The present policies of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) can only be understood as the results of a development since the end of the Second World War, against the background of the political economy of Italy since that period. What follows will be a necessarily brief historical outline which will lead into a discussion of the present policies and the problems raised by them in terms of political practice and theory.

**WORLD WAR II AND RECONSTRUCTION**

By the beginning of the Second World War, almost two decades of fascist rule in Italy had largely destroyed trade union organisation and extended employers' control over production, resulting in increased exploitation. All opposition parties were outlawed, and PCI members in particular suffered persecution, torture and murder, and numbered only a few thousand. But the war years brought increasing opposition to fascism, which culminated in the blossoming of the resistance movement after Italy's surrender to the allies, and the German occupation of the North.

The PCI emerged as the backbone of the resistance movement, and the partisan fighting in the countryside was accompanied by the renaissance of shop floor organisation in the factories. Where production was not disrupted altogether, this organisation not only smashed the repressive employers control of the fascist years but threatened the very nature of capitalist organisation of the work process. (1) Between 1939 and 1945, PCI membership grew from less than 4,000 to 1.5 million. The credibility that the PCI gained in the resistance and general anti-fascist struggle is still one of the main factors underpinning its strength today.

The crucial shaping of the PCI's post-war strategy occurred with the return to Italy in 1944 of its leader Palmiro Togliatti, who had spent the fascist period in exile, mainly in Moscow. Togliatti argued that there was no possibility for the success of an armed socialist uprising a la Yugoslavia in either political or military terms. After completing the immediate task of driving out the Germans and ending the war, the communists should preserve the unity of anti-fascist forces in order to rebuild democratic institutions in Italy, while retaining and rebuilding a capitalist economic structure. Togliatti knew of Stalin's agreement with the allies about spheres of influence in Europe, and this undoubtedly influenced his strategic decision. But the conditions for an armed uprising hardly existed in any case. The resistance movement was politically undeveloped and possessed only small arms, and Italy was occupied by allied armies.

Togliatti's strategy of unity and democratic renewal was based on the analysis of fascism being the result of an incomplete bourgeois revolution in Italy and of the uneven development of the agricultural south and the industrial north. Feudalism, it was argued, had

---

Pat Vort-Ronald is a lecturer in Adelaide. Last year, as a post-graduate student, she studied in Italy for some months, and here gives her views on the policy of the Italian Communist Party.
not been completely destroyed, and landed capital in the south had reached a compromise with industrial capital in the north. This meant that a bourgeois democracy had not fully developed, and the ruling class had turned to fascism as a viable solution when threatened in the early '20s by militant working class struggle in the north. After twenty years of fascism, all democratic forms and rights had to be reconstructed and safeguarded under a democratic constitution. Moreover, industrial workers were a decided minority, outnumbered by both a large peasantry and petit-bourgeoisie. The latter had provided much of fascism's mass support and had to be won over to an alliance with the working class. This alliance could be a continuation of the broad anti-fascist front of the war years which had included liberal and republican as well as Catholic forces. The PCI had developed as a strong "national" force in the partisan movement, and it had to continue this kind of intervention at the political level. A key element in this strategy was to avoid emphasising "ideological" divisions between communists and catholics, and to emphasise instead the possibility for agreement about political reconstruction and reforms. (2) For this reason, the PCI did not oppose the Vatican's retaining its "special status" in the post-war constitution.

Togliatti's strategy, combined with his proposal to suspend the question of the monarchy until the war was won, succeeded in breaking the deadlock among the other political parties, and a national coalition government, in which the PCI was strongly represented, was formed. Its strongest rivals were the Socialist Party (PSI) and the Christian Democrats (DC). The latter had been formed by an amalgam of capitalist and catholic forces in response to the growing strength of the communists in the resistance movement.

Once in government, the PCI found it had to make considerable concessions to maintain unity and stay in the coalition. At first, it supported the mass peasant movement for land reform and government by regional liberation committees set up by the resistance. But in the face of DC opposition, it was forced to abandon its demands for structural reforms. It did not insist on a purge of fascists from the police and civil service and the fascist penal code remained unchanged. (3)

Moreover, the PCI made concessions in the trade union movement to create unity at the top at the expense of maintaining and developing workers' initiatives and shop floor organisation which had been achieved in the resistance years. The agreed priority of the national government was to get production going again and the main task of the new united Labor Confederation (which brought together the PCI, PSI and DC forces) was to emphasise to the workers the need for productivity. The DC blocked attempts at mass action and the PCI did not object to a form of trade union organisation which assisted in the wholesale rationalisation and reorganisation of the work process in favor of employers and kept wages low. (4)

THE COLD WAR AND THE "LONG BOOM" OF THE '50s.

Spurred on by both the emerging Cold War climate and by the concessions of the left, the DC swung to the right, expelling the PCI from government and enlisting US and Vatican aid in the 1948 elections at which it won a decisive victory. Even after its expulsion from government, the PCI continued to back the drive for more profitable reorganisation of the work process. But this did not even preserve trade union organisational unity. The DC and the Social Democrats (a rightwing split from the PSI) split off to form their own respective organisations. During the early '50s the DC government presided over the reorganisation of capitalist production, and established the steel and energy industries which make up a significant part of the large Italian public sector. It was a period of high profits and high capital investment. But unemployment also remained high, since the new areas of investment were not labor-intensive. The profits of this period have been directly related to the successful rightwing offensive against shop floor organisation which the communist unions' emphasis on unity at the top failed to combat. (5)

In addition, the problems of the south intensified. There was no land reform from the early 1950s. Small holdings on poor land devastated by erosion and farmed by primitive methods remained the norm. The DC supplemented the ideological influence of the Church with a vast system of patronage and corruption which included government agencies allegedly set up to "develop" the south. Industry remained minimal and
emigration to the north and overseas was the only brake on unemployment. In this way, the south formed a continuous supply of cheap labor for the north, which increased the difficulties of the leftwing trade unions.

But in 1955, the PCI made a self-criticism of its trade union work and recognised that it had not organised or fought hard enough in the factories and that the reorganisation of production had aided the reassertion of the employers' prerogatives in the workplace at the expense of the unions. National conferences of communist workers were held, and a program of intensive shop floor organisation was launched. (6)

At the same time, the PCI maintained its general line of unity for national reconstruction. The 20th Congress of the CPSU and the events in Hungary and Poland strengthened the PCI's insistence on a distinctly "national" road - the Via Italiana - for socialism. The idea of the new democratic state and of the unity of all anti-fascist forces to achieve it was further elaborated.

**THE "ECONOMIC MIRACLE" AND THE CENTRE LEFT**

The period 1959-63 saw production in the north reach levels which enabled it to be described as the period of the Italian "economic miracle". In this period of investment and expansion, unlike the '30s, unemployment did fall in relative terms, giving the left trade unions room to manoeuvre in their campaign to re-establish shop floor organisation. Thus it was a period of increased trade union militancy, and this began to threaten high profit levels. In 1961, the DC attempted an "authoritarian" solution to these problems through an alliance with the neo-fascist party (MSI) to form a directly repressive government which was foiled by mass leftwing and workers' demonstrations. Thereupon the DC embarked upon an "opening to the left": an alliance with the socialist and social-democratic parties. This was the Centre-left government, the aim being a non-repressive reformist government which would keep profits up by eliminating corruption and inefficiency and pacify workers' militant demands through some reforms. In general, this was unsuccessful. The trade unions could not be curbed at a time when they were re-establishing shop floor organisation, and the employers' attempts to speed up production only increased workers' militancy. Corruption and inefficiency continued, the only major reform being the nationalisation of the electricity industry which further increased the large public sector.

The advent of Centre-left governments, pledged to reforms which did not differ markedly from those detailed by the PCI (7) led to a debate within the PCI and the emergence of at least two distinct positions. That which argued for a continuation of the "national democratic" strategy claimed that the economic miracle did not constitute a real change in the nature of Italian capitalism: Italy was far from becoming an advanced, integrated capitalist society. The party's political support derived from its concern with the problems of the south and uneven development, and the general persistence of so many pre-capitalist phenomena in the midst of modernity. (8) Thus it should continue with the development of broad alliances with non-proletarian but anti-fascist and non-monopolistic strata, and its program should continue to have "democratic" rather than socialist objectives. This position saw the centre-left as a positive political response to communist-led mass pressure, while recognising that its creators (the DC) intended to use it to attempt to destroy PCI-PSI and working class unity.

The opposing left position saw the centre-left as primarily arising out of the needs of the bourgeoisie itself. Economic planning, some control of the monopolies, greater mass consumption, administrative and educational reforms were all part of a complex strategic plan of the capitalist class to permit capitalist expansion. It argued that the workforce was becoming increasingly proletarianised (in the broad sense) and that, instead of a strategy of political alliances elaborated primarily at the level of parliament, there should be more emphasis on an alliance with all worker elements at the level of the productive enterprise. This did not exclude alliances with other classes and strata, but saw the need to forge them primarily through struggle in the work situation, and to build new forms of mass socialist democracy and workers' initiatives. This was contrasted with the relatively uncritical emphasis on forms of bourgeois democracy such as parliament of the PCI's traditional position. The left position was basically defeated at the Congress of 1966, (9) and the traditional strategy was continued.
1968-69 AND AFTER

As the centre-left failed to implement significant reforms, and trade union militancy grew, contradictions also increased in the government bureaucracies, especially schools and universities, in the cities, where lack of housing and planning had reached crisis proportions, and in the south. The students' and workers' revolts of '68-69 were the culmination and explosion of these contradictions, and the rightwing revolt in Reggio-Calabria was a manifestation of the same tensions felt by southern peasants. These events raised the same questions as had been raised in the debate with the left position: new forms of struggle and demands for direct mass democracy and control in the factories and other institutions.

The PCI reacted fairly flexibly to these struggles when they were in progress. However, the Congress of '68 integrated the issues raised into the general parliamentary strategy. At the same time, demands for specific reforms were incorporated into trade union contracts, and backed up by strikes and other industrial action.

Since 1970, the Italian economy has stagnated, with a declining output and unfavorable balance of payments, a process intensified by the oil crisis and the recession in the world capitalist economy. In 1974 inflation was over 25 per cent with one million unemployed, and over half a million underemployed.

The balance of payments has only relatively improved because of a drop in imports, which reflects low consumer demand and a tendency to a lowering of working class living standards. Industrial output is still very low. Various versions of centre-left governments have failed to create a situation in which a non-repressive government can preside over economic growth in the face of a strong and militant trade union movement, and there has been at least one attempt at a rightwing coup.

THE "HISTORICAL COMPROMISE"

The idea of the "historical compromise" was evolved by party secretary Berlinguer in an article on the fascist coup in Chile, in which he saw the lessons Italians could learn from Chile as being that of an even greater striving for unity among all anti-fascist forces, especially the petit-bourgeois and peasant strata. (10)

This was the culmination of a shift in emphasis in the attitude of the PCI towards the DC which had been going on since the late sixties. Previously, the aim had been for a new government consisting of socialists, communists and those forces in the DC which could be won away from its conservative leadership. The "historical compromise" aimed at shifting the centre of the DC without necessarily forcing a split, so that the PCI would govern more directly with it.

The PCI's present political program sees a "breakdown of political, economic and social equilibriums" in Italy, accompanied by a ruling class and fascist offensive against the masses. The broadest possible unity is needed in the defensive struggle against this, while elaborating a plan for "cleanup and renewal of national life". (11) This basically involves implementing the post-war constitution and reforms "in a socialist direction" while not seeking to socialise the whole economy. Economically, this includes:

a) Using the large public sector (45 per cent of GNP produced by state-owned or shared businesses) to exert pressure on the monopolies and "strip them of their powers of basic decision-making in the economy". (12)

b) Efficient economic planning and fiscal policy through the reassertion of parliamentary control over the budget, state banks and all public boards and agencies. (13)

c) The reorganisation and democratisation of all state bureaucracy to eliminate corruption, patronage and waste and make it accessible to parliament and the people. (14)

d) Through the above measures, the "primary needs" of the Italian economy can be tackled i.e. "containing inflation, progressive reduction of balance of payments, and defence and development of employment and productive activities". (15) This involves, of course, an extensive program of economic development in the south.

The program argues that the correction of the distortions and imbalances of the economy can be achieved both without nationalising further sectors (in fact, competition and private enterprise must be encouraged), and without sacrificing the living
standards of the working class. In fact, reforms in all social and health services are an integral part of the plan. (16) And each part of this reform program must be supported by mass struggle whose contents and forms must not "create divisions among the workers and arouse incomprehension and hostility in the population".

The implementation of such a program requires "agreement among the great popular forces": communists, catholics and socialists. This involves definition of goals on which agreement can be reached, not "ideological compromise", and the exploitation of the contradictions in the DC, which is not simply a capitalist party, but which must change fundamentally before an alliance with the PCI would be possible. (17) The PSI is seen as already having a perspective for unity, as is shown by its capacity to work closely with the PCI in regional governments. (18)

It was on this program that the PCI scored its huge successes (33-1/3 per cent of the vote) in the 1975 regional elections.

The PCI's strategic program abandons socialist revolution as a foreseeable goal. It is essentially a two-stage theory of revolution, only the first stage of which is elaborated. The future stage of transition to socialism is barely referred to in the program, but considerable effort is made to explain that socialism is not on the immediate agenda. (19)

The justification for this is based on the peculiarity of Italian conditions: the incomplete nature of the bourgeois revolution, the uneven economic development and hence widely differing types and levels of class struggle and consciousness, and the inability, in a period of economic crisis, of the capitalist parties to implement a reformist program which would permit economic growth. Far from contemplating seizure of power, as Lenin did in an analogous situation, the PCI is committed to a gradualist parliamentarist road which begins with reforms. There are a number of obvious contradictions between this approach and traditional marxist theory of the capitalist state, which raise the following problems:

1. The PCI faces all the general dangers of co-option faced by any working class based party trying to administer the capitalist state, and reform and rationalise capitalist production, especially given that it plans to do this in alliance with non-socialist parties.

2. Underlying the PCI emphasis on the unity of all anti-fascist forces is an analysis which assumes that all of these are by definition allies of the working class and would benefit from a reformed efficient capitalism. This is not necessarily the case for large sections of the petit-bourgeoisie whose whole existence would be threatened if Italian capitalism were made more competitive and efficient. The PCI program remains extremely vague on this kind of class analysis.

3. The PCI equates a "peaceful" road to socialism with a parliamentarist one. This is tied to its conception of democracy: parliamentary democracy is supported against fascist attacks, with little distinction being made between bourgeois and socialist forms of democracy. As Lenin pointed out (20) the structure and content of socialist democracy are totally different from those of the bourgeois state. By emphasising the struggle on parliamentary terrain rather than the creation of new mass forms of democracy, the PCI both fails to adequately criticise and perceive the dangers of co-option of the former and the possibilities of the latter. It is conceivable that a strong mass movement organised in a dual power situation could confront state power without a bloody civil war: the crucial point is not the degree of physical violence but the confrontation with, and destruction of, the old state apparatus.

4. The plan to strip the monopolies of their power in the economy assumes that they can be somehow separated from the capitalist economic system as a whole. In fact, they are an inseparable aspect of the system and it cannot be assumed that the state can act against them in any significant way without attacking the system itself. Yet the PCI plans to pressurise the monopolies to produce public consumption goods (e.g. buses instead of cars) without lowering wages and living standards and without provoking a flight of capital. The only guarantee given that this can, in fact, be done is a broad enough united force supporting the new democratic state.
In its day-to-day politics, the PCI's emphasis on "democracy" rather than socialism means it makes very little ideological criticism or analysis of capitalist structures and ideology. One example of this is its attitude to what is called "the emancipation of women". This question had received very little attention in the PCI until the national debates on divorce and abortion. The PCI explicitly dissociates itself from the feminist movement (it is conspicuous by its absence on demonstrations in support of abortion like the one in Florence in January of this year) which it regards as extreme. The PCI's own proposal for
abortion law reform allows abortion only in public hospitals after examination by two doctors and a social worker who must be convinced that there are adequate psychological or "social" grounds. The justification for this is that the PCI must preserve as much unity as possible with catholic elements, and since it claims to be a "national" party, it should accept the view of the majority of Italian people on such questions. This seems to abdicate from the task of political leadership and, more importantly, to ignore the vast numbers of women who want to make their own choices about abortion. (There are an estimated two million illegal abortions per year in Italy). The PCI's conservatism over this issue is the more striking since the Union of Italian Women, which has strong links with the PCI, has suggested that far fewer restrictions should be placed on abortion. It is also extremely noticeable that women play a very limited part in PCI organisation. This is not surprising when women form less than 20 per cent of the workforce in Italy. But when the sexual division of labor in the party (women still do the typing, serve the refreshments, etc.) is questioned, it is not seen as a serious political issue, and again one is told that the party merely (correctly) reflects the attitudes of the majority on these matters.

The PCI is the largest non-ruling Communist Party in Europe, and has been the main influence on the political development of what is probably the most organised and militant working class in the capitalist world. It is embarking upon a strategy of reforming Italian capitalism in a parliamentary alliance with non-socialist parties, based upon the specific conditions which exist in Italy. Obviously, such a strategy, whether correct or incorrect for Italy, cannot apply to Australia, since the conditions used to justify it do not exist here. But we can learn from the PCI's long and successful experience of mass work and mobilisation, especially in the trade union movement.

Crudely put, the questions that arise out of an examination of PCI strategy are:

Can a left-coalition government succeed in instituting reforms which would restore the profitability and efficiency of Italian capitalism without lowering, but in fact raising, working class living standards?

And can such a program be successfully defended against attacks?

An affirmative answer to this has to put much weight on the large state-controlled sector of the economy and the expanded powers of regional governments, in which the PCI won substantial gains in the 1975 elections.

What is certain is that a PCI coalition government would mean a new stage in class struggle in Italy. The real test of the PCI's program will be whether it strengthens and develops working class organisation in the course of its implementation. The alternative is that reform of the economy might require a limiting and consequent weakening of the movement, thus making it more vulnerable to a Chile-type coup.

2. La Politica de Unita Nazionale dei Comunisti. Speech made to the Neapolitan party organisation on his return to Italy in 1944. Republished by the PCI, 1951.
4. Ibid., pp. 22-3.
5. Ibid., p. 36.
6. Ibid., p. 39.
8. Ibid., p. 253.
9. The left position formed the basis of the Il Manifesto group which was expelled from the PCI over its criticism of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. It has since amalgamated with a section of a leftwing split from the PSI to form PDUP (Party of Proletarian Unity).