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# Italy the intractable crisis

Undoubtedly the seventies was the most intense and in some respects the most eventful decade in Italy's history since the Second World War. During those years a very bitter social and political clash developed which has not yet been resolved and at the centre of which there has been, and still is, the need for a fundamental change of ruling classes.

The entire 'Italian crisis' and its prolonged and acute character are to be explained by the fact that this crisis can be resolved in a positive way only if profound modifications are introduced into the country's economic, social and political structure. But if this is to be done, it is essential that new forces, and especially the forces of the working class movement, take hold of the helm of the nation.

Because this has not yet happened, notwithstanding the advance and the undoubted successes of the forces of the Left, and of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in particular, the crisis in the country has continued to worsen and, as the last decade came to a close, it assumed extremely alarming proportions.

It is not simply a question of economic problems. On the contrary, from this standpoint the country shows a certain vitality (even though, in the absence of serious economic planning, the industrial system is continuing to go downhill, especially in the leading sectors: iron and steel, chemicals, the car industry, etc). It is a question of political, moral and social problems.

The following events have taken place in the last few months alone. There was the terrible fascist carnage in Bologna with 80 dead (while 'red' terrorism has also resumed its killings). An extremely grave scandal has come to light, involving Christian Democrat ministers of the government now in power, senior army officers, members of the judiciary and also members of the secret service itself (it concerns a tax fraud which has been going on for years and is supposed to have cost the state about two million million lire).

And, of course, the inland areas in the south, the most poverty-stricken part of the country, have been struck by a terrible earthquake which claimed thousands of victims, many of whom, however, died as a result of inexcusable delays, lack of preparation and muddle on the government's part. The moral indignation and the fury in the country were expressed by the President of the Republic, who, in a message addressed to the nation, sternly attacked the government, almost

bringing about its collapse. The country thus stood on the brink of a constitutional crisis of such gravity that it might have threatened the very existence of the Republic that had resulted from the War of Liberation.

## A 'democratic alternative'

The unstable situation, the absence of leadership, the moral and political bankruptcy of the ruling classes could not have been more obvious or more serious, and it was in this situation that the Italian Communist Party issued a proposal for a government that would include all the 'healthy' forces of the nation and exclude the Christian Democrat Party (DC), the party that has governed Italy without interruption since 1947 and, in the course of all those years, has built up a complex power system based on a very close relationship, and in many cases on confusion, with the state.

It is the prolonged continuation of this power system that is making the Italian crisis so acute, threatening to turn it at any moment into a crisis involving the institutions of the country.

Given that the forces within the DC which stood for an end to this situation had suffered defeat (Aldo Moro, the man who had wanted to bring about a renewal in the DC and envisaged governing with the Communists, had been assassinated) and that in the existing state of affairs the only programme which the leading group of that party seems to have is one of clinging on to power for themselves at all costs, the PCI has abandoned its proposal for a government of 'national solidarity' (ie, a government that would include both the PCI and the DC) and is putting forward instead a proposal for a 'democratic alternative' government, without the DC.

Does this mean that the PCI is abandoning the strategy of the 'historic compromise'? This is a legitimate question, even though a political strategy should never be confused with a formula for government.

The answer, briefly, is that the PCI's strategy, in substance, is not undergoing a change, even though substantial novelties are being introduced into it. The basic aim which it sets itself continues to be the same: to make possible an effective change of ruling classes; to initiate, in the specific historical conditions obtaining in Italy, an original process of democratic transition to socialism.

This goal was not reached during the seventies.

Nor has there been, however, a turn of a 'right' type, as in other European countries (Britain, France, Sweden, Portugal). The situation is still unresolved and the Italian working class, developing its thinking on the basis of the experiences of recent years, can still offer itself as a credible and capable leadership for society as a whole.

## TRADE UNION ADVANCE IN THE SEVENTIES

The first group of problems that call for thought are those concerning the relationship established in these years between the struggles of the working class and the prospects for the economic system.

At the beginning of the seventies the fiercest and most important trade union conflict of the postwar period was in full swing. This was the so-called 'hot autumn', which started in 1969 but dragged on, practically without any intermission, until the renewal of agreements in 1972.

It was a cycle of working class struggles of the very greatest importance, in the course of which two fundamental results were achieved:

1 The wages of the Italian working class were being brought up to European standards and, what was even more important, the big differences in remuneration between the sexes and between geographical areas (north and south) were in the process of being ironed out.

2 The systems for regulating the workforce (speed and rhythm of

work, working conditions, qualifications, organisation of work) came under discussion and a type of conflict situation was introduced into the factories which profoundly changed the relation of forces between the two sides.

The most important result of those struggles, however, was a political one: the emergence, at the base and in the workplaces, of *Councils of Delegates* and the overcoming of the division which had persisted since 1948 between the various trade union organisations (the CGIL — Communist and Socialist; the CISL — Catholic and Christian Democrat; the UIL — Social Democratic and Republican). This in itself brought about a profound change in the whole set-up of the Italian political system, in which a completely new protagonist, with great weight and great mobilising capacity, made its entry.

It is necessary to linger for a moment on this point, because it can help in obtaining a better understanding of the special features of the 'Italian case'.

The first thing that must be emphasised is that the *Councils of Delegates* did not come into existence spontaneously or, still less so, in opposition to the old trade unions.

All the efforts made by groups of extremists along those lines had in fact failed. On the contrary, the Councils came into existence in Italy precisely through the will of the trade unions (especially the CGIL) and with the prospect of making them more democratic.

Precedent for this already existed: that of the *Councils* of 1920. At that time the *Councils* (and Antonio Gramsci was one of the leading figures in that undertaking) actually did come into existence in the midst of polemics with, and also a struggle against, bureaucratic and backward trade unions. In 1970, on the other hand, it was the leading groups in the trade unions which themselves provided leadership in the renewal.

### Changes in the working class

The struggles of the 'hot autumn' had brought to light, especially among the new working class reinforcements, a widespread demand for democracy which was, in reality, a demand for power. Power within the trade union organisation (that is to say in the way in which struggles were conducted); power in the factory (ie, the possibility of exercising supervision over working conditions); and, in more general terms, power in society (the demand, for instance, that the trade union should fight for reforms, for the so-called 'indirect wage': housing, health services, transport, education).

This strong pressure from below arose out of the far-reaching modifications which had taken place in the fifties and sixties in the composition of the working class and in its working and living conditions. In those years, in fact, millions of people emigrated from the south of the country to the north, filling the industrial cities to bursting point and bringing about acute social problems. In addition to this, the working conditions inside the factories had changed in line with processes very familiar in the more developed countries, with a progressive decline in the quality of labour, which was becoming increasingly monotonous and standardised. The great protagonist of the 'hot autumn' in Italy was in fact the so-called 'mass worker', ie, the worker tied to the assembly line, with low qualifications, low pay and, generally speaking, remote from a trade union which had its fundamental basis among the older and highly skilled workers.

The Italian trade unions must be given credit for having been able to cope with the pressure which came from this component (by that time in a majority) in the working class, and for being able to make this the occasion for a far-reaching renewal both of the trade union's own programme of struggle and of its organisational structures.

Before the *Councils*, the trade union, as an autonomous organisation, did not exist in the factories. In the factories there were *Internal Commissions* made up of a very limited number of workers

who had been elected on the basis of opposing lists: of the CGIL, of the CISL and, where they existed, the autonomous unions of the particular firms (these last were not very widespread in Italy, however, because the employers, making a strategic 'error' during the fifties in their assessment, gambled entirely on the CISL, which at that time was violently anti-communist). The trade union organisations, as such, did not have the right to enter the factories. Trade union leadership was exercised *from outside*, so to speak, and each organisation gave leadership to its 'own' people.

With the advent of the *Councils* the scene underwent a radical change.

In their great majority the delegates were elected on the basis of a single list by *all* the workers of the department or, better still, of the whole workforce. The *Council* formed in this way became the basic organisation of the trade union and the old division between *Internal Commissions* and *external* trade union organisations was thereby overcome.

In the meantime, through the action of the PCI, Parliament voted in favour of a 'Statute of Rights of the Working People', which confirmed the right of trade union leaders to enter the factories in order to hold workers' assemblies or meetings of the *Councils*.

At this point the trade union question ceases to be simply an organisational one, it also becomes a political question. What aims should the trade unions set themselves in the struggle and how should they link the problems of working conditions with those of general economic development? This has been the great question which has been worked on and discussed during the past ten years.

### NEW PERSPECTIVES AND NEW DIFFICULTIES

The struggles of 1969-70 thus led to important advances — but in the light of the subsequent needs of the trade unions, showed a very



serious limitation. They did not point towards an ultimate goal. They made an onslaught on the mechanism of accumulation, throwing it into crisis, without setting out, immediately and consciously, on a search for a positive outcome to this crisis.

The limitations of those struggles also had rather serious political consequences, so much so that in 1971 and 1972, especially in the south of the country, there was a big swing to the right, due in part to the fact that the working class seemed to be advancing victoriously at

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the expense of the weaker sections of society: young people, women, the unemployed, the south.

The trade unions then tried to make an initial rectification, concentrating their efforts on some broader legislative reforms which were intended to serve as a *support* for the recent wage gains and to ease social tension. A big general strike was carried out over housing and another was threatened over education.

But leaving aside the illusory nature of efforts to modify relations of power and complex social structures with mere legislation, and apart from the fact that in Italy, in any case, the problem is not one of laws but, in the last analysis, that of their application (and this means the problem of who governs), it was still simply a question of demands and struggles which affected the distribution of income but did not tackle the basic problem confronting the country — the problem of employment and development.

This was the problem which exploded with great force in the seventies, not just because of the working class struggles, but also because of the world economic crisis.

This combination of factors gave an even stronger impetus to the self-critical thinking which was going on in the trade unions and which found an important expression in the drafting of a programme of demands for the renewal of the national agreements of the various sections of the workforce in 1976 and 1979 (in Italy these agreements are renewed at three-yearly intervals and, as a rule, all together, so that millions of working people become involved in struggle at one and the same time).

### A new set of demands

Whereas with the renewal of agreements in 1972-3 matters remained, so to speak, within the 'horizon' of 1969 and the whole effort was directed towards a radical change in working and living conditions in the factory, without concerning oneself with the effect that these changes would have on the general conditions of the economy. In 1976, at the centre of the arguments about agreements, the trade unions brought forward, on the other hand, the need to acquire *rights to information* regarding the policy of firms, and especially regarding investments, seeking to relate them to a programme for the reconversion and reinvention of the industrial system.

The qualitative leap was obvious: while not in fact abandoning the defence and improvement of the living and working standards of the employed workers and while standing firmly by their egalitarian policy (in 1975, for example, they succeeded in obtaining the unification of the reference point of the 'mobile scale' — the method by which Italian wages are index-linked — making this the same for everyone, whereas previously it had favoured white collar workers and the higher categories), the trade unions now shifted their main drive on to the field of accumulation, seeking, by winning rights to information and to supervision over investments, to stimulate its resumption.

The trade unions, in essence, adopted a line of moderation with regard to wages but, in exchange, laid claim to exercising a leading role in the struggle to enforce an economic policy of a new type.

The basic problem was that of influencing the policy of firms and even that of the government while retaining, as trade unions, their own autonomy, that is to say, without entering the path of 'joint management' of the West German type or that of collaboration on a subordinate level with the political authorities.

The path chosen by the Italian trade unions was that of standing firmly by the principle of the *oneness* of the negotiating body: it is the trade union which negotiates everything at all levels. There does not exist, as in the case in West Germany, for instance, a distinction between the trade union which negotiates wages on the one hand, and, on the other, the representatives of the working people on the management councils of firms. In Italy the body which negotiates wages, hours and the way work is organised in the factory is the same as the one which negotiates and supervises, with the instruments of trade union struggle and only with them, the firm's investments. And it is also the same body which, through its local and national representatives, discusses and negotiates with the political authorities, not economic policy in general, but the most important options (methods of struggle against inflation, public investments, tax reform, etc).

### The failure to succeed

Along this innovating road, the Italian trade unions have obtained results which are significant but, in general, they have not succeeded in bringing about an effective turn in economic policy, nor have they succeeded in exercising real control over the ongoing processes of restructuring industry.

There are at least three reasons for the 'failure'.

In the first place there are subjective difficulties: in order to fight on this battlefield, a trade union has to make an immense cultural and political effort, putting it in a position actually to link the questions of the working class situation with those of general economic development. It is a question of mobilising millions of working people on questions such as: *What to produce? How to produce? And why produce?* And this cannot be done unless one builds up a mass industrial culture, of which only the initial elements can be perceived, and those only with difficulty.

The second sphere of difficulty is of an objective character and is related to the fact that the decisive sectors of the Italian economy, those in which agreement on investments might reach large figures and really affect the national economy, are *all* in a state of crisis and are therefore in a phase of reconversion or restructuring.

This ought not, in itself, to constitute an insuperable obstacle for the trade unions, although there remains the fact (borne out by the recent struggle of the Fiat workers<sup>1</sup>) that the trade unions find it very hard to operate in this field, which calls for a very high capacity for presenting propositions and also the willingness (very difficult to obtain from the working people) to accept alternative employment (as opposed to redundancy).

To this must be added the fact that in those places, too, where there is no crisis and where important commitments regarding investments are extracted from firms, it is not always easy for the trade unions to exercise effective control over those commitments. It means, in fact, asking the working people to strike if the undertakings are not

<sup>1</sup> Last year Fiat wanted to sack 15,000 people. After a prolonged struggle, it was agreed that Fiat would lose 10,000 jobs (as opposed to 15,000) on the condition that Fiat (or the government) found them alternative work. In the event of them failing to do this, then Fiat would be obliged to retain these jobs. (*ed.*)

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respected and that is a very difficult matter unless the failure to make the investment involves obvious and immediate harm to the working people.

Nevertheless, the real difficulty of the trade unions, the basic obstacle which they have come up against in recent years, the obstacle with which they are still confronted in developing their role as autonomous bodies in the economy, is *outside* the trade unions, is political.

The Italian experience during these years shows clearly that a new style economy is established *only* with a social struggle, at the workplaces and in society. This struggle is indispensable and decisive, but it is not sufficient.

What is needed is a *political power* which backs up that struggle, so to speak, and makes all those choices as regards fiscal and monetary policy, public expenditure, support for agriculture or key sectors which the struggle of the working people demands. What is required, in short, is a *political leadership undertaking effective reform*, otherwise even the new forms of participation and of democracy which are won in society, in the long run will not work.

That is the point we have reached in Italy and this constitutes the second group of problems on which the Left must reflect today.

### **BREAKING THE IMPASSE**

Centrally here we have the effort by the Italian Communist Party to establish that 'political leadership undertaking effective reform', through the policy of the 'historic compromise'. A very important effort but one which has not produced the results hoped for: the seventies ended without the struggles of the working people and the democratic forces, very important though they were, having succeeded in bringing about radical changes in the power structure.

This power is in a state of crisis. It no longer succeeds in imposing its own logic on Italian society, but the alternative is not yet ripe and the forces of the Left, too, are going through a difficult phase.

In order to appreciate the theoretical and practical effort undertaken during these years by the the PCI with its policy of the 'historic compromise', we should remember the basic aim which this policy has set itself, and sets itself today: the capacity of the working class to tackle the crisis of the capitalist system. If this point is lost sight of, moreover, the very policy of the trade unions that has already been outlined — a policy of which the Communists have been the most convinced supporters — would appear incomprehensible. So it is a matter of measuring one's strength with the crisis in order to assert, through a policy of democratic programming of the economy, the proper function of government.

If this is the task of the working class, then certain political consequences follow.

They are, in essence, of two kinds.

Firstly, what *type of social bloc* is needed for an experiment in 'democratic programming' to succeed? Is a 'working-class bloc' sufficient?

Secondly, what *type of political leadership* must be provided for society, and in particular for a society such as the Italian one? Is it sufficient to have a leadership made up solely of forces 'of the Left'?

To both these questions the Italian Communist Party has answered, and continues to answer, 'No', at least as an initial hypothesis.


A 'working-class bloc', in a society as stratified and complex as

mature capitalism, is not enough even to win a factory struggle when it assumes a political character (like, for instance, the struggle against 15,000 sackings at Fiat), so it is hardly adequate to carry out 'democratic programming'! With this end in view it is necessary to bring into being a bloc of a *democratic type*, which will embrace, in addition to the working class, intermediate social sectors and emerging social strata (the women, the young people, the unemployed).

As regards the political leadership, the problem is analogous, whether it is considered from the most general standpoint, of the relationship which should be established between the political leadership and the new forms of participation by the working class and the people which should be at the foundation of 'democratic programming', or whether it is considered from the more specific standpoint of the political forces which should, concretely, make up the government.

In both cases what must be aimed at is a *base* that is as wide as possible, in society, but also among the cultural and political components of the Italian people. Something which, side by side with the 'left-wing' and Marxist components, will include popular forces that are Catholic in tendency.

Why must this be done? Because a turn such as it is desired to bring about with the participation of the PCI in the government and with the launching of a process of 'democratic programming' of the economy is so radical and far-reaching that, without the original and autonomous contribution of the Catholic masses, it may turn out to be impossible, or in any event extremely hard, to carry this out (anyone who is aware of the history of Italy certainly knows that everything of a positive character that has been achieved in this country in the past 35 years has always been the result of a coming together and an understanding between Communists, Socialists and Catholics: the



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Resistance, the Republic, the Constitution, and to come up to the seventies, the building of a new type of trade union).

There is also a second reason which, in Italy, justifies the search for a type of political leadership which goes beyond the forces of the Left, and this is the relative fragility of the democratic system and the danger of a welding together of reactionary forces and moderate forces with results of a 'Chilean' kind.

### The relationship with the Christian Democrat Party

In order to solve both these problems — the relationship with the Catholic world (or, in any case, with a considerable part of it) and the relationship with the moderate forces — the decisive question is that of the relationship with the *Christian Democrat Party*, whether one opposes this party (as the PCI did for so many years and as it has again begun to do now) or whether, on the other hand, one looks for a form of dialogue and understanding with it (as happened between 1976 and 1978).

If we are to understand this problem, it is obviously necessary to be aware of the special features of the DC as compared with other bourgeois political formations in Europe.

In the first place, it is a question of a mass party. Not so much on account of the number of members, of whom, however, there are many, even though they are not very active, but because of its social basis: peasants, middle strata, workers, apart from decisive sections of the bourgeoisie, which prefer, however, to give it 'indirect' support. With these social realities the DC throughout all these years had at its disposal, and as far as the peasants are concerned, it continues to have, real 'transmission belts' of its own, ie, it has direct control of important social organisations (until 1969 it also controlled the CISL, that is to say, the country's second most important trade union organisation, over which it still preserves a certain influence).

To this it should be added that the DC, as distinct from other moderate parties that are in power in Europe, has, in the course of its long period of political domination, established an ever closer relationship with the state (the bureaucracy, the police and the secret services, television, the banks) and has promoted in every possible way its own intervention in the economy, 50% of which is in fact nationalised in Italy.

This, too, has been a very important channel for building up and maintaining the backing for its power system.

Lastly, we should not forget the most important thing, if not today, then certainly in the years from 1947 (the year when anti-fascist unity was broken) until 1963-4 and even later—the total and unconditional support of the Catholic Church and the United States.

Thanks to this network of support, and thanks also to the country's special historical (and geographical) position, the DC built up in Italy a political regime of a very special kind, 'immobilised' so to speak, in which the Communist opposition can still make important gains but

cannot, however, move into the government except at the cost of a far-reaching 'destabilisation' of government.

A political regime, a 'power system', in short, of which the DC is the 'centre', a fixed centre and one which does not tolerate real alternatives or even 'second leads', to use a theatrical term.

On what basis has this system maintained itself for so many years and how does it continue to do so? What has legitimised it in the eyes of the masses and still does legitimise it, at least in part? The answer is not difficult: anti-communism, or the division and passivity of the masses within the country and, abroad, the division of the world, the policy of blocs standing in opposition to each other, the cold war.

### Underlying instability

As long as these things had a firm basis in reality, the Christian Democrat power system not only enjoyed great stability but was even able to expand. When, whether as a result of the process of

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international detente with its ups and downs or, above all, as a consequence of the policy of the Italian Communist Party, a party that stakes everything on *unity* and the *leading role* of the masses, these things entered into a crisis in actual reality, the Christian Democrat system of power entered a phase of growing instability.

The DC is no longer strong enough to exercise hegemony over the political system on the old foundations, but it is still strong enough, however, to prevent the system from developing in a positive way.

On the other hand, the alternative represented by the PCI and the working class movement, although concrete, is still not strong enough to impose itself without dangers.

The whole situation rests on an equilibrium that is unstable, 'catastrophic' as Gramsci would have said. An equilibrium which can be the forerunner of authoritarian solutions unless it is successfully changed in a democratic direction. But this democratic solution is only possible if, in society, the relations of forces are changed successfully to the benefit of the Left and if the crisis of the DC, that is to say, the crisis of the *real* premises of its policy and its power, finds expression, not, as is always possible, in a swing back towards the moderates and the Right, but in a democratic advance on the part of the masses of Catholics and the intermediate strata which this party still succeeds in dominating.

It is therefore indispensable to have a policy which turns towards these social and cultural forces and either wants to see them play an active leading role *within* the DC in order to ensure that it undergoes a



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renewal, and impel the DC towards an understanding with the PCI and the working class movement, or else wants to see them *break away* from the DC if that party swings to the right and sets out to sweep away — in its own political downfall — the whole democratic system. The PCI's insistence on unity with the Catholics, on the defence and development of the democratic system, on alliance between the working class and the middle strata, finds in this its fundamental motivation. The very struggle against anti-communist prejudice, in this context, far from being a 'party' struggle or a struggle that is purely defensive, appears on the contrary, as the central aspect of a far wider democratic strategy aimed at *freeing*, not only the PCI from absurd discrimination, but the *entire* Italian political system from what is *today* blocking any possible evolution for it. Not a struggle of the Communists *for* the Communists, then, but a struggle of all democrats for democracy.

In short, the aim is to change into a weak point of the Christian Democratic Party what in the past used to be its fundamental strong point.

From this there emerged, in the years from 1975 to 1978, the challenge of the 'historic compromise' and from this there emerges today the invitation to the Christian Democrat 'world' to confront, with the working class movement, the problems of Italy's social and political renewal.

It has been asked and is being asked: 'But why aim *also* at a renewal of the DC?' The answer may even seem trivial: Why not? Why should the Communists give up acting *also* on political forces with a view to changing them, in addition to acting on social forces?

But apart from this, there is a constant rule of political life, there is a more basic reason which is concerned with the crisis of Italian society.

Just because this crisis is so serious and has such a sharply defined political character, it is ridiculous to think that Italian society, and consequently the great mass parties of which it is made up, can emerge from this crisis exactly the same as they were when they entered it.

That will not be the case. Everything will change: for better or worse, this will depend on the actual behaviour of each and all, but what is certain is that nothing and nobody, nor the Italian Communist Party either, will come out of the crisis the same as before.

If this is how matters stand, is it really so ridiculous to pose the problem of the possible evolution (or regression) of a party as complex as the DC? Or to ask oneself in what way the mass movements which the crisis will spur on in society will influence its policy and, in their turn, will be influenced by it?

### The dichotomy within Christian Democracy

We have already looked at the process of trade union unity (which was not inevitable and is not irreversible either). What effects did it have on the DC? And what effect did other very important mass movements have in the seventies: the student movement, the movement of anti-fascist unity (which was very strong between 1969 and 1974 in the fight against fascist terrorism), the women's movement and its democratic gains — divorce and abortion?

It would be absurd, and it would have been still more absurd in past years, not to pose this question and not to adopt a consistent policy.

All the more so since those mass movements, those social processes which threw the DC's power system into a state of crisis *from below*, opened up — and could not fail to do so — a very deep crisis in the leading circles of that party. That crisis was expressed in sharply contrasted ways.

On the one hand there was a sharp reaction from the Right, which even succeeded in providing itself with a mass basis in parts of the south and introduced a long period of terrorist violence which, unhappily, is not yet over.

On the other hand, however, in the Catholic world and in the DC itself, there were manifested strong trends towards renewal, which looked in a positive, even if timid, way towards relations with the PCI.

### The historic compromise

It was in this situation (1973) that the PCI put forward the idea of the 'historic compromise', that is to say, a policy of collaboration and understanding in order, on the one hand, to beat back right wing reaction and, on the other, to enable the democratic trends which were manifesting themselves in society to assert themselves *also* at government level.

This was what was attempted.

And the years from 1973 to 1977 showed that the attempt was not an absurd one.

The Left, and especially the Italian Communist Party, won great victories, both political and social (trade union unity was consolidated; the strategy of 'terror' was thrown into disarray; the referendum on divorce ended in victory; the PCI achieved electoral advances), while in the DC, on the other hand, a sharp clash developed which ended in a victory for the most progressive forces, led by a man who was prudent but of high political calibre — Aldo Moro.

And so there began an experiment which was very unusual and certainly difficult: a government of which the Communists did not form part but which, however, for the first time in 30 years, they supported after having agreed on its programme. This should have been the starting point for a more radical and more decisive turn. Instead it marked the highest point reached by the tide of unity.

On the day the government was formed — March 16, 1978 — Aldo Moro was kidnapped by terrorist forces and, 55 days later, he was killed.

The experiment in unity, which was already shaken by those events, began to fall apart: the government did not carry out its programme and within the DC the forces hostile to any relations with the PCI definitely regained the initiative, finding an unexpected ally in the Socialist Party. In the meantime the development of the economic crisis and the contradictory policy pursued by the government brought about discontent in the trade union movement, which found expression in a general strike. For the Italian Communist Party there was nothing to be done but to take note of the end of that experiment and go back into opposition.

This led to the political elections held ahead of time in 1979 and these resulted in a considerable loss of votes for the Communist Party, without the DC, however, gaining any direct advantage from that. Following this, there was an electoral recovery in the local government elections in 1980 and there occurred all the contradictory and dramatic developments referred to at the beginning of this article. So the political situation in Italy remains more than ever undecided, and more than ever, at its centre, there remains the question of a change of ruling classes. And this — limitations and mistakes notwithstanding — constitutes the fundamental merit of the policy of the Italian Communist Party.

Translated by A M Elliott.