

Report from Italy by Liliana Gorini

Communists rush to support austerity

Visentini's plan to tax small businesses into extinction would not have survived without PCI backing.

It is the Communist Party of Italy and its trade union allies who deserve the major share of the credit for the fascist fiscal package that Finance Minister Bruno Visentini has managed to impose on independent shopkeepers and family enterprises. After the successful strike against Visentini's plan organized by the main shopkeepers association, the Confcommercio, a discussion had begun in the Italian Parliament which might have led to Visentini's resignation, had not the Communist and Socialist-linked trade union federations intervened to call for a general strike in support of Visentini's package.

Visentini's fiscal plan was opposed in particular by the Christian Democrats and the Social Democratic Party (PSDI) because it would tax some 40% of the gross income of all non-employees, particularly hitting small shops and family businesses. These proprietors and enterprises would not survive that prohibitive tax rate.

For those who refuse to pay, Visentini has announced special measures, which include imprisonment on the basis of mere circumstantial evidence. For a reluctant small shopkeeper, it would be enough to be denounced by the "fiscal brigades" organized by the trade unions, according to a proposal by UIL union secretary Giorgio Benvenuto; the shopkeeper would be jailed first, before being given an opportunity to prove his innocence.

That's the reason why the shopkeepers association Confcommercio

went on strike with such slogans as "We don't want the KGB in our house" and "Down with the left dictatorship!" When the Christian Democratic Party, the largest party in Italy's coalition government, and the PSDI presented amendments to Visentini's plan, Visentini declared that he would not change a single comma, and if the plan were not completely accepted, he would resign. The same threat was issued by Giovanni Spadolini, Defense Minister and Visentini's colleague in the Republican Party.

Then the trade union federations, pushed by the Italian Communist Party, jumped in to save the Visentini plan by calling for a general strike to support it on Nov. 21. Italy's political parties felt obliged to undertake a round of discussions in order to come to a "compromise solution" and avoid the government crisis that would follow on a general strike.

If the DC and the PSDI give in to the Communists and the Republicans in the parliamentary discussion, which now has been postponed to the week before the scheduled strike, the door will be open to the fascist "government of the technocrats" which Visentini and his political allies have long sought for Italy.

Bruno Visentini is the former president of the Olivetti corporation; along with the current boss of Olivetti, Carlo De Benedetti, he is an enthusiastic champion of the view that Italy must be a "post-industrial society," according to the policy prescriptions laid down by the oligarchical financier families historically based in Venice,

Switzerland, and London. Before he proposed to tax the shopkeepers out of existence, Visentini's principal accomplishment was gutting the cost-of-living escalator in trade unions' contracts, thereby allowing the workers to be freely looted through inflation.

Nevertheless, at Communist urging, the unions supported the man who had just picked their pockets. In Italy, too, the slogan "equality of sacrifice" is useful in lowering living standards, while different groups in the working population are pitted against each other by the "technocrats"—and the government, industry and labor "co-determine" the degree of austerity required. This was Mussolini's model.

The Confcommercio and other non-wage earners' categories are determined not to give up their fight. They have now threatened a two-day strike which would shut down all the shops in Italy, and have announced an alliance with the artisans, the lawyers, and the newspaper-kiosk salesmen—the latter are supposed to pay 39% of their gross income although they receive only 20% of the cover prices of the papers they sell. Both the lawyers and the artisans in Milan have announced strikes on their own.

But flush with the support he got from the trade unions, Visentini has announced another measure hitting family enterprises: a 10% tax increase on real estate.

To demonstrate that there is no limit to his rapacity, Visentini has also announced a special three-tier tax on dogs: they will be divided, in three categories: "luxury" dogs, "semi-luxury" dogs, and "low-class" dogs, according to their breed, the purpose for which they are kept, and their relationship with the owner. Those who possess dogs for no other reason than personal affection will pay the highest tax rate.