

## **Address by Fausto Bertinotti to the Congress of the European Left Party**

*Prague, 24 November 2007*

I'd like this congress to be seen by all of us as an opportunity to make a strong political commitment and to imbue our political activity with new energy. We could begin with this thought: we are holding this congress in Prague. It will soon be 40 years since the Prague Spring, a season that brought hope. Men and women of the Czechoslovakia of 40 years ago, men and women of the Czechoslovak people, gathering around communists and non-communists who believed in the lead given by Dubcek and his companions, around the idea of refounding, of renewing, society and activating popular consensus, expressed the last chance for reforming those systems. That was the same hope that united the workers and students who in many places around the world, from Berkley to Paris, to Turin and London, were calling into question the capitalist organization of work and society. The defeat of the Prague Spring presaged the collapse of the regimes in eastern Europe; this early defeat of the season of workers and students foretold the defeat of the workers' movement of the twentieth century. Today we are faced with the need to resume our journey. After the resistance and the resistances of recent years, we need to resume our journey because since then everything has changed, there has been a capitalist revolution, a restoration, that is commonly called globalisation. We are now able to see the profound nature of this, its ability to bring about modernization on a planetary scale

and, together with that modernization, we can see its daily undermining of the civility of work and of civility in general. It is in this context that we have witnessed the most violent upsurges of war and terrorism, and war has come back to haunt us. It is in this context that Europe too has seen the spread of insecurity, uncertainty, the loss of control by individuals, by classes, by peoples over their own destiny, so that to struggle against war and for disarmament becomes a commitment on behalf of civility and the struggle against temporary employment becomes an indispensable condition for mapping out a future for the new generations. But the adversary appearing before us is a dangerous, strong adversary. It would be a serious mistake on our part to underestimate its strength and the danger it poses. It is a capitalism that we might call winner-takes-all, in the sense that it has pretensions to incorporate everything, to absorb into its capitalist accumulation not only labour, but every aspect of the life of people and of nature. A capitalism that in its voraciously competitive nature needs to create forms of socialization such as perhaps have never been known before, but at the same time to deny them systematically; a capitalism that wants to reduce people, classes, the environment to variables that depend on the capitalist system of accumulation. It is in this context that emerge systematic attacks on the social conquests of half a century, since the victory over Nazi-Fascism in Europe. In this Europe the process of unification throws up a remarkable paradox: while the world and European people feel the need of Europe, a material Europe, the one actually created is unable to display its own independence on the world scene, dominated as it is by unipolar aggregation around the United States of America, even

calling into question the social and democratic compromise reached in the last fifty years. Faced with this challenge, we need a left in Europe; without a political left in Europe even manifestations of struggle, of resistance and of contestation are doomed not to result in an alternative. I believe, then, that this congress, as a homage and memorial to the men who attempted it forty years ago, must readdress the challenge of interpreting the malaise, the criticism and the opposition of the peoples of Europe who, like the protest movements, if they do not find a political entity capable of offering a strategy, risk becoming frustrated and imploding.

We together, comrades, had the right idea, and I say it without any particular pride but in the knowledge of having travelled some distance along the road, when we created the European Left Party. We have worked along the right lines, but today we are called upon to make a further quality leap so as not to dissipate the experience we have gained. It is as though we have taken our run-up and now we are called upon to jump. Our correct perception was in understanding that this class conflict would inevitably end up becoming international, worldwide and, as far as regards our own dimension, at least European, that the renewed contestation against this neo-capitalist order would spring from a movement such as the *alter-globalisation* one that reactivates critical capability, that would reintroduce new generations to the political arena. We understood that the European Left Party could not be built on foundations of ideology or identity but instead through choosing to construct another Europe, democratic, social and peaceable. We've made headway and I think, comrades, that we can lay claim to one important thing: mutual understanding, the willingness to

learn from each other's experiences and not to think like a central authority but like a plurality of experience and cultures from which to draw lessons. We have been involved in important political events like the extraordinary experience of the struggle in France against the European constitutional treaty in the name of the other Europe. We have seen the appearance of a significant experience like that of Germany's Die Linke, the emergence of a new political reality of the left, and we have participated in the first experiments of struggle at a European level like the opposition to the Bolkestein directive. But what I wish to say to you, comrades, is that I don't think that we can afford to go on in this way. We need to make a quality leap, for two reasons: the first has to do with a consideration as to our limits. We have had these experiences but we have to recognize that we have not managed to create a true European movement of struggle. We have not managed to create unitary seasons of struggle even when the issues the individual governments were facing, often to the detriment of the social movements, were the same. This happened, for example, with regard to welfare: it was under attack in individual countries and we were unable to find the coordination necessary to pose a great European question, or on huge questions that have become ever more important such as wages. In Italy, over the course of five years, workers have lost purchasing power, they have lost about Euro 2,000 p.a.; in Germany workers have regressed to the purchasing power of 1986 and the situation is the same in all European countries, yet we offer no wages initiative at a European level, temporary employment has become the sad lot of an entire generation. We have denounced the facts and provided analyses but have certainly

not arrived at a unitary movement at a European level. And yet we are at a crucial point. Work, the new work, the new jobs, have become an extraordinary challenge, and not in line with the old social democratic or labour canons in which the battle is almost exclusively waged over redistribution, important as that is, as I mentioned earlier. The question of jobs now covers matters of gender, of the environment, of civil rights. In reality, by way of this extraordinary modernization, we seem to have turned the clock back to the nineteenth century, to Marx's descriptions of the turning of the proletariat into light infantry, those who migrated after production and jobs where they were to be found, and ended up being denied their fundamental rights, deprived of collective bargaining, reduced to the lonely relationship of each single worker against the power of the enterprise and the market. This is the challenge for the future: we cannot go on as before, yet we can't say there is any dearth of movements. Portugal witnessed in Lisbon a demonstration by 200,000 people, out of a population of 10 million. Two hundred thousand, in Lisbon! On 20 October, in Rome, one million people, mostly young, demonstrated against temporary employment. In recent weeks in France we have seen the extraordinary lead taken by those same students who won the battle against the *contrat première embauche* and who are once again on the march, and in the struggle over transport there is an extraordinary mobilization. But may I say, comrades, that these struggles that are crossing all of Europe risk not producing important results? And that by not achieving important results they may condemn the movement to despair and impotence? In this panorama there is evidence that the increase in struggles is

accompanied by a crisis of politics, so it can easily happen that there may be populations engaged in struggle and at the same time neo-liberal or liberal-social policies are carried forward; and is there no capability to create an alternative? I do not believe that the alternative in Europe can come from social-democratic, labour or neo-liberal groupings, whose readiness to oppose I appreciate, but that is not where the answer is going to come from. The answer will not come because the prevalent culture in these groupings is a culture that denies the bitter contradiction with the market. And in this type of capitalist modernization without any ideological concession, unless the big question of the contestation and the transformation of the existing capitalist order is reopened, these great struggles too risk going nowhere. This is our task. This is where we need that quality leap. We cannot help but see that in this European reality in which we live there is a wearing down of democracy and an unravelling of civil society. How often now do we witness a confrontation, a contrast, not between right and left but between the low and high ends of society, with a part of the population that refuses politics as a system, that when saying “we” does not mean the working class, the movement, the left, but those who find themselves at the low end of society as opposed to the rest of organized society. In order to reverse this trend, there needs to be a political entity of the left, European, that is able to undertake a great political operation, that of criticizing this winner-take-all capitalism, the forms of government in Europe and in the individual countries that go along with it, but not simply in day-to-day clashes but stopping to think about the serious perils it brings for the left, for individuals, for classes, for civilized

society: the process of reducing every aspect of social life to a commodity, and engaging not only in a new exploitation and alienation of labour, but in the colonization of life, the use of bodies and the environment as mere factors in the accumulation. In such conditions, the clash between environment and development and the discrepancies of gender are not Sunday luxuries. Unless we come to grips with these contradictions, even class conflict can no longer generate an alternative society. This is what we must look to, this capacity to build a new basic programme of the anti-capitalist, alternative, left. An alternative of the left must be able to come to fruition within society, it must be able to present itself as a convincing alternative government and society. The heritage of the workers' movement depends on this renewed capacity. With some apprehension, I would say that this is a possibility, but we are also running a risk. This possibility really is within our reach but the risk is that the left, by which I mean the heritage of the workers' movement, may be cancelled from the Europe of the near future (in the long run – said Keynes - we are all dead). In any case, in the long run, there is always time for hope, but in the short run this left risks being cancelled and politics risks being reduced simply to an alternation, not an alternative type of society, to an alternation between one alliance and the other, into which the popular masses too can be drawn in the name of making their votes count, if there is no relationship between an alternative society and alternative politics. For this reason, I believe that we must not box ourselves in, I believe that we must aspire to construct, in each country and in Europe as a whole, a wider, pluralistic, unitary left that is still capable of keeping alive the challenge of

socialism in the twenty-first century and, here and now, contesting the politics of neo-liberalism and liberal socialism: in short, capable of encouraging the movement with results and offering future prospects.

I don't know whether it is because in Italy we are still strongly influenced by the teachings of a great Marxist intellectual like Antonio Gramsci, a leading light of Western Marxism, but I truly believe that the question of hegemony is once again becoming the big question in politics, hegemony not as the triumph of an ideology but hegemony as formation of peoples' common sense, hegemony as the coming and harbinger of a different society that's possible, hegemony as the ability to call into question the rigid schema of compatibilities within which even struggles are imprisoned, even the most important and generous of them. In short, I believe we must keep our feet on the ground but look to the stars. This ambition is necessary in order to construct the left of the future; and the European Left Party must position itself to play a major role in this left in Europe.