for Hitler, who had been called in by that other antifascist Hindenburg, the chosen man of the democratic and social democratic forces. (Bilan no. 13, December 1934: 'Fascisme-démocratie: Communisme').

In fact 'fascism' was the child of 'democracy', or more precisely of the left of social democracy. According to *Bilan*, social democracy had to leave government office once its counter-revolutionary tasks had been carried out. By crushing the proletariat physically (Germany) or ideologically (Italy) social democracy had done its job, and could now make way for fascism to complete the work it had begun:

Between democracy, between its finest flower, Weimar, antifascism, there is no real opposition: the one makes it possible to crush the revolutionary menace, disperses the proletariat, fags its consciousness; the other, at the end of this business, is the iron claw of capital, ensuring the rigid unity of capitalist society on the basis of smothering any threat from the proletariat. (Bilan no. 16, 'L'écrasement du prolétariat allemand et l'avènement du fascisme').

But why was it necessary to crush the class in this way, when there was no revolutionary threat in Germany, or even in Austria? *Bilan* pointed to the accelerating preparations for war as the only way out of the crisis. This solution was all the more pressing in countries like Germany and Italy, who had been fleeced by the Versailles treaty and, lacking any colonial outlets, had to launch themselves into a new imperialist struggle for the redivision of the world. Thus 'fascism' corresponded "to the need for an apparatus of domination which could not only repress the resistance or revolt of the oppressed, but which could mobilise the workers for war" (*Bilan* n° 10, August 1934, 'Les événements du 30 juin en Allemagne').

This is why, despite the contrasts and discussions existing inside the German and Italian state machines, the dislocation of fascism was not on the agenda. Neither the Matteotti affair, nor the liquidation of Röhm's SA could lead to the internal collapse of fascism:

There is no reason to suppose that we are seeing a weakening of fascism in Germany... on the contrary, this repression indicates a considerable strengthening of its dictatorship, linked to real difficulties which it cannot overcome without the outbreak of world war. (Bilan no. 26, January 1936, 'L'exécution de R. Claus').

The Italian Left did not think that this strengthening of fascism meant that capitalism as a whole was moving towards the Nazi or Mussolini model. On the contrary, fascism, by giving birth to antifascism,

had reinforced the 'democratic' powers. This polarisation between fascism and anti-fascism had even shown itself to be extremely useful in the ideological mobilisation for the next world war. As *Bilan* pointed out, by raising the spectre of fascism the French and Belgian bourgeoisies had managed to strengthen the state's preparations for war. The choice between capitalism and communism was replaced by the choice between dictatorship and democracy.

We can see, for example, that today after 14 years of fascism in Italy, in a situation of very sharp inter-imperialist contrasts, the fascist movement is not at all becoming universal and that, on the contrary, the course of events that is leading us towards war is taking place under the banner of anti-fascism. This is the case in France, and also, despite the total absence of the basis for fascism and antifascism there, in Britain, one of the richest countries in terms of its colonial empire. Experience is confirming everyday that the diversify of fascist dictatorial and of liberal-democratic regimes makes it possible to place all the struggles between states under the banner of dictatorship vs. democracy' - the banner under which the working masses will be mobilised for the new world carnage. (Bilan n° 22, August-September. 1935, 'Rapport sur la situation en Italie').

The genesis of the Popular Front in France only confirmed *Bilan's* analysis. The Fraction pointed out that the reaction of the French workers had been diverted by the left and the unions onto the terrain of capitalism "because its banner was the defence of the republic, of democracy" (*Bilan* no. 16, March 1935, 'La grève générale : expression de la lutte de classe'). The fact that the French workers were marching under the flag of trade union unity, of the Popular Front, under the Tricolour, marked the defeat of the proletariat and showed that it was being drawn ineluctably towards war.

It is under the sign of imposing mass demonstrations that the French proletariat is dissolving itself inside the capitalist

regime. Despite the fact that there are thousands and thousands of workers marching in the streets of Paris, we have to say that in France as in Germany there is no longer a proletarian class fighting for its own historic interests. The 14th July marks a decisive moment in the process of the dislocation of the proletariat and in the reconstitution of the sacrosanct unity of the capitalist Nation. This was a true national festival, an official reconciliation of antagonistic classes, of the exploiters and the exploited; it was the triumph of Republicanism, which the bourgeoisie, far from restraining it with overzealous stewards, has encouraged to the point of apotheosis. The workers thus tolerated the Tricolour of their imperialism, sang the Marseillaise, even applauded Daladier, Cot and other capitalist ministers who, with Blum, Cachin and the rest solemnly swore 'to give bread to the workers, work to youth and peace to the world', in other words, lead, barracks, and imperialist war to all. (Bilan n° 21, July-August 1935, 'Sous le signe du 14 Juillet').

More than fascism, the main enemy of the French and Belgian proletariat was democracy:

...Democratic rule is much better adapted to maintaining the privileges of the bourgeoisie, because it is much better than fascism at penetrating the workers' brain, at undermining from within, whereas fascism uses violence to crush the class maturation that capitalism has not managed to do away with. (Bilan n° 22, August 1935 'Les problèmes de la situation en France').

Under the banner of the Popular Front, 'democracy' had achieved the same result as fascism: the crushing of the French proletariat, its disappearance from the historical scene. "The prolétariat momentarily no longer exists as a class, as a result of profound world-wide defeats." (Bilan n° 29, March-April 1936, 'L'écrasement du prolétariat français et ses enseignements internationaux').

This analysis gave rise to disagreements within the Italian Fraction. A minority held that the Popular

Front was born out of the pressure of the class struggle, and expressed a degree of maturation and radicalisation of the working class. This was not the opinion of the majority, who while not denying the class character of the wildcat strikes in Brest and Toulon in 1935, considered that the strikes of June 1936 had been diverted onto the terrain of capitalism. In *Bilan* n° 31 (May-June 1936) the majority wrote:

...the Popular Front can only represent a form of capitalist rule, the form which best corresponds to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Far from facilitating the outbreak of workers struggles, its job is to dragoon the workers from the first day of its arrival in power, and even before that.

Bilan's analysis did not deny the power of the strikes. It noted that the French strikes had broken out "rather like the strikes of May '36 in Belgium: outside and against the unions, in short as wildcat movements" (*Bilan* n° 31, 'La victoire électorale du Front Populaire en France'). Without making concessions to the enthusiasm of the Trotskyist groups who saw these strikes as the beginning of the 'French revolution', the Italian Fraction observed that "the enthusiasm élan of the proletarians has been struck to the back of the Tricolour, thus undermining their real significance"; that "the occupation of the factories has been carried out under strict union discipline: 'not one bolt must go missing'". In conclusion, *Bilan* argued that "there has been room neither for a new consciousness nor for a new form of organisation, whereas the influence of the capitalist parties and the grip of the CGT have been considerably reinforced". (*Bilan* n° 32, June-July 1936, 'Le prolétariat a répondu au Front Populaire').

The French bourgeoisie had thus succeeded in channelling the strike movement to its own advantage. The Popular Front, far from being an "expression of the weakness of the French bourgeoisie", was, on

the contrary, “an expression of strength” (*Bilan* n° 32, op. cit.). The mobilisation of the workers of France behind the Popular Front, which was developing a whole programme of rearmament, was thus underway. When the Popular Front was eliminated from the government, and the repression started in earnest - such as the shootings at Clichy and the banning of the general strike of 30 November 1938 - *Bilan* concluded that the left had fully completed its task of demobilising the class. Fascism in Italy and Germany would be strengthened by this:

The Popular Front, through its struggle against the French proletariat, has thus deprived the workers of Italy and Germany of the only help that could support them in the ferocious struggle against fascism; it is the direct auxiliary of Mussolini and Hitler. (Bilan n° 40, April-May 1937, ‘Premier mai 1937’).

But for *Bilan*, more than the Popular Front, it was Russia which played the decisive role in the triumph of the counter-revolution. On the ideological level, “*the role of Russia has done more to kill the idea of the proletarian revolution, of the proletarian state, than any ferocious repression by capitalism*” (*Bilan* n° 17, April 1935, ‘De la Commune de Paris à la Commune russe’).

For *Bilan*, the Russian state still had a dual nature: proletarian, by its origins, in the Russian framework; and capitalist because of its membership of “alliances for the war” (*Bilan* no. 2). Its recognition as a state by the USA, its adherence to the League of Nations, marked an acceleration of preparations for war. “Russia’s entry into the League of Nations immediately poses the question of Russia’s participation in one of the imperialist blocs for the next war.” Consequently, the Italian Left, unlike the Trotskyists, rejected any defence of the USSR: “The duty of the workers of the whole world is thus to wage an equal and simultaneous struggle against it, as against the other states.” (*Bilan* no. 2, December 1933, ‘Une victoire de la contre-révolution mondiale : les Etats-Unis reconnaissent l’Union soviétique’).

In 1935, when Stalin recognised as 'positive' the Laval government's preparations for war — a statement immediately supported by the PCF - the Italian Fraction had no further hesitation in breaking officially all its links with the Communist Parties.

Until 1935, the Italian Fraction had continued to call itself "the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy". It was more as a reference to the revolutionary past of the party, to Bordiga's day, than because of a belief in the revolutionary nature of the PCI, that the Fraction maintained this name after 1928. The opening up of a period of counter-revolution, the long series of defeats since 1927, convinced the Italian Fraction that there was no longer any hope of reconquering the Italian Party by eliminating its 'centrist leadership'. To maintain any reference to the PCI in the present conditions, when the CPs were supporting the principle of national defence, and when Russia was integrating itself into the web of alliances, appeared more and more of an anachronism to the majority of the Fraction's militants.

The Fractions 1935 Congress

The Congress of the Italian Fraction held in Brussels in autumn 1935 thus had the task of setting this question. A minority represented above all by the central organs (executive commission), out of loyalty to the past, but above all to conserve an organic link with the Communist International as it had been at the beginning, remained hesitant. It was afraid that to suppress the term "Fraction of the PCI" would give rise within the organisation to hopes of proclaiming the party, whereas it was clear that the period was not a revolutionary one.

In order to prepare the Congress, Vercesi was given the job of writing a draft resolution on the problems of organisation. This draft, published under the name of Alphonse, sought to mark the definitive closing of a whole historical period; it underlined the fact that the CPs had become part of “the concert of the counter-revolution” and thus that there was no possibility of regenerating them. This was a crucial text in the life of the Fraction, which is why it is necessary to quote it at length. It declared:

- *That in 1933, with the death of the Third International, came the definite closure of the phase which posed the possibility of the regeneration of the Comintern thanks to the victory of the proletarian revolution in a sector of capitalism, a victory whose precondition would have been the conquest of the leadership of the struggle by the left.*
- *That the centrist parties, still organically linked to the corpse of the Third international, are already operating in the concert of the counter-revolution, today presenting their candidature for the role of direct organs of imperialism in order to drag the proletariat into the abyss of imperialist war.*
- *The Fraction declares that the phase envisaged in 1928, of a possible regeneration of the parties and of the Comintern, is now closed, and consequently that:*
 - *the Left Fraction takes on the task of reconstructing, independently, and exclusively around itself, the communist party of tomorrow, through its work of training militants;*
 - *the only elements who can adhere to the Left Fraction of the PCI are these who accept the texts adopted by the Pantin Conference and who recognise as an essential task the critical examination of the whole experience of the Third International, of the degenerated proletarian state, in order to elaborate, in a more advanced historical direction, the material for the world party of tomorrow. (Bilan no. 18, April-May 1935, ‘Projet de résolution sur les problèmes d’organisation’, by Alphonse).*

A discussion opened up prior to the Congress on the need to suppress the reference to the PCI; and on

the moment for founding the party, which the resolution placed solely in the hands of the Fraction.

A *Manifesto*, written by Vercesi in the name of the Fraction, dated 21 July and distributed in French to the workers of France and Belgium, called on them to leave the Communist Parties immediately. It called on them to “fight against all fatherlands: fascist, democratic, or Soviet”. But, above all, it proclaimed: “Not one more minute in these instruments of the world-wide counter-revolution”, in the CPs who had been “reconciled with the interests of world capitalism”. (*Bilan* no. 23, September-October 1935, ‘En dehors des partis communistes devenus des instruments du capitalisme mondial’).

The invitation to leave the CPs was also, logically, an invitation to get rid of the reference to the PCI. This was the conclusion drawn by Vercesi, supported by the organisation’s rank and file:

...On the very terrain of the process of the formation of tomorrow’s party, there has been a profound modification which should be recognised by changing the name of our organisation; we can no longer refer to a party which has gone over to capitalism, a party which has taken on an equivalent function to capitalism in preparing the war... for this reason, I propose that the Congress adopts the name ‘Italian Fraction of the Communist Left’. (*Bilan*, op. cit.).

This view was not shared by a number of militants with positions of responsibility in the organisation, such as Jacobs, Pieri and Bianco, who thought that “the reference to the PCI did not constitute any obstacle to the future functioning of the Fraction”, and even that it would facilitate “the development of the Fraction’s militants who, in Italy tomorrow, will reconstitute the real communist party in the revolutionary tempest”. More important than the name, for them, was the need to affirm that the party could not emerge from nowhere, that the Fraction which would form it was necessarily linked to the old parties of the Comintern. They added that this reference was “still linked to a historic body which,

with the foundation of the party at Livorno and the civil war that followed, was rooted in the body of the Italian proletariat”.

In fact this minority, composed of the most experienced militants in the Fraction, was afraid that the organisation would imitate Trotsky and the Trotskyists and proclaim the party in a historically unfavourable moment. As Jacobs put it: “To believe that the Fraction could lead movements of proletarian desperation would be to compromise its intervention in the events of tomorrow”. On the other hand “keeping the term PCI means proclaiming our will to maintain the Fraction until events make it possible to transform it into a party...”

This fear seemed to be based on the intervention of militants like Candiani who affirmed that “the party retains its function through a theoretical and organic activity equally in a depressive period”; that the Manifesto of the Congress was “the indication that one period was closing and another opening, one with the possibility of political work”.

In order to close the debate, three motions were submitted to the Congress:

- Vercesi’s motion. It declared essentially that the Congress had to consider that “the process of transforming the fraction into the party is the same as the transformation of the present reactionary situation into a new revolutionary situation”. But the motion added, paradoxically, that “each moment of the present situation is a step towards our inevitable transformation into a party”,
- the motion from Jacobs, Pieri, Bianco. It asserted that “It is only in the course of the war, in a situation which contains a perspective of revolutionary movements, that the Fraction can take up

positions directly oriented towards its transformation into a party”;

- the motion from Candiani, Gatto Mammone, Piero. “The Congress considers ... that it can no longer call itself the fraction of a party which has definitively gone over to the ranks of the enemy, and decides on the denomination ‘Italian Fraction of the Communist Left’”.

In order to avoid divisions in the organisation, Vercesi withdrew his resolution in favour of the one from Gatto, Piero, Candiani, but proposed the following amendment:

The Congress of the Fraction conceives this process of its transformation into a party solely through the triumph of its positions, of its cadres and the expulsion of all the Socialist, Centrist and other currents from the working class. It is only on this basis that it can intervene in class conflicts and during the course of the war.

This resolution was adopted by a very small majority of delegates (8 votes to 7). But this was the way in which the name of the Fraction was changed, responding to the wish of the majority of militants; while at the same time it reaffirmed the Italian Left’s position that the party could only be born in a revolutionary period, which it thought would come out of the war.

As we will see later on, the differences were far from having been absorbed; they would reappear at the time of the war in Spain and up until World War II, leading to major splits.

In fact the Congress minority - which perhaps represented the majority of the organisation in 1935 - did not understand that the historic period opened in 1927-33 was one of profound reflux. Very dynamic, often impatient and voluntarist (some of its leading members had come out of *Réveil*

Communiste), it thought that the perspective was one of developing class struggles with a revolutionary content. Although it subscribed to the analysis of the Fraction, it did not really believe that war was inevitable. This was the minority which in 1936 was to split after serving in the POUM militias, finally ending up in Union Communiste.

The Congress majority, on the other hand, was much more prudent. It considered that the counter-revolutionary course could only be broken by the war. Less 'interventionist', no doubt expressing a certain inward-looking attitude, it believed that the primordial task, in order to prepare the future, was to make a balance sheet of the revolutionary period opened up by the Russian revolution.

The evolution of the Italian Fraction, especially after 1937, showed that the two tendencies often intermingled. One saw the war in Spain as the opening act of the world revolution; the other saw 'local' wars as expressing the exacerbation of conflicts between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and that this also would lead to the proletarian revolution.

However, the Fraction's Congress clearly affirmed that the perspective was one of war. The Italian-Abyssinian conflict was a decisive step towards a world conflagration. This particular war was the only passable response of a weak capitalism, literally at the end of its tether and ready for any adventure. But, for *Bilan*, Italy's entry into this war mirrored the situation of world capitalism as a whole.

However, although it saw no sign of a revolutionary resurgence in Europe, despite the strikes in Belgium, France, Britain and America, and although it considered that despair reigned over the class, the Fraction made an exception for Italy. This 'sick man of Europe' had crushed the proletariat physically, but not ideologically. The report presented at the Congress by Jacobs saw in the existence of

the Fraction, the only organisation defending intransigent revolutionary positions, the undeniable sign of the class consciousness of the Italian working class: *“The fact that the Left Fraction is isolated today, as were the Bolsheviks before the war, could indicate that the conditions for a revolutionary maturation exist only in Italy today”*.

The task of the Fraction was therefore full of responsibilities for the future, because “this element of consciousness depends entirely upon the capacity or incapacity of the Marxist nucleus of the proletariat to act upon the historic situation of the working class.” (*Bilan* no. 17, April 1935, ‘Projet de resolution sur les problèmes de la fraction de gauche’). But, when there was an upsurge of the Italian workers in 1943, the Left Fraction failed to arrive at the rendez-vous...

The Fraction isolated

Indeed, the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, up until the war, and particularly between 1933 and 1936, could have no doubts about its tragic isolation. The pressures of a period in which each defeat was presented as a victory by the various parties which had an influence over the working class, led little by little to a break, or at least a weakening of contacts with the workers’ milieu, and even with the weak revolutionary milieu.

At this point the Fraction seems to have maintained its membership, which in 1936 was probably no more than 60-70 militants. Though some of them had left, others - coming from Union Communiste - had joined the Fraction, refusing to support any position smacking of antifascism or ‘critical support’ for the Popular Front.

Material difficulties weighed heavily on a mass of the militants, the immense majority of whom were

workers. Unemployment added a greater and greater burden to their already mediocre living standards. In Belgium and France, deportation was often the common lot of these Italian émigrés. In Belgium, the mere possession of *Prometeo* could lead to being searched over and over again. It was only Vercesi's good relations with the Socialist leaders which could, to a very slight extent, protect the best known 'Bordigist' workers from the most drastic police measures in Belgium(4).

When they were not under surveillance by the local police, they were watched by the Italian OVRA, which was present in Paris and Brussels and spied vigilantly on the members of the Italian Fraction. It is very probable that in Brussels a spy of the Italian police kept the Fraction's activities under permanent observation, even penetrating the section meetings (5).

On top of the OVRA theme was the Russian GPU. The GPU's special weapon was Ersilio Ambrogi, an old militant of the Italian Left. Returning from Berlin to Moscow in 1932, he quickly capitulated. His former role as a divisional general of the GPU made it easier for this police organ to hold him in its clutches. Threats to deport his second wife and his son did the rest. Having been expelled from the Russian CP, in March 1932 he asked to be reintegrated. In a letter addressed to the party's control commission, he claimed that "the experience of the undeniable successes achieved, the giant progress in the industrialisation of agriculture, the control of the countryside thus assured, the tendency for classes to disappear" had pushed him to re-examine the situation. This letter was obviously written under constraint. The "progress" of Stalinist agriculture would make one laugh if one didn't know that Ambrogi, like many other militants exiled in Russia, had been led to capitulate and renege on his real beliefs. In a last gasp of rebellion he concluded - in an expression with a double meaning - that he did not "intend to reject responsibility for his past fractional activity". The references he made to the IInd Congress of the Comintern and the 21 conditions, about which the Stalinist Comintern was making "a

redoubled campaign for their application” were of a similar kind (see *Bilan* no. 6, April 1934, ‘Maximo rejoint le front de la contre-révolution centriste’).

Bilan recognised that “Maximo has dissipated the equivocation that has lasted two years by totally menacing the positions of the Left”.

Two years later, Ambrogi, no doubt with the GPU’s agreement, made contact with the Italian consulate in Moscow. He obtained authorisation to go to Belgium, his archives to be sent by diplomatic channels. The Fraction refused any contact with him, knowing him to be a double agent. He was under surveillance both by the CPU and the OVRA. In 1940 he wrote in a Belgian newspaper an article eulogising fascism. Returning to Italy in 1942, he was acquitted, but was then deported to Germany. In 1956, he was a member of the Italian CP.(6).

This itinerary was not fortuitous. It was symbolic. Ambrogi reflects a whole epoch of the suffocation of the revolutionary epoch of the 20s, an epoch which deliberated the small revolutionary milieu. Rather than loyalty to the revolutionary positions of the past, desertions if not betrayals were the norm. In October 1934, *Bilan*, addressing itself to its readers, bitterly recognised this fact:

Our isolation is thus accentuated in proportion to the debacle along the entire workers’ front. Some want at any cost to save this degenerated state from a definitive collapse, and in so doing became allies of social-democracy; others leave the terrain of struggle and wallow in indifference. (*Bilan* no. 12, October 1934).

As the USSR and the CPs integrated themselves into the preparations for war, the position of the Italian Left became more difficult. It was subjected to the repression not only of the ‘democratic’ or

'fascist' police, but also to that of the CPs (7). In Russia, a militant of the Italian Left - despite the Fraction's campaign to get him freed (8) - disappeared in a concentration camp. In countries like France and Belgium, the Italian militants were denounced in meetings or demonstrations by the PCI, the PCF or the PCB as 'Bordigo-fascists' and were often subjected to physical violence and even death threats by Stalinist shock-troops.

As for gaining an influence in the 'mass' organisations, this became impossible. With most of them expelled from the PCI between 1926 and 1929, they were simultaneously driven out of the unions. This was the case for example with Bruno Proserpio (known as Milanese), a militant of the Fraction in Marchienne-au-Pont (Belgium), expelled in 1929 from the PCI and the union. Political refugees, often illegal, threatened with deportation at any moment, the militants tried to find help from 'Secours Rouge'. Expelled from Luxemburg in 1930, 'Milanese' was able to enter France thanks to this organisation. But very quickly militants were expelled from it even though Secours Rouge claimed to be open to all working class victims of repression. Subjected to the control of the Stalinist Comintern, it would only defend and materially aid those who submitted to the directives of the CPs (9).

This political (rather than physical) isolation from the working class was manifested in the most striking way in the absence of any links with proletarian youth. In Liebknecht's words, the latter was the 'flame of the revolution', but it was generally missing from the ranks of the Fraction. Most of the militants were between 30 and 50 years old; new blood was not flowing in as it did during the revolutionary period of 1917-23 (10).

This indifference of working class youth towards revolutionary activity - which sometimes took the form of hostility to the old revolutionaries "who had become objects of contempt for young workers,

and sometimes victims of their fanatical blindness” (11) - was also the fruit of the period of counter-revolution. The young were left to themselves and became factors in the spread of anti-working class ideas and illusions:

Under the impulse of October 1917, working class youth radiated round the world the hopes raised by this great victory of the world proletariat. When the latter went through its first defeats, the young people tended to withdraw into themselves and as defeat followed defeat, as the resulting political divisions multiplied and as the length and intensity of the crisis ravaged the workers ranks, the youth was first seized by disquiet, then by indifference, and was finally completely dis-oriented, falling into the prevailing atmosphere of action for action's sake as peddled by the reactionary organisations. Finding itself alone, left to itself in the face of an extremely complex situation, unused to theoretical work and feverishly looking for an activity which would allow it to forget reality, the youth easily became an element in the acceleration, maturation and triumph of the objectives of the capitalist class. (Bilan no. 12, October 1934, “Le problème de la jeunesse” by Hilden (Hildebrand).)

In such a situation, it was understandable that militants close to the Fraction should give into despair and fall into unthought-out actions. This was the case with Beiso, a former PCI militant, responsible for its activities in France. He had been accused by the PCI of being an agent provocateur. Hostile to the policies of Stalin who had signed the celebrated pact with Laval, and sympathetic to the positions of the ‘Bordigists’, he was expelled from the party. Enraged by the accusations against him, in August 1935 he shot down the PCI's leader in Paris, Montanari. Sentenced to five years in gaol, he was only defended by the Fraction; the Trotskyists did not solidarise with him (12).

Such an act showed the pressures and hostilities faced by revolutionary militants who refused to go along with the ride. The weakest often responded to their isolation with acts of despair.

The Left Fraction was perfectly conscious of this dramatic, stifling situation and did not seek to bide it. Its isolation was the price it had to pay for not reneging on its positions; its activity had to be restricted to propaganda in an increasingly restricted milieu:

It's clear that at the present time we can only propagate political positions without the proletariat having the possibility of applying them. This does not mean that our positions are wrong, but just that it is necessary to tear the masses away from the capitalist influences which are dissolving them... if there is one chance of avoiding the massacres of a new war and of unleashing an insurrectionary struggle, it resides in the strict maintenance of the principled positions of communism, which the vanguard will have to have succeeded in linking to widescale movements of struggle. (Bilan no. 12, October 1934 'Le problème de la Sarre: Non! Non! Non!')

Resignations, betrayals, the hostile atmosphere weighing on the Fraction within the working class, could however not get the better of militants hardened by revaluation and repression. While the Fraction was composed of workers, it was not 'workerist'. It had been solidified as much by its past as by its theoretical framework. Working not for the immediate but for the future, it thought - following the Russian example - that only a war could raise it out of obscurity by provoking the revolution. Far from flattering this or that action of the workers, which tended to end in yet another retreat, in yet another procession behind the Tricolour and in expressions of anti-German chauvinism, it always held on to a critical analysis of events. "The reconstruction of the working class, thrown into disarray by the bourgeoisie" could only come through the revolutionary seizure of power.

The Fraction saw this resurgence of the revolutionary class coming essentially out of the struggle on the economic terrain, through the defensive general strike "against wage reductions and threats to the

workers' gains", an the condition that this was not used by the governments of the 'Popular Front', who would inevitably turn it against the proletariat. The failure of the strikes in Belgium and France in 1936 seemed to the Fraction to be the crowning glory of capitalism's victory banquet.

The central activity was therefore the political preparation of working class militants through the development of the Fraction's influence in the small revolutionary milieu. Far from theorising its isolation, *Bilan* dedicated itself to discussion and the confrontation of its positions with other political groups situating themselves outside Stalinism and social-democracy. Such groups would have to show a great deal of political clarity and a real will to discuss for a community of work to be established between them and the Italian Left.

Discussions with Union communiste

In 1933, however, it was less the Italian Left that would polarise revolutionary militants than the Opposition, who even managed to provoke a split by two militants of the Paris section: Mathieu (real name Severino) and Gandi (Comegni), who published an ephemeral bulletin (3 issues): *Pour la Renaissance Communiste*. This split took place on the basis of defining Russia as state capitalist. The regroupment that began to take place around Union Communiste seemed to offer them a wider field for intervention. Their attempts to get their positions across within this new organisation ended in failure, and these two militants withdrew from political life.

The year 1933, the year of defeat in Germany, was rich in splits from Trotskyism. Faced with Trotsky's attempts to proclaim a IVth International (13) and to work with left social-democracy, then with right-wing social-democracy in practising 'entrism', half of the French Communist League split. 35 militants

joined the first Union Communiste formed by Chazé and the XVth rayon (Courbevoie, Nanterre) with Bagnolet's opposition. This group, which lasted until the war, became the most important numerically, having more members than the Italian Left and the small Trotskyist group reduced to a handful by the split (14).

While the Fraction intervened orally at the regroupment conference, contact between the two organisations remained very difficult. In its first issues, Union Communiste could hardly be distinguished from Trotskyism, except that it criticised its haste to form the IVth International. Like Trotsky, it criticised the SP and the CP for not carrying out the united front against fascism. During the events of February 1934, it called for workers' militias and reproached these two parties for not setting them up to fight fascism. In April 1934, it noted with satisfaction that the Socialist Left was "taking up a revolutionary attitude". Vis-à-vis democracy, no. 3 of *Internationale*, organ of Union Communiste, affirmed that it was for the defence of threatened democratic freedoms, and for a partial defence of French bourgeois democracy. In 1935, at the time of the Stalin-Laval pact, it made contact with *Révolution Proletarienne*, some pacifists and the Trotskyist groups, calling for these elements to come together in a new Zimmerwald. In 1936, it participated on a consultative basis in the creation of the new Trotskyist party (Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste).

An evolution took place in Union Communiste when it began to question antifascism and refused any indirect support for the Popular Front, which it defined as the ideal instrument of the bourgeoisie.

Similarly, there was a rapid evaluation on the Russian question in the group, which was animated by Henri Chazé, Laroche and Lastérade de Chavigny. It rejected any defence of the USSR, denouncing the "Russian bureaucracy" as a new bourgeoisie.

The Italian Fraction followed the evolution of Union Communiste with a good deal of distrust. The splits that took place in Union Communiste towards left social-democracy, its activism in the committees against the 'Union Sacrée', in fronts englobing anarchists and Trotskyists within the Technicians' Federations in which Chazé was active, none of this seemed very encouraging to *Bilan*. The latter noted that "... the Union has endlessly called for 'coming together', symbols of confusion and mystification", and it asked whether UC warned to "finish with zigzags and vacillation". In 1936 it concluded that while it was possible to discuss with the *Internationale* group, there was no possibility of joint work:

...at present we see no possibility of establishing a serious community of work with the Union. We are and will remain fully prepared to discuss with it, so that the comrades of the Union and also our own comrades can draw some clarity out of such polemics. (Bilan no. 29, March-April 1936, 'L'écrasement du prolétariat français et ses enseignements internationaux', report for discussion by Jacobs).

UC was also very distrustful towards *Bilan*. *Internationale* saw in the Fraction's attitude an excess of pride, as the implacable messianism of Italian immigrants:

... the Bordigists declare themselves to be virtually predestined to become the nucleus of the future international organisation just because they are Italians, and thus armed with an unequalled experience and political-doctrinal framework. (Bulletin d'informations et de liaisons, no. 2, November 1935).

Equally difficult were the relations with the American groups which had moved away from official

Trotskyism.

The Communist League of Struggle

The first group, Communist League of Struggle, had emerged in 1931 out of a split with Cannon's group, which represented official Trotskyism. This group, led by Vera Bush and Weisbord, had made contact with all the groups opposed to Trotsky in order to create a 'left communist' international organisation. It contacted the New York Federation, and even sent delegates to Europe to discuss both with the Italian Left and the Union Communiste. In 1935, it proposed to *Bilan* an international conference, with which the Fraction refused to associate. The Communist League of Struggle accused the 'Bordigists' of isolating themselves:

In refusing to associate yourselves in any way with other groups, the Italian Fraction is condemning itself to live in isolation, detached not only from the activities of other oppositional groups, even those which are quite close to you in certain areas, but also detached from the activities of the working class in so far as these activities appear in its political organisations. (Vera Bush in *Bilan* no. 26, December 1935).

In fact there were profound disagreements. The Communist League defended the regime of the Negus at the time of the Italian-Abyssinian war, in the name of 'the principle of national liberation struggles'. Supporting the USSR, it rack up Trotsky's theses on the permanent revolution', which affirmed the possibility of bourgeois revolutions supported by Russia, a country whose economy was 'socialist' and 'proletarian' in content.

While the Italian Left did not refuse to discuss and polemics, it did reject any voluntarist attempt to

create international oppositions, blocs of alliances aimed at artificially proclaiming new Internationals. The experience of its work with the International Left Opposition had convinced it that such methods could only lead to confusion, as long as the new questions arising out of the defeats in Russia and Germany had not been clarified and deepened to their very roots:

We categorically refuse to collaborate in any initiative to form an international organisation, if we are not guaranteed against the repetition of the numerous enterprises of confusion which have infected the Communist movement in recent years.

Despite our refusal to participate in such a conference, and as long as you continue your principled struggle against the two existing Internationals and all the currents attached to them (even the extreme left of Trotskyism), we still consider it useful to carry on a polemic between the two organisations on the problems posed to the proletariat. (Reply by the Fraction, Jacobs, Bilan no. 26).

The Revolutionary Workers' League and Oehler

The second group, a spur from the Trotskyist Workers' Party in 1935, founded by Hugo Oehler (hence the label 'Oehlerism' given to it by Trotsky) called itself the Revolutionary Workers' League. It published a paper called *Fighting Workers* and declared itself to be a partisan of the IVth International. Very activist, it had presented a candidate to the 1936 presidential election. It declared itself in favour of the defence of the USSR, where "the dictatorship of the proletariat remains". Its position on Russia was very contradictory. It defined it as bourgeois: "In the hands of the Stalinists, the state is constituted by a political, industrial bureaucracy which oppresses the masses in its own interests and in those of the world bourgeoisie." This position was quite close to that of *Bilan*, but the conclusion drawn logically by the Italian Left was the non-defence of the USSR.

The two organisations had opposing positions on other points, such as the ‘progressive’ nature of national liberation struggles, democratic slogans and antifascism.

Another group, close to the other two, the League for a Revolutionary Workers’ Party, led by the economist Field, was very workerist and wanted to create a party immediately without any prior discussion on aims and principles.

All the discussions in New York between the Fraction and these three groups ended in failure. The Spanish events (see below) were to complete the split between these groups and the ‘Bordigist’ current.

The Italian Fraction reproached these groups not so much for their political positions as for their incoherent attitude. The Italian Left was not an organisation which would suddenly change positions in the most confused manner. It would only modify its positions through a slow but sure process of discussion.

For the Fraction, a Communist organisation was too serious a thing to be subjected to 180 degree turns; it had too great a sense of responsibility — the inheritance of the time when it constituted the leadership of the PCI — to compromise it through acts or positions which it judged to be premature.

But above all it was practically the only organisation, along perhaps with a part of the German-Dutch Left and the Mattick group in the USA, to define the period opened up by the victory of Nazism in Germany as one of counterrevolution. In such a period, it was a matter of resisting the ride towards war rather than rushing towards a premature regroupment. It saw the political confusion which

characterised the groups which emerged and then quickly disappeared as the expression of the general immaturity of the revolutionary movement, which was paying tribute to the atmosphere of profound counter-revolution. It saw the importance of preserving its own strength. Not that it rejected discussion and polemic. *Prometeo* and *Bilan* were full of polemics and discussion texts with all the groups to the left of Trotskyism which situated themselves on the basis of the IIIrd International. But it considered that its first task was one of theoretical clarification in order to be able to intervene without peril in the political milieu, and to prepare for its future tasks as a party in the resurgence of the revolution, which was a distant prospect.

The definite break with Trotskyism

By 1934, the break with Trotskyism was total. Trotsky had proclaimed the necessity for the IVth International because he believed a revolutionary upsurge to be imminent. During the events of May 1936 he declared that “the French revolution has begun”. His attitude was identical during the war in Spain and the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, where for him the ‘national liberation’ of China was not the prelude to world war but the prologue to the ‘Chinese Revolution’.

At the beginning *Bilan* was careful to distinguish between Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement, which it saw as false friends of the illustrious leader of the Red Army and the Comintern. In April 1934, when Trotsky was chased out of France, the Fraction still described him as “a luminous example of revolutionary courage” and demanded that “the old Communist leader be allowed to return to Russia in order to be able to continue his struggle for the world revolution” (*Bilan* no. 6, ‘La bourgeoisie française expulse Leon Trotsky’). A few months afterwards, when the “old Communist leader” had decided in favour of the ‘Bolshevik-Leninist’ groups entering the SFIO in France and the POB in Belgium, *Bilan*

modified its judgement and no longer distinguished the leader from his disciples:

Trotsky has rapidly disappointed us. Today he is slipping and we wonder whether this is a definitive fall on his part or an eclipse which the events of tomorrow will dissipate. in any case, in the present situation, we have to wage a pitiless struggle against him and his partisans who have crossed the Rubicon and rejoined social -democracy. (Bilan no. 11 September 1934, 'Les Bolchevik-Léninistes entrent dans la SFIO').

The Italian Left, which had learned from Bolshevism that social-democracy had definitively betrayed during World War I by defending the war and the 'fatherland in danger', and that this treason was irreversible, proclaimed that the Trotskyists' entry into the SFIO marked their disappearance as a revolutionary current "in the International of traitors and renegades". Thus the IVth International was a "stillborn abortion" for having tried to "bypass the rout of the masses and the crisis of the revolution and take a whip to history, one made up of desperate desires". The conclusion was a struggle without mercy against Trotsky, a "great eagle" who had fallen into the mud, and against the 'Bolshevik-Leninists' who were "taking up their place in the enemy's ranks, and which will have to be swept away in order to set up the new organisms of the proletariat" (*Bilan* no. 10, August 1934, 'De l'Internationale deux et trois quarts à la Deuxième Internationale').

First joint work with the Belgian Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes

Up until 1936-37, only the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes in Belgium worked in close contact with the Italian Fraction.

As we have seen, the LCI was born out of a split with the group in Charleroi led by Lesoil. It was really

formed in 1932. Unlike *Prometeo*, it wanted to orient its work towards the creation of a second communist party and rejected “the proposal to constitute itself as an internal fraction of the official CP as being dangerous and leading to new and cruel disappointments for the development of a communist influence in Belgium” (Declaration, November 1930). In contact with the Italian Fraction in Belgium, in 1932 it went back to its original idea of forming a party; it considered that the task of any revolutionary was to “regroup in organisations fighting completely independently of the official communist parties for the triumph of communism” (*Le Communiste* no. 9, November 1932, “Comment l’Opposition s’est-elle scindée?”, par Hennaut).

On the nature of the Russian state it more or less followed the same path as the Union Communiste. In its declaration of principles of February 1932, it considered itself to be “the best continuators and executors of the Bolshevik doctrine which triumphed in the Russian revolution of October 1917”; it declared that its duty was to “defend the soviet regime against any attack by imperialism”.

One or two years later, it defined Russia as state capitalist, and the soviet state as a bourgeois state. Following its contacts with the Dutch Left, it began little by little to defend more or less ‘councilist’ positions on the nature and role of the party. The party did not have the task of taking power and installing its dictatorship. It thought that the primordial role in the revolution fell to the workers’ councils. This position led to an exchange of texts between the Fraction and the LCI; this in turn contributed much to the clarification of the Russian question within the Italian Left.

The same divergences as with Union Communiste came to light in the permanent debate going on in Brussels. In 1933, just as UC had done at a given moment, the LCI thought that “the effort of left

Communists should be directed above all to the reserves of social democracy”; it envisaged the possibility of the emergence of “revolutionary nuclei within the independent socialist parties under the irresistible push of the masses”.

But unlike UC, the LCI had a ‘participationist’ attitude to elections (15). It had already stood, as an Opposition, at the elections of 1928 and 1929. Afterwards it no longer took part directly in elections though in 1932 it declared itself in favour of a vote for the PCB, because “despite everything, it represents the idea of the proletarian revolution”. It was the same again during the 1935 by-elections. In 1936, the LCI pronounced officially in its Bulletin in favour of a vote for the POB, in order not to “facilitate the arrival of fascism”. (The Belgian ‘Rexist’ - fascists - presented a large number of candidates in liaison with the Flemish nationalists).

Despite the deep gulf between them — on certain points more profound than between the Fraction and UC — the Italian Left maintained contact with the LCI and even established a ‘community of work’ with them in the form of joint meetings, and sometimes even joint interventions. According to *Bilan* in 1935 (no. 22, August-September, ‘Projet de résolution sur les liaisons internationales’), the Hennaut group was “the only grouping directed towards the programmatic definition required to give the Belgian proletariat its class party”.

This difference in attitude towards the LCI was based on the formation of a minority within the League (a majority in Brussels), opposed to Hennaut on all the main questions (elections, anti-fascism, the Russian question, party and councils, etc.). This minority, whose main representative was Mitchell - who signed himself Jehan in the Bulletins of the LCI - was fundamentally in agreement with the Italian Fraction. Neither the Italian Fraction, nor Mitchell’s minority wanted a split. Aware of their duty to

clarify political positions for as long as possible, they did not aim for an immediate success, which would have strengthened the Italian Fraction numerically but without a clear separation having taken place. At the same time, the discussion with Hennaut's majority was not yet blocked, and had shown that it could still help the group's evolution towards the positions of the Italian Left. It was above all the LCI's openness to the most profound confrontation of ideas which made it a much more favourable so than the UC, which was so strongly marked by its Trotskyist origins.

As long as there were no dramatic events facing the orientation of the Ligue, this community of work carried on. The war in Spain was to provoke a grave crisis which gave rise to a split with the LCI and the formation of the Belgian Fraction.

As for the Dutch Left, with which the LCI was in contact, relations were only indirect. There was undoubtedly a problem of language and a certain lack of acquaintance with their respective positions. The GIC, which published *Rätekorrespondenz* was in liaison with the Mattick group in Chicago, and with some Danish elements. Isolated in Holland since the 1920s, the left around Gorter and Pannekoek, Canne-Meyer and Appel had made little effort to contact the Italian Left. It was only after the Second World War than there were, for a number of years, discussions (and polemics) between the two main communist lefts, through the Gauche Communiste de France (16) and the Belgian Communist Fraction, and the Maximilien Rubel Councils Communist Group.

Moreover, the divergences were very deep, both on the question of the party and the question of the workers' councils. The GIK's definition of the Russian revolution as bourgeois (the GIK's 'Theses on Bolshevism' were published in 1935) further widened the gulf. However, unlike the 'Bordigist' current

after 1945, the Italian Fraction considered the KAPD, then its successor the GIK, to be a revolutionary proletarian current; it did not resort to the anathemas hurled at it by Bordiga in the 20's, who followed Lenin in labelling it as the 'infantile left' and 'anarcho-syndicalism'. The German left current had in fact been the first left reaction within the Comintern, on the questions of the United Front, the trade unions, parliamentarism, and the internal and external policies of the Russian state. The Italian Left underlined this point, while at the same time insisting on the practical impossibility of having a working relationship with groups other than the LCI:

...we consider that the IInd Congress... does not imply the exclusion of the internationalist Communists of Holland (the Gorter tendency) and elements of the KAPD. It has to be seen that these currents represent the first reaction to the difficulties of the Russian state, the first experience of proletarian management, in linking up with the world proletariat through a system of principles elaborated by the International; then their exclusion did not bring any solution to these problems. (Bilan no. 22, 'Projet de résolution sur les liaisons internationales').

The Italian Fraction was thus not completely isolated; it tried to maintain a permanent contact with all the groups to the left of Trotskyism. It did not reject dialogue; rather it was that dialogue gradually broke down. In a period of extreme confusion for political groups (many of which did not come directly out of the old workers' movement), a period of demoralisation then artificial exaltation quickly followed by depression in the face of the accelerating slide towards world war, the general rule was withdrawal. This was the price the Italian Left paid for maintaining its own positions. For the Fraction principles were the arms of the revolution. In an unfavourable historical situation, it had the choice between swimming along with the tide, which was dragging humanity towards the abyss, in order to get

out of its isolation and gain the ear of the masses; or to defend with all its meagre strength the principles which gave it life, despite suffering insults and even hatred from the workers and the political currents which claimed to be revolutionary. The Italian Left made the most difficult choice.

NOTES

- (1) Cf. Vereeken, Juillet 1932, *Journées révolutionnaires insurrectionnelles et grève générale des mineurs*, Brussels, 1932 pamphlet.
- (2) Many elements on the crisis can be found in Fritz Sternberg, *The Conflict of the Century*.
- (3) 'Fascisme, Démocratie, Communisme', *Bilan* no. 13, Dec. 1934.
- (4) Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi), who was a member of the office workers' union, had excellent relations with the Socialist typesetters union in Brussels.
- (5) The police reports of the time, which in 1945 and afterwards were communicated at their request to militants who had been investigated during the fascist dictatorship, never indicated the informant's name. He seems to have had access to all the meetings of the Brussels section, and even of the central committee which sat in this city (cf. Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano*, t. II), in the section dealing with the Italian Fraction). In 1938 suspicion fell on Alfredo Bianco, an EC member in Paris; he was expelled. After the war, quite recently, Dante Corneli (in *Lo Stalinismo in Italia e nell'emigrazione antifascista*, Roma, 1977) did not hesitate to accuse Alfredo Morelli of being the informer. In fact neither one nor the other — until we have proof to the contrary — seem to fit in with these grave accusations. We must bear in mind the extremely difficult atmosphere of the 1930s. Each militant, faced with a hostile outside world, felt himself to be constantly surveyed and threatened. Suspicions sprang up like poisonous mushrooms. People tended to lose their heads. This historical enigma remains unsolved. (Bruno Bibbi, known as Bianco (1901-1979) joined the PCI after the war. After 1952, and until his death, he was a member of *Programma Comunista*).
- (6) In order to follow the 'odyssey of Ambrogio', cf. Anne Mettewie-Morelli: *Lettere et documents d'Ersilio Ambrogio*, Annali Feltrinelli, Milan, 1977.

(7) A militant of the Fraction in Lyon, 'Piccino' (Otello Ricceri), was selling *Prometeo* in 1931. He was attacked by Italian Stalinists who threatened to kill him. In order to get away he had to fire in the air. His assailants from the PCI denounced him to the French police, who beat him up so badly that he was handicapped for the rest of his life. (Testimony of Marco Chirik).

(8) This militant imprisoned in Russia, Luigi Calligaris, was the editor of a clandestine communist paper in Trieste from 1926-1932. He was banished to the island of Lipari, from which he escaped. Taking refuge in Moscow, he was arrested in 1935, and deported to the White Sea area. Letters from the Fraction demanding what had happened to him were not answered. The PCI, via the 'wigmaker' Germanetto, let it be understood that Calligaris had 'repented' and was now 'content' to work in Siberia 'for socialism'. The companion of Virgilio Verdaro had better 'luck'. Reduced to the most extreme poverty in Moscow, to the point that her child died of hunger, she was miraculously able to leave Russia in 1944-45 and joined her companion in Italian Switzerland.

(9) This information about the activity of the Fraction in Marchienne-au-Pont is taken from the interview with Bruno Proserpio by Mrs Anne Morelli, in her thesis on the Italian immigration in Belgium between the two wars. We are extremely thankful that she has shown us the pages dealing with the 'Bordigist' current in Belgium.

(10) Bordiga, in the obituary he wrote for Perrone (*Programma Comunista*, October 1957) underlined: "In 1921 at the Livorno Congress, Ottorino was 20; along with the whole socialist youth at the time, he was with us. The Serratists and Turatinists put us in the minority, but we left then without any of the youth".

(11) *Communisme* no. 4, 15 July 1937 'Le rôle de la jeunesse prolétarienne dans le mouvement ouvrier'.

(12) Cf. *Bilan* no. 22, September 1935, 'l'attentat de Beiso'. Trotsky, in an article he devoted to this affair ('For a jury of workers' organisations') noted that Beiso has been through some extremely painful ordeals which have seemed intolerable to him and which, in the end, have made him unbalanced and pushed him to commit an act both irrational and criminal". He concluded that it was necessary to "throw as much light as possible on this affair" in order to prevent "the repetition of people being killed by revolver shots in the revolutionary milieu". The PCI accused Beiso of being at one and the same time a "fascist", a "Trotskyist" and a "Bordigist".

(13) For the relations between the Trotskyist movement and organisations like the SAP and RSP, cf. Michel Dreyfus, *Bureau de Londres ou IV^e Internationale? Socialistes de gauche et Trotskyistes en Europe (1933-1940)*. Doctoral thesis, Paris-10 Nanterre, 1978.

(14) The exit of the 'Jewish group' in 1933, which went on to join Union Communiste, reduced the Frank and Molinier Ligue Communiste to a small group of perhaps 30 militants.

(15) A strong opposition to this 'electoralist' policy of the LCI crystallised around Mitchell who published a critical text: 'La

Ligue devant le problème des élections', 1936.

(16) *Bilan* published texts by an old friend of Gorter, Abraham Soep, a syndicalist-revolutionair from the beginning of the century, a Dutchman who, with Van Overstraeten, had been a founding member of the PCB. The Fraction also published, in nos. 19 to 21 of its review, contributions by Hennaut summarising the *Grundprinzipien kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung*, Berlin 1930. The main texts of the Dutch-German GIK in the 1930s were republished by Rowohlts Klassiker: *Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten Hollands*, Hamburg, 1971.

