



# Florence ESF: left-wing speakers attract biggest applause at Florence forum

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In Florence on 8 November at a packed European Social Forum meeting in a huge hall in the Fortezza da Basso more than 5,000 people listened to speakers on the theme of "parties and the movement". This was certainly the most interesting of the large scale "conferences" of the forum.

There were many references to the brutal repression in Genoa, to Carlo Giuliani, to the mass demonstrations of Italian workers over the past year, to approaching war, to capitalism and imperialism as the enemy, to 1917, etc. These were all rapturously received by an audience "mainly young Italians.

Fausto Bertinotti, leader of Rifondazione Comunista, stigmatised the total failure of reformism, calling it "the biggest block on the movement today". He pointed to the role of centre-left governments in Italy and France, discouraging active participation of millions of workers in political life and then collapsing to let in the right.

He even acknowledged that "we" had made mistakes in the past in not realising this. Of course, he did not renounce the whole policy of Rifondazione in propping up the centre left "Olive Tree" government in Italy in the mid-1990s, even when it was supporting imperialist policy in the Balkans and the Middle East.

He warmly praised the anti-capitalist movement for having led a huge revival of political life and renounced any goal of hegemonising the movement saying that that "Rifondazione is in the movement as one part amongst the other parts."

On the impending war against Iraq he said that the capitalist system needs this war to impose its order on the world and pledged Rifondazione to oppose it. The audience responded very enthusiastically to the more radical parts of his speech.

An MP for the German Greens, in opposition within his own party, received huge applause when he said that his party was "completely wrong to support war against Serbia and Afghanistan." But he too drew the wrong conclusion when he said, "social movements are the real engine of social change. Any social movement that stays in government too long becomes part of the establishment."

A party like the Greens (or the SPD) which takes power within the straightjacket of the capitalist state, which does not even intend to lay a finger on the billionaires let alone overthrow them, is certain to become incorporated from day one.

But neither is permanent opposition the answer either. We have to take power (not parliamentary office) by smashing up the whole apparatus of repression (the state) and then replace capitalism with social ownership and planning by working people as producers and consumers.

Olivier Besançon, of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, who won more than a million votes as its candidate in April's French presidential elections, was cheered and applauded when he said that "social movements, trade unionists and young people especially have all learned to mistrust parties. Who is to blame for this? For the traditional parties, the social movements and the trade unions were little toys for their use or, at worst, punch-bags."

He went on to say that "it was a great step forward when trade unionists learned they could struggle against their own party in government. Our struggle should be to pull together the anti-capitalist left wing, to create a "left wing of the

left wing", open to the ecological, revolutionary, Marxist, feminist and libertarian traditions."

Chris Nineham from the Socialist Workers Party and Globalise Resistance argued, "As we increasingly challenge the powerful, they will try to block us. All the issues debated at the ESF are connected. We are not involved in a series of separate campaigns but against a total system. Political parties can play a crucial role in this, but not those who talk radical to get votes and then make peace with the powerful. The parties I want to see are revolutionary ones that try to unite the struggles in order to confront the whole system."

Bernard Cassen from Le Monde Diplomatique and ATTAC, said that the movement had been "born out of the disillusion with the failure of political parties and unions to deliver the ecological and social policies people want."

True enough. From this he argued that "it is vital that the movement is not a political party or the tool of one or more parties. We have members from many parties - we would lose most if one party dominated our thinking."

This is a real charlatan's argument. No one is arguing either to turn the movement into a party overnight or to subordinate it to one of the political parties active within it. In fact it is Attac that has fought for and helped impose a ban on parties within the movement through the Porto Alegre "principles". These were stitched together by the Attac, Brazilian PT and Italian representatives behind the scenes after Porto Alegre.

Why were they wrong to do this? Because this ban privileges the middle class intellectuals (who make up think tanks like Attac) over the militant activists against war or global capitalism, amongst whom parties are important players. In Italy Rifondazione Comunista, in Britain the SWP have been very important in mobilising and creating the movement. In France too Attac would have got nowhere without the work of the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire.

Whether they realise it or not this ban in fact disenfranchises the non-party activists too since it does not allow them to see who is who, to judge these parties according to how they argue the movement should go forward. The nonsensical idea that militant anti-capitalist parties are not part of "civil society" whereas bourgeois charities (NGOs) and bureaucratic trade unions are, is a total travesty of the truth. Of course, all mass organisations, all individual fighters should be welcomed with open arms.

A real open and living democracy within the movement will prevent any one party from imposing a Stalinist-like "leading role" or a bureaucratic stranglehold. But to achieve this all key decisions must be made in mass assemblies, opposing arguments must be put clearly and openly. The "consensus principle" - the approach of turning all meetings into rallies - prevents this.

In fact it privileges the big name speakers, whose place on the platform or on the lecturers rostrum is arranged behind the scenes in cabals of the "big hitters." The Porto Alegre principles, in fact, favour the big reformist parties, like the PT of Brazil, who can manipulate the movement from behind the scenes, or through their associated trade unions and cultural organisations.

This method also marred the meeting of the European Social Movements at the end of the ESF. All the speakers were arranged in advance, no differences were aired, the assembly made no change whatsoever in the resolutions. This must be changed at the next ESF or the movement will make no progress.

It is not enough to quietly subvert the ban on parties as was, in effect, done in Florence by Rifondazione, the SWP/IST and the LCR for their own benefit. It must be challenged head-on and overthrown for the benefit of all party members and non-party members in the movement.

But the latter two - representing the forces of centrism rather than reformism - did not challenge the ban on parties. They did not even mention it: or their own parties either.

Neither Chris Nineham nor Olivier Besancenot mentioned the necessity for a revolution to overthrow global capitalism and imperialism. They did not criticise the parties represented or supported by Cassen or Bertinotti. Nor did they warn

of the inevitable repetition of reformism's betrayals of the working class.

During the forum and at the Social Movement Assembly at its end they did not seek to commit the union and mass party leaders present to action. They did not even demand that the parties with dozens of deputies in the national parliaments use the tribune this gives them not only to speak and vote against the war, but to summon the working class to a campaign of strikes and direct action against the war.

This is because the LCR actually believes that what is needed is a party straddling the two opposed strategies of reform or revolution (i.e. a centrist party) whilst for the SWP it itself is already the revolutionary party and it resists any attempt to win the movement to revolutionary positions.

The SWP also believes that a united front (such as Stop the War) binds one to abstain from all criticism of ones partners in struggle, be they reformists or even the Muslim Association of Britain. Whatever its long term 'revolutionary' intentions, this protects the reformists from revolutionary criticism in the here and now. The SWP also acts as a real restraint on any attempt to broaden the overall aims and objectives of the movement or even to debate them. This is because the SWP cannot or will not embody its overall strategy in a transitional action programme to which it seeks to win the workers and anti-capitalist movement.

Above all they did not say what had to be said, that a new International 'a worldwide revolutionary party' was needed: that this must be based solidly on the working class. The great mass march on Saturday of the ESF was to demonstrate not only that the working class still existed but that it was the powerful and decisive force that must be at the very centre of any attempt to create a world without capitalist exploitation, insecurity and imperialist war.

The Friday night meeting was nonetheless enormously inspiring, precisely because of its mass youthful and working class character, because this audience applauded most enthusiastically the most left wing and militant statements of Bertinotti, Besançon and Nineham.

Cassen's tepid reformism was noticeably less warmly received. This meeting, like the million strong march the next day showed that, in Italy, the anti-capitalist movement has fused with the working class movement.

Across Europe we have to do the same because aside from the working class, without the working class, 'another world is not possible'. With a revolutionary working class movement however, 'everything is possible'.

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