

## DOCUMENT

FRANCO FORTINI:

### *Letter to a Communist.*

We publish below extracts from the final chapter of the book, *Dieci Inverni (Ten Winters)*, published in Italy this autumn. This book assesses a decade of work and errors by the militant intellectuals of the Italian C.P. and of the Socialist Party, and the (Inadequate and painful) struggle fought by some of them -- including the author -- against the Stalinist mentality. The book is intended as a documentation of a period which the author considers closed: that of a harmful "unity" of theory and practice which caused very grave errors to be committed not only by intellectuals who followed the political tactics and cultural directives of Communism during the Stalin era, but also by the minority of the "internal opposition" of "critical Marxists." The need for a new distinction of theory and practice corresponds, according to Fortini, to the possibility and the necessity of overcoming problems of present-day party structure. The present division of the militant Left in Italy into the Communist Party led by Togliatti and the

Socialist Party led by Nenni, must give way to a union of all the Communist and Socialist opposition within one political organisation which -- as an essential precondition of unity -- must have carried out a thorough critique of social-democratic as well as of Stalinist ideology.

Franco Fortini, who is forty, joined the Italian Socialist Party in 1944. He edited the Socialist newspaper *Avanti* (1946-7), and in addition to his work in political theory he is a novelist, poet and critic.

We haven't met since that afternoon of 4th November when we were together for over an hour, hardly saying a word.

I don't need to telephone you to find out how you feel about the events that followed, the congresses of your party and mine, the international and internal situation. Nor is there any need to ask if you have renewed your card. I imagine that, all things considered, you have. And I know that if I asked you why you would reply irrefutably: "For the same reasons that you have renewed yours in the PSI." And our mutual awareness of ten years of errors and truths would save any further explanations.

. . . From the first months of 1956 we foresaw the danger that the political separation between Italian Socialists and Communists might develop into the separation of two parties, two disciplinary organisms, but not to two languages, two methods of democratic self-control, of investigation and reply. *Peace at the base and war at the top!* Perhaps this should have been the order of the day. In those months almost alone we asked that the results of the 20th Congress and then the Khrushchev report should be discussed *together* by the militants of both parties

as well as by the intellectuals of the two parties and by those intellectuals who based themselves on Marxism. Otherwise we would have, as we *have* had, silence; a silence filled only with affirmations by newspapers, leaders and congresses. That was in May last year; I remember how they replied to these proposals through authoritative spokesmen who voiced rigid party attitudes. You were capable — I mean, your leaders were capable — of using a tone of intimidation. The idea that between March and October Communist and Socialist workers and intellectuals should meet *together* to discuss not only the faults and virtues of Stalin but the role of their respective political and trade union organisations and the faults and virtues of their own leaders — this idea struck the leaders of your party (and mine) with horror (or indifference). If we said "class" they replied "party." If we said "-unity," unity in truth, in the bitter truth of the faults of the USSR and ourselves, they replied "splits," each of the two parties promising itself to grow fat at the expense of the other. To the formula of "controlled truth"\* which Khrushchev wanted to see respected in Poland and Hungary, our Communists added that of "controlled unity" . . .

So don't think it paradoxical that I begin speaking to you, a Communist, about my own party, the Italian Socialist Party. The very existence of this party raises for your members and mine more

serious questions and answer, than those by which its existence is usually justified. I'll go so far as to say that this "mystery" of its survival perhaps contains a vital message for you and for the entire international Socialist and Communist movement.

What was that "democratic" spirit, that refusal to accept the Stalinist theology, centralism and the magico-ceremonial practices of Communism, which constituted the basis of Italian Socialism at the end of the war? Was it merely an inheritance? Was it, as your people, and even our own theoreticians, explained it, the outlook of a subordinate zone of the proletariat, historically and ideologically backward? As compared with the working class sectors of the SFIO, who inherited certain "qualifications" as a working class aristocracy, the Italian Socialists might appear as living fossils, ethnological rather than political beings. To some extent the Socialists accepted this view of themselves — guardians of the Old Pact of the united front which was certainly venerable but which had become entirely absorbed in the New.

So what if it was like this? If the Italian Socialist Party was to fact only a clearing house between Communism and Social democracy, a tradition, a weakness, an uncertainty, what sense is there to its survival *today, especially today* when apparently it can boast a partial innocence and minor responsibility when compared with Communism (though inno-

cence and irresponsibility are not exactly to be recommended in a political party)?

The error of Italian Socialism was to believe in the possibility of united action with the Communists while maintaining as a piece of nostalgia or as an alibi its own (traditions from before the Livorno split or rather the birth of Italian Communism\*. It was an error to think that *there could be two parties without saying why*, on the one hand recognising In the difference a tendency and spirit which they didn't have the courage to make clear and understand, and on the other hand through common action recognising a necessity which they weren't humble enough to accept and so overcome. It was an error to believe that they could join in the classical Communist criticisms of Social-democracy while nevertheless keeping their own socially democratic soul well in the background as a kind of emergency exit. In this sense there is a definite iron logic, and an exact sharing of mistakes, in the policies pursued by the two Italian Marxist parties after the 20th Congress. The Communists, convinced that they could limit the full extent of the confusion, are frigidly taking up a strict party position; the Socialists think that in the Soviet revelations and the subsequent convulsions of the system they can see a confirmation of their *raison d'etre*. But if they have a *raison d'etre* it is a social-democratic one. Hence the inevitability (and at the same time the absurdity) of the policy of

unification with the Social-democrats, Inevitable if there is no alternative to either Stalinism or Social-democracy; absurd because this policy was put forward precisely at the time of the crisis of Stalinism. It seems to me that the mistake in the methods so far used to put this policy into effect lies in the false identification of the beginning of compromise with Social-democracy with the criticism of the Communist standpoints, almost as if one were the mirror and consequence of the other. There could be no better proof of the absence of a Socialist theory over the last ten years. And no doubt the worst of your people, the most short-sighted and cynical of the Communists, at the first rumble of the tanks in Budapest, thought they could profit by it.

I know that so far you are with me; I know that you will object when I go on to say: "Our teachers, mine, are not Turati and Treves but Labriola and Gramsci; there is no going back to before Lenin; to dispute the socialist character of the USSR is to play with words just as disputing the socialist character of the many experiences which the USSR denies or condemns is to play with history; we are two fractions of the same party; but to the extent to which these fractions see themselves as such, as parts and not wholes, the party to which they allude is different from any that they believe they represent." You will reply, in the words of A. Giolitti, that this desire to supersede certain party structures of

\* A play of words on the Italian police notion of *controlled liberty* the status of a person who is awaiting trial and has been granted provisional freedom.

\* At Livorno Congress, 1921, the Italian Communists broke away from the Socialist Party and founded their own Party.

the labour movement in one leap doesn't take account of " historical reality which is still valid and of experiences which are still fruitful." Agreed, as a counsel of prudence. But what is the meaning then of admitting — as A. Giolitti does, and you too, I imagine -- that " a new historical era must be born out of the end of Stalinism?"

What in short is the decisive element which allows us to speak of the end of the Stalin period, but which for the same reason prevents us also from stopping there and taking a stand on some earlier line — however grandiose or noble that line may be, whether we call it Leninism or Marxism -- and which instead forces us to think out and restudy and so, in a certain sense, to *accept* the whole history of the working class movement from the nineteenth century to today, including Stalin? This doesn't mean that we can't call ourselves Marxists; but this adjective will be of value as a political indication and a working hypothesis. It's best to say clearly that it will be much more the first than the second. Bear with me for the moment if in speaking to you about it I begin with the conclusions, knowing that you are quite capable of fitting it all together and filling in the gaps.

It is this: the whole profound liberal, egalitarian, decentralist, anti-authoritarian current which, parallel to Marxism, runs through the revolutionary nineteenth century. This exists in Marxism too and moreover finds in it its truest arguments. It continues to express itself in our century and

with what force from the Russian civil war to that in China, from the Karl Marx Hof to the *cite universitaire* in Madrid, from most of the resistance to Nazism to the workers councils of Warsaw and Budapest. It is this component part of socialism which Soviet Communism — Lenin and Stalin — in certain circumstances and for very specific reasons, sometimes good and sometimes bad, had first to repress, then oppose and finally expel and condemn for decades, finally denouncing it as the evasive conscience of the bourgeoisie, which has now *re-emerged from within the system*, as a new formation and no longer as a hangover and bolstered up from outside. It is not like Kronstadt the last outburst before a phase of clamping down and hierarchy but the beginning of a new era for world socialism and *for the Soviet Union itself*. Moreover it can no longer be called an anti-authoritarian and egalitarian force as before 1917 and 1927 but something new, a new way of expressing these needs. I told you I would begin at the end; it's up to you now to link two kinds of apparently divergent causes: the egalitarian pressure of the colonial proletariats and the pressure, which has been made possible by evolution in production and a growth in political understanding, of Soviet society against bureaucracy and technocracy.

These new formations are destroying the party alignments as they have existed so far, realistic and efficient as they were for more than thirty years. The dream of unity is finished. The Party as a body, whatever its

prestige or practical function in the world, is discovering its manifold nature. Contradiction is tending to make itself accepted without scandal. Unanimity has a price which maybe it is not necessary to pay. This is as yet being expressed in elementary forms. It appears in the contests between states (Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union); it is hidden in the demands of opposing national forces (Poland and the USSR, Hungary and the USSR); it takes on the appearance of purification (the " cult of the individual ") or of latitudinarianism (the "Hundred Schools "); it seeks to escape its own significance with the evasion of bilateral relations between Communist Parties. But there is something which will force the Communist Parties, and is already forcing them, to abandon their autocratic illusions: and this is the mechanism of the process of rehabilitation. Up till now they have tried to give the rehabilitation the character of piety towards history; moreover, the very notion of " rehabilitation " is designed to make us believe in continuity, that of the person who is being rehabilitated, and in a recovery of individuals and organisations which had fallen into an empty fog. But it is not like this. Thanks to some of those who have done their own rehabilitation -- Tito, Gomulka -- we are realising that the whole history of Communism can no longer be looked on as the story of one principle, of one interpretation, of one method which continuously purges itself of its own " dry branches." It can no longer be seen as an orthodoxy triumphing

over the heresies, but as a complex *histoire des variations*, in which there exists a unity but an invisible one. The rehabilitations have an epistemological character which cannot be hidden. The borderline between "enemy" and " comrade," which is apparently so clear at present, will become uncertain in the near future. We feel ourselves obliged to do justice to all those who have fought against the bourgeoisie and imperialism: and yet whole central committees, entire populations of militants, have been shot, deported, or have vanished and been branded with disgrace: from the sailors of Kronstadt to the defendants at the Moscow trials, from the victims of the "purges" to the Polish party of 1938, from Bela Kun to Marty, from Trotsky to Rajk, from the Spanish anarchists to the Polish Socialists, from the Yugoslavs to the Greeks: — men, movements and episodes which must be studied again, re-valued and given new judgements. Yesterday's vanquished are unable to be today's victors for they are dead and can only live on as ghostly presences bringing a salutary sense of remorse without whom the world proletariat could not continue on its path.

If this is the case, if, despite its dismissals, world Communism will gradually be constrained to recognise that its faults and errors were its *own* faults and errors, self-generated contradictions and not hangovers, not objectified and exorcised opposing forces, what will be the outcome of all the big talk about internal and external democracy which has taken place recently unless

it is to see that it is not so much a question of "autonomy," "decentralisation," "plurality" as of changing the whole method of representation and political propulsion which goes by the means of Party? And if this is the case, how can the Communist Party in its present form face up to current needs since it is and has substantially been inevitably twofold -- a party of authority and cadres and a party of the "popular" masses? And the same applies to the Italian Socialist Party, at least to that very large part of it which reached the point of understanding the necessity for its own past subordination to the Communist Party but which isn't yet able to interpret its own rationale except as a rationale *this side of* Lenin and Stalin and Communism and not *beyond them*. The Socialist Party did little or nothing to resist the *black lists* of the Italian Communists. It accepted the enemies of Stalinism as its own; and so it destroyed at the roots any historical reason for independence, *other than that represented by Social-democracy*' It can only rediscover its own scope and rationale - which are more than rational and provincial — by vindicating as its *own* starting point and inheritance the history and struggles of those Communist heresies which Italian Social-democracy at least has refused or to which it has at the most conceded political asylum. But from this point on it **would** already meet the advance **wing** of

the Communists on the same road. We are two fractions of the same party, *which has yet to be created*.

And now if you ask me to answer the main problem, how to transform the system of political representation of the proletariat, I must reply that I don't know, none of us knows. And in our ignorance we can't risk acting alone. We must realise that the decline of our parties, and more generally of the working class movement will continue. All the neo-capitalistic deception will be unfolded, the consolidation between clericalism and neo-capitalism will be fulfilled. And only after more errors will we be able to see the fabric of resistance and recovery which we perhaps have begun to weave. And this will only happen when the last illusions about parties as they are today have been shed by the mass of privileged workers together with illusions about abstaining from socialist struggle. I am told that precisely this is being understood by certain minorities of workers, Communists, who have lived through all the day-to-day experiences of the last fifteen years and who, though openly opposed to the policy of the present leadership, are nevertheless remaining in the party and conducting a struggle against the indifference, and remorse, of the other workers, feeling that their only hope lies in history.

(Translated by Louis Marks).