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A New Stage of Struggle in Italy

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Date de mise en ligne : lundi 30 décembre 2024

Date de parution : 15 décembre 1949

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Factory Occupation and Agrarian Revolt

(December 1949)

From **Fourth International**, [Vol.11 No.1](#), January-February 1950, pp.9-14.

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The revolver shots fired by the obscure Sicilian student, Pellante, on July 14, 1948 at the Stalinist leader Togliatti set off the broadest movement of the Italian proletariat since the insurrection of 1945. The gun shots of Minister of Interior Scelba's police, which slew two farm workers in the Apulia region on November 29, 1949, resulted in a general strike ordered from above which proved to be a two-thirds failure. The entire evolution of the Italian workers' movement in the last 18 months is bracketed by these two incidents.

The general strike of July 14, 1948 came like a sudden explosion of all the discontent stored up during the preceding months. The enthusiasm evoked by the launching of the electoral campaign of the "Democratic Peoples' Front" and then squandered by the parliamentary cretinism and the petty-bourgeois phraseology of its leaders found expression despite the electoral defeat of April 18, 1948. The victory won by the bourgeoisie in the April 18 elections had not yet been translated into a defeat of the proletariat in action. The trade union movement was still united. The motorized police were still on the defensive. The employers still hesitated to launch a frontal assault on the workers in the large industrial centers.

The proletariat in its general strike of July 14 made a magnificent attempt to regain the initiative in the class struggle. Its failure was not due to any lack of spirit or courage. On the contrary, for twenty-four hours bourgeois authority was shaken in the principal centers on the peninsula. The cynical capitulation of the Stalinist leaders to bourgeois rule stabbed the workers' offensive in the back and at the same time gave rise to an inevitable wave of discouragement and demoralization among the advanced workers, who felt themselves betrayed by their own leaders.

The general strike of December 1, 1949 took place after a lengthy period of working class defeats and of successes of the bourgeoisie in actions against them. The trade union movement, first split in 1948 by the formation of the Christian unions (General Italian Confederation of Free Labor – LCGIL) was then split again in 1949 by the creation of the "social democratic" trade unions (Federation of Italian Labor – FIL). The employers unleashed a full-fledged offensive by laying off thousands of workers in the factories. A system of intimidation was instituted in the offices and banks against all militant elements and even against those who merely held membership in the CGIL (largest Italian trade union federation led by the Stalinists).

A series of movements in separate industries taken up by all the workers with admirable tenacity (farm workers' strike at the beginning of June 1949 which lasted six weeks ; bank employees' strike in September 1949), ended in complete defeats. These successes, enhanced the boldness and arrogance of the representatives of the capitalist state. They began to systematically hurl the police against peaceful demonstrations, inaugurating a new bloody series of massacres of workers as in the infamous days of pre-Mussolini "democracy."

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The Southern Proletariat to the Rescue

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It is highly significant that, in these conditions of rearguard battles carried on by dispersed ranks of the industrial workers, the farm workers of Southern Italy came to the rescue. During the last two months their actions signaled the beginning of a serious resumption of the workers' movement in the entire peninsula. These actions are not to be explained by particularly marked development of the class consciousness of the Southern masses but by an indescribable poverty which makes daily existence intolerable.

This miserable mass of day laborers or owners of tiny parcels of land, with an average *annual* income of \$150, works about a 100 days a year, lives in wretched hovels and sees its children permanently undernourished while immense tracts of land owned by the big landowners lie fallow. Result : The periodic outbreak of local revolts over control of the land.

Since the fall of fascism, this development has been channelized by the formation of *peasant cooperatives* which have the right to request the assignment of fallow land. Although these assignments are supposed to be made by courts, and although in Southern Italy even more than in Northern Italy, judicial power is intimately tied to the local proprietors, the first months after the "liberation" were marked by a certain flourishing of these cooperatives. The government sought in this way to *legalise land seizures* which occurred in that tumultuous period. As the central power was strengthened and the state apparatus rebuilt, the cooperatives isolated within an economy directed by their enemies and lacking credits, machinery and skilled personnel began to fall apart.

Two months ago a new movement of land seizures broke out, less spontaneous than the one immediately after the war, but better prepared and stimulated by the *Confederterra* (farm workers' union under Stalinist leadership). The movement began in Sicily and Calabria where the untitled "latifundia" (big estates) was most extensive. The land seizures were genuine ; the peasants immediately sowed the occupied land.

The government therefore, combining tactical sagacity with judicious use of armed force, decided upon some unavoidable concessions. Prime Minister De Gasperi made a trip to the Sila region, one of the most backward provinces, embraced the inevitable little boy, delivered the inevitable "progressive" speech, and legalized the assignment to the cooperatives of some 30,000 hectares of land. 3.8 million hectares of land are owned by big landowners, in other words 25% of all cultivable Italian land is divided among 8 million agricultural enterprises.

Following this governmental action, the second stage of the land seizures which occurred in Lucania, Apulia, Campania and in the vicinity of Rome lost the momentum of the initial movement. Most of the time, the trade union movement limited itself to a "symbolic" seizure. The "occupied" land was not worked. In many areas, notably in Sardinia, the prefects succeeded in preventing seizures by promising the peasants to speed up assignments of land by legal methods. It should be noted that one of the rare concessions made by the government to the peasants was the transfer of authority to assign land to the prefects who are considered to be more "liberal" ...

However it was in the course of this second stage of the land seizures that there occurred the violent incidents in Torremaggiore in Apulia which led to the outbreak of the strike of December 1. Four weeks previously in the province of Crotona, in Calabria, other bloody incidents had occurred in Melissa which cost the life of three farm workers, murdered by "the forces of law and order." In Torremaggiore, the De Gasperi government once more clearly demonstrated the kind of "order" it was preserving, the kind which proscribes trade union meetings and instructs the police to open fire on a disarmed crowd gathered to hear a report-on negotiations between the unions and government authorities.

And, pathetic illustration of the condition of the *braccianti* (farm laborers) : the agitation which led to the incidents and the slayings of November 29 did not even occur over a demand for improving the conditions of the workers. Its sole aim was to enforce the law of "the labor quota," which obliges big landowners to employ workers numerically proportionate to the size of their estates. Thus the *braccianti* had demonstrated in Apulia for the *preservation* of their

wretched wage of about \$25 a month. And following in the tradition of the Italian clerical gang, the government gave them lead and gunshot ...

Layoffs in the Big Factories

The urge to defend the very existence of their wives and children led the farm laborers of Southern Italy to pick up the gage of battle at the very time when the combativity of the proletariat had sunk to what seemed to be the vanishing point. Likewise the brutal attack by Big Business against the industrial proletariat, which takes the form of mass layoffs and mounting lockouts, seems to be the signal for a serious revival of the militancy of the workers of Northern and Central Italy for the next period.

Italian industry operates at a permanent deficit. Technological backwardness and the absence of an adequate internal market renders big Italian industry incapable of competing on the world markets with the heavy industry of the advanced capitalist countries. Living and operating solely by virtue of government orders and credits, the crisis which industry has experienced since the "liberation" has been aggravated by the success of the workers in preventing layoffs. Hence, when the relation of forces was altered [1] and the employing class felt itself strong enough in relation to a divided working class, it everywhere began to repudiate the anti-layoff agreements and workers by the thousands were thrown into the street. In the Milan region alone the Caproni plant, employing 6,000 workers, and the Safar plant were shut down ; 5,000 out of 10,000 employed in the Isotta Fraschini establishment were laid off.

Under conditions of general unemployment at least 2½ million fully unemployed and several hundred thousand partially unemployed) a layoff in a big plant actually means the loss of all possibility of work for many months. That is the reason the workers do not accept these employer conditions without putting up a desperate resistance to this condemnation to poverty. Occupation of factories shut down by the employers are widespread.

Three typical cases took place at the end of November : In the Breda factories in Venice, in the OMI factories in Rome, in the Fonderi Liguri plants in Genoa. The first of these followed a threat of layoff and a demand by the workers to inspect the employers' books. The second case followed the non-payment of wages, an indirect lockout measure currently used by the employers. The third occupation was a reply at the time to layoffs and to the dismantling of the factory by a bankrupt company.

The Art of the General Strike

How has the bourgeoisie and the capitalist state reacted to these factory occupations which are a direct threat to private property in the means of production ? It is not at all surprising that the occupations have produced an un-excited reaction, one which inclines to allowing the workers "to go through their own experience" just as they did in the movement of factory occupation in Turin in 1920. The employer is content to protest, to refuse to pay wages and in cases where the workers continue production to shut off the electric current after a few days. That's all he need do. What necessity is there for the intervention of the authorities or for trying to evacuate the premises by force ? He is very well aware that, left to themselves, the workers occupying the factories find themselves in a blind alley from which they emerge sooner or later utterly demoralized and without any confidence in their trade union organizations ...

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The tactic adopted by the Stalinists is right down the employers' alley. For many months, the Stalinist leadership of the CG1L was systematically opposed to any extended occupation of the factories, limiting themselves to "symbolic" 24-hour occupations. Under pressure of the workers affected by the layoffs and prepared for any sacrifice, the Stalinist leaders were compelled to beat a strategic retreat. Today they sanction and even discreetly approve of occupation movements but attempt to limit them and to studiously restrict them to a single establishment.

The worker occupants first undertake to put the machinery in working order and to clean up the premises and then with great difficulty start up production. In the meantime the trade union leaders organize financial assistance in the region and in the best case set up a free commissary for the workers. Then, one, two, three weeks go by and as the employers refuse to pay the workers, the workers' meager reserves are soon exhausted and their families are literally penniless. They cannot sell the products they have manufactured ; the Stalinist tactic does not permit this transgression of bourgeois law. There is then nothing for them to do but to pull out defeated, harboring bitter feelings toward their "leaders."

It is obvious that this tactic of isolated movements does not hold out any concrete perspective to workers threatened with layoffs, and threatens to discredit the strike weapon as well as the occupation of the factories in the eyes of the workers. The "war of attrition" chosen by the Stalinists – a token of their remarkable tactical skill – at the very moment when the economic interests of the employers require a temporary cessation of production, can only play into the hands of the bourgeoisie. They can only be compelled to retreat before a full-scale attack all along the line.

Partial movements for very limited aims are of decisive importance only insofar as they enable the working class to reconstitute the unity of its ranks, only insofar as such movements revive the workers' self-confidence. But to fulfill this function, these isolated and limited movements must be *victorious*. However, the Stalinist leaders first organize limited movements which are doomed to defeat in advance and then they periodically crown them with "general strike demonstrations." like that of December 1, which lead to even more resounding defeats. So, combining opportunist errors with disorganized adventurism, the Stalinist leadership continues to do everything in its power to squander and destroy the reserves of militancy of the Italian proletariat which is now being reawakened after 18 months of defeats.

A factory occupation, limited to one plant and aided only by financial support, is doomed to certain defeat if the leadership is not prepared to go the limit. To be able to go the limit, it must act according to a *plan* – this term is used in the Bolshevik sense and not in the sense of the miserable project called "the GIL plan" which is acceptable to the bourgeoisie and even to that old reactionary politician, Nitti.

This is what acting according to plan entails : Choose a key enterprise threatened with lockout, preferably one whose raw materials are produced in Italy itself ; organize a national agitation around its occupation (it is characteristic that all the agitations on the factory occupations were limited by the Stalinist leaders to a regional scale) ; proceed to the production and *to the sale of the manufactured products* if the employer refuses to pay wages ; organize this sale through workers' and peasants' cooperatives in accordance with the needs of the population ; illustrate through these test cases that the crisis of Italian industry is a crisis of *capitalist* industry working *for the market*, and that the *needs* of the population do not call for a closing of plants but for a tremendous *rise* in *production* ; organize a movement of national solidarity with the workers in the occupied factory, proceeding if necessary to the confiscation of raw materials by workers or miners in the extractive industries, and to free transportation by railroad workers of the finished products.

In other words, confront the employer with the acting and active solidarity of the working class orienting through a series of rapid successes to a general strike for the attainment of a clear and precise program whose first point should be : Re-open all the closed factories and operate them at government expense under workers' control. It is not the responsibility of the workers in bankrupt factories to shoulder the burden of capitalist bankruptcy. Money to float these industries should be obtained where it is plentiful : in the strong-boxes of the banks and Big Business.

Beginning with that, we have the whole program of the socialist revolution which can be explained simply and concretely to the masses with the help of transitional demands combined into a *workers' and peasants' plan* to be realized by a workers' and peasants' government.

Such a strategy, avoiding both hopeless and disorganized struggles, would moreover have the great advantage of *educating* the workers on the significance of their struggle. A defeat which is presented as a stage in the attainment of an objective leading to the solution of the most burning problems of the class can serve as a stimulus to the militancy of the masses. A useless purposeless defeat is a sure cause of further demoralization. That is why the criminal tactic pursued by the Stalinist leadership is not only responsible for the defeats, resulting from the unfavorable relation of forces confronting the working class, but also for the demoralization caused by this senseless policy.

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The Crisis of the Italian Communist Party

Organizing proletarian resistance to capitalist layoffs ; preparing and guiding the counter-offensive to guarantee tolerable conditions of life to all Italian workers – which is impossible without taking some of the principal citadels of capital by assault – these are tasks which are neither desired nor can they be attained by the present leadership tied to the leading strings of the Kremlin. A *new revolutionary leadership* must be created, a leadership whose first elements have been shaped in the crucible of the negative experiences of recent years. Its formation can be considerably accelerated if the revolutionary vanguard succeeds in regrouping and in organizing the vanguard militants who, as a result of their own experiences, have already broken or are on the point of breaking with the CP in the principal regions of Italy.

The crisis of the CP is still in its initial stage. The December Central Committee meeting of the CP indicated an early purge which would rid the party of numerous "deviationist" elements. It is difficult to forecast the scope and real significance which the next stages of the crisis will have. But some of its general characteristics can be sketched now.

Let us note first of all that the present crisis of the CP has a contradictory character—because it appears at a time when the CP is embarked on a "leftist" policy, at least verbally. While vanguard militants are breaking away to the left because they realize that the CP policy is contrary to the workers' interests – and that explains the opportunist as well as the adventurist errors – on its right the CP is losing a considerable section of those who had joined it on the basis of its policy of "national unity" and who now condemn its class phraseology as "antidemocratic."

This phenomenon is especially important in intellectual and Catholic circles. It should not be forgotten that there are many members of the CP in Italy deeply attached to the Catholic religion who have been struck a heavy blow by papal excommunication (although the measure has been very circumspectly applied).

Suffice it to say that the Communist mayor of Turin, the most important industrial and proletarian center of Italy, had one of his children married in the church, sent another child to a religious school, and organized cultural gatherings addressed by the Catholic ministers of the De Gasperi cabinet at the expense of the municipality ! The opposition of these circles, which weighs heavily on the party, should not be confused with that opposition which expresses, however confusedly, the revolt of proletarian class consciousness against the acrobatic tactics of the Stalinists.

It should also be pointed out that the Yugoslav question has sowed confusion in Italian communist ranks. During the period of the "national unity" policy, the Italian CP went through some particularly revolting contortions to harmonize its ultra-chauvinist agitation with its unreserved support (at least in public) of the "anti-Italian" policy of the Yugoslavs

in Istria and Trieste. The leaders of the party were not really at ease until the break of the Cominform with Tito enabled them to take their place in the chorus of the chauvinistic anti-Tito agitation, long carried on by all "official" public opinion.

But many militants, who the day before had had to "swim against the stream" on this particular question, could not make so sharp a turn and became greatly bewildered. Many Stalinist cadre elements had also fought as partisans during the war side by side with the Yugoslav-partisans. Today, **Unità**, central organ of the CP, tells them that the partisan struggle in Slovenia was really organized by the Gestapo. And it is not easy for them to swallow this new morsel of Stalinist wisdom.

Some of them have even openly opposed the anti-Titoist line of the leadership and have agreed to organize visits to Yugoslavia. They have been expelled for "political treachery and connections with Trotskyist and Titoist provocateur elements," a formula that is repeated in almost every issue of the main regional CP papers.

Finally, there is a third characteristic phenomenon of the crisis of the CP : A number of old members, often founders of the movement, are beginning to break with the party on the basis of personal experiences, restricted to a regional or plant-wide scale, after a series of particular incidents which were too much for them to swallow. Two typical cases are those of Avico, general secretary of the national oil workers union and Morelli, former mayor of the important metal center of Terni. Cases of personal corruption and malodorous petty intrigues which the cadres have observed in their dealings with the national leaders have proved decisive in causing their break with the CP.

This phenomenon occurs much later than in France, Germany, Great Britain or the United States. Because of the victory of Fascism in 1922, the ideological evolution of numerous Italian communist cadre elements had been arrested for 21 years. Thus today there is to be found in the ranks of the oppositionists – alongside of the young militants whose experience with Stalinism is of recent date – even founders of the party whose experience with Stalinism in the *mass movement* also does not antedate 1944.

The Crisis of Italian Socialism

Contrary to what has happened in most of the countries of western Europe, the serious crisis of Stalinism has not led in any way to the strengthening of social democracy, either in members or in votes. On the contrary, at the very time the crisis of Stalinism is beginning to break out in the open, Italian social democracy itself is undergoing an especially serious crisis which is expressed in the existence of three socialist parties. And the Calvary of Italian social democracy is far from ended ...

This crisis of Italian social democracy, joined to that of Stalinism, expresses a fundamentally *healthy* development of the Italian workers' movement. The combativity of the Italian working class, the sharpening of the class contradictions, the desire of the militant working class youth for ideological clarification – all these factors preclude a *retrograde* development of the most advanced sections. Becoming conscious of the betrayals of Stalinism or reformism, they are seeking a new road to regroupment without returning to one or another of the two movements of class misleadership.

The crisis of Italian social democracy broke out the first time in January 1947 when the unified party split into two fragments. Unfortunately the split did not occur along clearly demarcated ideological lines (i.e., revolutionary Marxist tendencies against reformist and collaborationist tendencies) but "for or against unreserved unity of action with the CP." The PSLI (Italian Socialist Labor Party), the new social democratic party which emerged from the split,

comprised at the time a part of the traditional reformist right wing (Saragat, Daragona, Simenini), and a part of the extreme left centrist wing (M. Matteoti, Zagari and the Socialist Youth).

Less than a year after its foundation, this new party was confronted with a serious crisis when its leaders, violating their solemn commitments, entered the De Gasperi government. Most of the centrist elements capitulated to this flagrant abuse of confidence by the reformist right wing : Only the cadres of the Socialist Youth broke with the PSLI at its Naples convention in January 1948. Losing all contact with the working class, the right wing drew all the logical conclusions from its purely petty-bourgeois course. It accepted the Marshall Plan and the Atlantic Pact enthusiastically. It organized the split in the unions. It came out in favor of an electoral bloc with completely bourgeois parties like the Republican Party [2].

The "left centrist" tendency, eternally wavering between its oppositionist inclination and its fears of "the responsibilities of power" in the party – an expression of its inability to concretely formulate a policy in opposition to that of the reformist right wing – then sought its salvation in "socialist unification," that is, in allies outside the party.

It found them in other groups which had broken from the PSI (Socialist Party of Italy), after the January 1947 split, namely in the Silone group (*Union of Socialists*) which had no precise political platform but with a certain reputation for "political honesty" (the scarcity of this commodity has boosted its price) ; and the reformist tendency led by that old political fox and careerist, Romita, who had broken from the PSI during the year. Its patrons on Comisco [3] had envisaged a "genuine" social democratic unification including the PSLI plus Silone plus Romita. At the last moment, the PSLI right wing, not having obtained adequate guarantees that it would control the "unified" party like it now controls its own (through a "democracy" which mobilizes for conventions thousands of votes of paper "members"), withdrew from the combination. "Socialist unification" therefore turned out to be merely another split, the center and left of the PSLI joining the Silone and Romita groups at the Florence convention in December 1949 to form the Unified Socialist Party, PSU. (Let us note in passing that the right wing of the PSLI, which is so "passionately" attached to formal democracy, disbanded entire federations and acted more bureaucratically than the Stalinists ever dared do in Italy.)

The speeches, declarations of principles, and other feature defining the character of the new party clearly indicate that it does not intend to differentiate itself in any way from the PSLI. It is not opposed to collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the government ; it favors such collaboration on better conditions (it wants at least five portfolios against the paltry three that Saragat is satisfied with). It is not against the Atlantic Pact, it is only for its transformation into a "peace pact." It is not in favor of the split in the trade unions ; it merely explains that the split is an accomplished fact ... Under such conditions it is clear that no major obstacles exists to an eventual fusion between the PSU and the PSLI provided the "unified" party pursues a strictly Saragat policy. The unfortunate knight-errants of centrism, who feel as out of place today in Silone's house as they did yesterday in Saragat's, fervently hope to return to a more familiar atmosphere in the house of Saragat, Silone and Co. They are deceiving themselves. Following an eventual fusion, only a split will open new perspectives for them.

The PSI, the other social democratic fragment, has not experienced such complicated and bewildering convolutions as those of the PSLI. There are four tendencies in its ranks : A pro-Stalinist tendency led by the infamous little Cominform agent, Pietro Nenni ; a "left" tendency led by Lelio Basso who has been dubbed "the little Lenin of Italy" (although his only resemblance to Lenin consists of a goatee) and who systematically refuses to differentiate himself from Nenni ; a right wing tendency, strictly reformist, led by Romita, and finally a so-called "center" tendency led by former partisan leaders like Riccardo Lombardi who comes from the Action Party. This latter tendency is regrouping all the elements within the party who are vaguely discontented with the Nenni policy.

But unlike its rather politically formless base, these centrist leaders, who have recently been moving toward Marxism, are making an honest effort to formulate a policy which corresponds to the interests of the workers.

The electoral defeat of the "Democratic People's Front" on April 18, 1948 was above all a defeat for the PSI. As in all social democratic parties, it was the signal for a change in leadership. For more than a year Nenni-Basso allowed the representatives of the "center" to take the helm. But like all centrists, they feared nothing so much as applying their own policy. Placed in the leadership of the party by the masses of discontented members, these new leaders tried to differentiate themselves as little as possible from Nenni. They did not offer the workers any different perspective than that of the Stalinist policy of defeat. They do not know how to stem the collapse of the party. The 1949 convention saw the withdrawal of Romita and gave the majority to Nenni who leads the PSI like a Cominform party. At the December Central Committee meeting, Nenni attacked the Yugoslav CP for having gone over to "the imperialist camp." (Nenni himself was an ardent supporter of the first and second imperialist wars !) The discontent in the party has again risen against this Cominform policy. And again, the "center" is unable to give the members any concrete policy, besides embarrassed allusions to a needed decentralization of the workers' movement.

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Toward the Revolutionary Party

Nevertheless the fact that Riccardo Lombardi and his friends have never once been influenced by the comedy of the so-called "socialist unification" is an excellent sign of their fundamental orientation. They must now draw the conclusions from their negative experiences with reformism, Maximalism (left centrism) and Stalinism. They must find the courage to clearly formulate, at least for themselves, the perspective of *the building of the new revolutionary party* of the Italian proletariat. Above all they must rid themselves of any inferiority complex toward Stalinism. There are thousands of workers in the Italian proletariat and *in their own party* who understand that Stalinism is the antithesis and not the continuation of Leninism.

An evolution on their part in a revolutionary and internationalist direction, that is, in a Leninist direction, would rapidly transform them into a pole of attraction for everything healthy in the left social democracy, among the followers of the Basso faction in the PSI and the left wing members of the PSU. They would thus render an important service to the building of the Italian revolutionary party, to the regeneration of the European workers' movement in general.

But whatever the further evolution of the "center" in the PSI, revolutionary cadres who know their task already exist in Italy. For most part they have come from the Socialist Youth and, having assimilated the Leninist program through their own post war experiences, these cadres have joined the Fourth International and laid the first basis for building the revolutionary party. After having organized the militants who came from the social democracy, their immediate task now is to organize the militants and groups who are breaking with the CP. To bring the Bolshevik program to the broad masses, to participate in their daily struggles, to enable the vanguard workers to see in action a new leadership, however embryonic, that is different from the Stalinists – these are the aims this cadre will seek to attain in the coming months.

The possibilities of development offered by the objective situation are excellent. If they know how to utilize them, they will be able to give a powerful impetus to the development of the Italian revolutionary movement and – through their own successes which will be the successes of the program and organization of the Fourth International – they will speed up the progressive evolution of oppositionist groups inside and outside the traditional parties toward the World Party of the Socialist Revolution.

December 15, 1949

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[1] Where this change did not occur, the workers continued to make serious gains. Thus at the Ansaldo plants in Genoa, they have just won the 24-hour work week at 40-hour pay.

[2] At the Naples convention, Saragat justified participation in the government by the need of checking the government actions of the Christian Democrats. At the Milan convention in 1949, he explained that this collaboration was required because social democracy and Christian democracy were both "profoundly democratic and socially animated parties."

[3] Committee for International Socialist Conferences. A liaison center for Social Democratic Parties in Europe, a kind of successor to the pre-war Second International.