ITALIAN STUDENTS IN REVOLT

In an article especially written for ALR a prominent Italian communist discusses the reasons for the upsurge of student activism and the attitude adopted towards student radicals by Italian communists.

ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES have been deeply shaken by a great student movement which, through its struggle, reopened discussion not only about the university organisation and structure, but about the whole of the emphasis in study underlying one of the most traditional and conservative institutions of culture and society.

For various reasons the movement attracted immediate attention: its extent — tens of thousands of students from all of Italy's universities (often even from the schools) took part; the length of the struggle—it began in Autumn 1967 and lasted till Summer 1968 and everything seems to point to it beginning again with vigor when the universities re-open; the determination with which the students have fought—violent clashes with the police, dozens of trials, disciplinary measures and intimidation have not stopped the movement; the forms of struggle—occupation of university buildings, study committees on reform, demonstrations on the street, democratic organisation in assemblies; the framework of the struggle—the link established between university questions and the basic and more general problems of Italian society.

Why did this movement occur? What are its specific and more general causes? What does it mean and what does it express? What are its prospects? The crisis in Italian schools is profound and in many ways insoluble within the framework of the present social structure. Here, as in other decisive sectors of Italian society, only great reforms which cut deep into the social fabric are capable of solving the most acute of the problems. (This is true in general of developed capitalist societies.)

There has been a great increase in the school population, especially in middle schools (1956-57, 930,000 pupils; 1961-62, 1,540,000), but also lower middle schools (technical schools, high schools and grammar schools), and in the universities. Faced with this,
about 10 years ago the government took a few routine measures, without even touching on the "social" problem which was implicit in a real democratisation of education. This policy was defeated by a strong movement of opposition in the country, in the schools, and in parliament. And the governments which followed, all led by the Christian Democrats, tried to find a new policy, called a policy of "reform", essentially designed to make a new instrument of the old school system, one capable of providing, at all levels—from worker to engineer—a workforce suitable for the development of Italian industry. This policy is the one which, in the last few months above all, has experienced complete failure.

In the first place during these years the development has been quite inadequate for the increase in the school population and its growing needs. We lack thousands of classrooms; there are no laboratories; one university professor often teaches a class of 500-600 students and so on. In the second place, the view which regards the school system as an appendix of production again brought to light, and still more clearly, the class character of schooling, both in its selective aspects and in its formative and educative functions. In the third place, contrary to the apologists of neo-capitalism, Italian capitalism, far from developing in an organic fashion, has grown like Topsy, aggravating all the imbalances which are typical of Italian society.

The conjunction of these three elements has accentuated a basic contradiction which accompanies capitalist development and which is tending to become more acute in the conditions of advanced capitalism, making it more obvious and explosive. This contradiction lies on the one hand in the necessity of stimulating the development of education and scientific and technical knowledge, and on the other in the necessity of channelling, controlling and containing this development in a way that meets the demands of the productive system; of maintaining in the schools a selection system related to the class base, which serves to reproduce the social hierarchy and give most of those entering production an inferior education which will prepare them for the subordinate function of manual activity. From this arises the fact that schools are no longer looked on as sectional institutions guaranteeing the fulfilment of tasks, but are rather regarded as one of the aspects of society in which are created the contradictions and contrasts of the whole society itself.

It is in the universities that these contrasts and contradictions show themselves most clearly. The high cost of study and the absence of any right to study show up the system of selection on the basis of class in its clearest form. Only 13.8 per cent of those who are enrolled in the first year of university come from working class families, and only 8.4 per cent of those who finally get
their degrees. But there is also the other class aspect of education—the utilisation of education and cultural and professional training as an instrument of integration into the constituted order, and of absorption into a social hierarchy which is implicitly authoritarian. In relation to this there comes to mind an important observation of Marx (the third Thesis on Feuerbach) in which he maintains that society is divided into two parts, whereby one part is raised above society itself, prosecuting its ideology, its values, its conventions as objective and neutral knowledge, whereby it becomes knowledge serving to predetermine the social destiny to which everyone is assigned.

In the university authoritarianism is expressed at all levels and in every way—from the unquestioned authority of the teachers (baronies, as we call them; "god-professors"), to the system of examinations, to the aristocratic relationship between teacher and student, to the academic hierarchy, to the rigidity of courses. The hierarchic, bureaucratic, sclerotic structure is, in this sense, a response to the institutional functions which are assigned to the university: to educate the cadres of the established order; to deprive the professions, as a distinctive element of the social hierarchy, of every intellectual autonomy. So the university operates more and more within the compass of a wretched and compromised educational system, explicitly excluding all political and social debate, remaining closed to the great problems of our time, an obstacle to any real development of knowledge and the sciences, which find their principal basis in the critical spirit, in non-conformity, in openness to what is new.

Thus the university becomes a catalyst of certain deep contradictions: a) the contradiction between the real democratic spirit of education and the mechanical nature of selection and education by class; and b) the contradiction between the demands of a free, modern, critical culture which allows for the development of the personality and a sclerotic and coercive education. These contradictions clearly express more general ones between the development of the social productive forces and the limits which are placed on them by the actual system of relationships of production and the requirements for maintaining the existing social and political balance. The proof of this is seen in the way in which the powers-that-be reacted to the student movement—just as they do in the bitterest of working class battles. If we add to this the weight that the sciences have assumed in the productive processes and the new relationship which has been established between intellectuals and technicians and capitalist society, we can easily understand the depth of the issues posed by the movement.

The movement began against a government bill which was presented as a "new reform" of the university, and which was in reality no more than a reconfirmation of all the things just
described. Hence the movement launched slogans against authoritarianism in scholarship, demands for an adequate professional training and recognition of the role of professional people. In brief, they made demands not only for a more efficient and better educational system, but for different types of schools and for different societal development. “We don’t wish to be robots in the service of the bosses”, said one of the leaflets distributed at a student demonstration. Hence the denunciation of the class mechanism in selection and the demand for the right to study for all; hence the demand for and the creation of forms of participatory democracy and student power aimed at the rejection of the view which regards the student as an object in favour of the student as a subject, and a protagonist who is active in university and cultural life. The echo of these demands among the student masses, the degree of mobilisation around them, the result obtained by shaking the old structures and old power relationships indicate how deeply they were felt, creating a situation which became more and more explosive.

On the other hand, the more general relationship established between these specific education problems and the authoritarianism which is implicit in developed capitalist societies, the relationship between the school and production, between liberty and the professions, the stimuli to involve culture (and society) in the great issues and problems of the contemporary world, could not but become involved with the debate on more general political questions, forming a link with vast sectors of public opinion, and being reflected in the whole Italian political situation.

Besides, this connection was, in a certain sense, inevitable. If conditions in the universities were the concrete occasion which precipitated the movement, there were also other causes which generated it, and which can be summed up as the new feeling of responsibility of the intellectual vis-a-vis the revolutionary movement in action throughout the world. Comrade Luigi Longo, general secretary of the Communist Party of Italy, said at a recent meeting of the Central Committee that it appeared to him abstract and incorrect to approach the student movement’s problems according to the class origin of its components in the petty, middle and high bourgeoisie, and thus to predict an inevitable petty bourgeois deviation. Comrade Longo said that the element to be stressed was that the movement had exploded in a situation which was decisive for capitalist society, and within the context of a great political and social clash in which the working class and its organisations are ever more the conscious vanguard protagonists.

This must be kept fairly in mind; it would be a mistake to look for the reasons for the movement only in the imbalance between the education system and society, and in the deep crisis which the former is undergoing. Certainly, the acuteness of the problem
of education is something which must not be neglected, but it occurs
in a context which is more complex and which concerns the
growth of problems of the whole of Italian society, and beyond that
of problems which concern the whole world. Thus the influence
which the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people has had is incal­
culable. Around the question of Vietnam has grown up a deep
and fiery anti-imperialist feeling, a higher awareness of the value
of human beings, of freedom, of national independence and a
new feeling of internationalism. All the liberal myths which had
been regarded as a pole of attraction for quite a number of youth
groups collapsed miserably before the brutality and oppression of
Vietnam. This revealed the negative motives implicit in American
society which until recently was pointed to as the model to follow.
The dramatic problems of that war, as well as the more general
problems of the "third world", intimately connected with the
struggle against hunger and underdevelopment, come face to
face with the false consumer problems of wealthy civilisation,
provoking deep idealistic and moral reactions.

At the same time, the failure of the social-democratic "renewal"
(Wilson, Brandt, etc.) caused a further shift. And the whole
experience of the Italian centre-left, which failed even to renovate
the system internally, the collaboration between catholics and
socialists in ever worse forms of power management, all provoked
a reaction from the masses of youth who see nothing consoling in
this system; even see it as oppressive and degrading; and thus wish
to change the system. And it is in this general context that the
specific conditions of education have come together to fuse the
different elements and transform them into a movement which
raises problems of general (revolutionary) renewal of society.

Are there hidden dangers in this movement? No doubt. In it
there flourish no small number of extremists, of voluntarists, and
much political and ideological confusion. Often there are strategic
and tactical evaluations which involve in a passionate polemic
the great issues of the working class movement. Typical, for example,
is the emergence of a position which underestimates the specific
aspects of action in the Italian universities. Behind this under­
estimation is the belief that the students' struggles are but the
occasion for development of a revolutionary vanguard of a new
type, in contest with the vanguard organised by the working class.
The particular characteristics of Italian society, the presence of a
strong Communist Party with a strong working class heritage, the
real dialectics, political and social, sometimes escape the student
movement, leading it to conduct forays, leading it to assume the
role of someone wishing to teach a lesson in revolution to a
working class defined as integrated in the system.

Against such positions we must open up a frank political and
even polemical debate, and we have done so. But what counts
is to evaluate such dangers soberly, neither exaggerating nor
minimising them, and seeing at the same time where they arise from.
In an article in *Rinascita* "The Student Movement in the Anti­
capitalist Struggle" Luigi Longo, for example, did not hide that
there has been a lack of contact between the Party, its activity and
attitudes in the universities, and the political and organisational
reality which has arisen among the students, especially among the
most dynamic and active sectors, that certain political and cultural
ferments which existed in the universities interested our members
and organisations only belatedly. Hence a certain lag which was
a lag in ideas and politics, not only in understanding what was
happening, but which also led to avoiding contact, in turn assist­
ing the emergence of attitudes which we consider extremist or
mistaken.

How then can we move towards the student movement? We
intend to do so by respecting its autonomy of action and initiative,
and by considering it as a rich and positive movement from which
the whole of Italian society and politics can derive important
benefits. A relationship with the movement, therefore, which is
open but which seeks unity. To be present in the reality of
the movement, Longo wrote in the article cited, means not only
to note what happens, but to intervene continuously through
debate and action, to clarify situations, to overcome doubts, to
reject errors.

It is not a question of making references to theses and pre­
fabricated schemes, but, without any belief in superiority and
infallibility, of replying to attitudes with our own attitudes, replying
to opinions with our own opinions in a concrete fashion, striving
each time to understand the origins, the significance, the range,
even of what seems at first sight to be absurd or distorted. What
is more, this is the way to keep with the issues, to measure our
reasoning against the reasoning of others, assimilating what we
find good and of value in their ideas.

We maintain that the student movement cannot and should not
counterpose itself to the political organisations of the working
class, to its party, and in this specific case to the Communist Party.
It is by working in this spirit that we believe the problem of the
incorporation of the student movement in the strategy of the
working class struggle in Italy can be positively solved. It is with
this method that we are convinced of the role the student forces
of Italy play, and of the need to call to the attention of all Italian
society, and particularly of the workers' movement, issues, prob­
lems and demands to which must be found a complete and valid
reply, so that revolutionary strategy may be capable of carrying
out the tasks it has set itself in a country of developed capitalism.