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Europe

Some incomplete notes on the political situation in Europe

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These notes on the current situation in Europe, the state of opposition to the austerity policies implemented by all governments, and the prospects for rebuilding the radical left are the result of a report and discussion in the Bureau of the Fourth International.

1. The European economy is still immersed in crisis. The IMF predicts that 2012 will end with growth of – 0.4% and 2013 with 0.2%. The recession is particularly significant in the periphery, especially in Greece and the Spanish state (in the latter a fall of 1.5% and 1.3% in 2012 and 2013) and there is weak growth in the centre, with forecast of 0.9% growth for Germany. The general economic stagnation and austerity policies affect the latter in a negative way, as its exports to the rest of Europe tend to fall (down 11.4% as a whole, with falls of 15.8% to Portugal, 9% to Greece, and 8.6% to Italy) and are not offset by the increase in exports to the United States and China.

The crisis is generating tensions in the entire edifice of the EU and the Euro zone and accentuating the neo-colonial and centre-periphery internal dynamics. In this context Mediterranean Europe has become the place where all the political and social tensions of the crisis are condensed. The future of the Euro remains uncertain, although the German policy for keeping the single currency, tightening the rope but without breaking it, is needed to promote their exports. Capital flight continues from the periphery to the centre (the Spanish state suffered outflows of capital from June 2011 to June 2012 of 296,000 million Euros, 27% of GDP in 2011, while Italy has registered outflows of 235 billion Euros, 15% of GDP in 2011), and the gap between the sovereign debt premiums for Germany and those of countries like Italy or the Spanish state show the situation of risk for the Euro.

The most immediate factor that marks the European agenda is the total bailout of the Spanish state that has been planned in European politics for months. Apparently imminent weeks ago, it seems now that they can get by a little longer. Apart from the doubts of the Spanish government, and above all Germany itself, the issue will remain on the table, in a scenario also involving Italy, Cyprus and Slovenia. In Greece the political crisis can only worsen and the strategy of the troika is to prepare a firewall preventing a domino effect in case of having to disconnect the Hellenic country from the Euro.

In this situation the debate about the Euro is gaining force on the European left, although the only country where there is real debate beyond small circles is in Greece. The anti-capitalist left opposed the creation of the Euro, as a project in the service of the major economic powers of the EU and detrimental to workers. Once implemented and consolidated as an apparently inescapable reality the most appropriate policy was to put the emphasis on an internationalist break with the Europe of Capital (opposition to all Treaties, Constitution, Directives and so on), without raising the question in terms of “exit” from the EU or the Euro. Focusing on the rupture with the Europe of Capital in an internationalist sense and not falling back on the national-state mentality remains a strategic issue. However, the evolution of the situation puts on the table the specific issue of the currency, the Euro, which no longer appears as an irreversible fact. In this context exit from the Euro cannot be a taboo, nor can we take its existence for granted, as was the case before the crisis.

However, I do not think it necessary to raise exit from the Euro as a programmatic demand *a priori*, or focus on the discussion around the currency as fundamental, but it is best to place the question of exit from the Euro as a possible consequence of the break with the policies of austerity: suspension of debt payment, non-application of the adjustment policies and reversal of the cuts made, expropriation of banking and so on. Thus a possible leftist government in any European country, rather than voluntarily leaving the Euro, would have to break with the policies imposed by the troika and assume the possibility of expulsion from the Euro, which on the other hand is also not 100% sure, especially if this happens in a country which is economically relevant (Spanish state, Italy and so on) with the consequences that could entail for the survival of the Euro itself. Faced with a scenario of “disobedience” from

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one country the troika would be forced to punish such insubordination, so that the example does not spread, but at the same time there may be difficulties in drastically expelling from the Euro zone a state of this weight, or two states if there is insubordination in two countries at once. A left-wing government should be prepared to leave the Euro and would have to prepare the population for this, but I see no utility in posing *a priori* a voluntary departure although it's very important to continue to denounce the model of European integration that has been built.

2. What is underway is a comprehensive project of social reorganization and change of the social model under the designs of financial capital. It is not a complete, coherent, or planned project in its entirety but, without a doubt, what is at stake is a deep and drastic change of the current social model. In the European periphery we are witnessing a "Latin Americanization"/"Third Worldization" of the Euro-Mediterranean societies in terms of model of society (inequality, social de-structuring, increased violence and so on). And the destruction of the so-called "European social model" and the remains of "Rhineland capitalism" is deepening in the continental centre, through an "Americanization" of the continent, towards a model of wild unregulated capitalism. This has been Germany's path since the Schröder reforms and Hartz laws at the beginning of the century.

The transformation of the social model implies a change of political regime. The oligarchic involution of the parliamentary democracies is deepening and intensifying. We are seeing a draining of content, an implosion of the traditional democratic-institutional mechanisms of the European countries, by extreme subordination of politics to the interests of finance capital, the greatest expressions of which have been "financial coups" in Greece and Italy and the placing in key institutional positions in the EU and in many countries of the men from Goldman Sachs. In times of crisis, it is better to take the rudder of the ship directly.

In the countries of the periphery, the economic and social crisis has become a political crisis continually deepening the growing process of de-legitimization of institutions and mainstream political parties, and the rejection of the financial elites. In Greece, the most advanced case, a continuing, deepening crisis of hegemony has led to an explosion of the traditional party system. In the Spanish state the rejection of "politicians and bankers", which was the founding motto of 15M, has increased and the country is entering a growing dynamic of "regime crisis" which mingles the wear and tear of the institutions of the state (including the King although in nuanced form) and the two great parties for their pro-banker management of the crisis with the crisis of the state model and the rise of the independence movements in Catalonia and Euskadi.

The deepening of the political consequences of the crisis in Greece, Portugal, and the Spanish state, of the traditional party system, social outbursts and problems of "governance" denote a deterioration of the political situation, in countries where the "democratic" tradition among political and business elites is very superficial and historically not deeply rooted. There is increased police repression, with the hardening of the laws and reiterated violation by the regime of its own laws and rules of the game when necessary, within the framework of a growing authoritarian involution of political and social life, to which must be added the growth or emergence of the extreme right. Recourse to authoritarian solutions, whose realization can take many forms, evolves more and more as a real hypothesis for the ruling class, as the crisis of legitimacy deepens and the traditional mechanisms of domination decompose.

3. Social democracy does not present any kind of alternative to current policies at the European level, or any agenda of solution to the crisis that is differentiated from that of the right and finance capital itself. In the countries of the periphery, social democracy (PASOK in Greece, PSOE in the Spanish State, SP in Portugal and so on) has actively collaborated in the implementation of adjustment measures. In Germany the SPD has not questioned either, in any real way, the austerity of Merkel or the official story of the crisis that lays the blame on "workers from the South". It cannot be ruled out that in the future a social-democratic majority in the key countries of the EU could pose some slight variation or "breathing space" to the countries in the worst situation and opt for slightly opening the security valve to release steam, with the aim of alleviating the worsening of social tensions, but there would not be any serious change of course. Despite all the pumped up media expectations around Hollande, for those who had them,

they have been quickly dashed and, despite all the election promises, his government's budget maintains a commitment to austerity policies (reducing the deficit from 4.5 to 3% next year and 0% by 2017) and supports the fiscal pact at the European level.

Social democracy appears today as a current at a historic low point without a specific political project. Where it has applied austerity policies, it has paid a huge political price. However, it still retains, with distinct forms according to each country, broad political-electoral apparatuses, bases in some sectors of society and in the trade unions, control or affinity with the media and, despite everything, still has a significant share of electoral support in many countries (Great Britain, Germany and so on) as the only alternative to conservative governments today available. In Mediterranean Europe the crisis of social democracy acquires an ever-increasing dynamic although with different degrees of intensity. PASOK has been destroyed in Greece and its standing in the polls is below 10%. In the Spanish state the PSOE has not climbed back in the polls or capitalized on the erosion of the right-wing PP government and has indeed lost electoral support and social credibility. In Portugal the SP retains a significant electoral quota and is capitalizing on the unpopularity of the government of Passos Coelho, somehow combining a hypocritical verbal radicalism against the cuts and basic support for austerity policies. But everything suggests that when the battered Passos Coelho falls the SP will have to engage again in the management of austerity, either in a unity government or in another form, that will inevitably erode it.

Devoid of a transformational project, and converted into a faithful servant of the financial regime at a time when it is sacrificing most of society to save itself, social democracy in the south of Europe enters into contradiction and collision with its social base. Social democracy had a key role in the formation of the post-dictatorial regimes in the 1970s in Greece, Portugal, and the Spanish state and its deep crisis in these countries is one reflection of the more general crisis of the political order established then.

4. A new phase in the social struggles starting from 2011 is clear, although these are still very uneven on the continent, reaching a mass or popular "rebellion" level only in the Mediterranean periphery (with strong exceptions such as Italy) or in some Eastern European countries (Romania in early 2012 and so on). In others, such as Britain, struggles against the cuts are notable by the usual standards of the country, as shown in the demonstration on October 20, 2012. The wave of current struggles have as a clear limit, in geopolitical terms, the fact of having not yet reached France, the key country in the resistance to neo-liberalism from 1995 until the outbreak of the crisis, and Italy, where the social situation still has not been exploited in a "Spanish" manner. Without being deterministic, it is predictable, however, that as adjustment policies deepen along with the instability of the crisis, these countries will sooner or later develop their own "15M", and their own, unexpected, ways to unlock the situation and enter into a new political and social cycle.

The internationalization of the "indignant" and "occupy" movement and new resistance to austerity is very uneven. The 15O of 2011 was an important step forward and represented a day of remarkable global action, to be followed a few months later by the protests of Blockupy Frankfurt in March 2012 at the continent's financial heart. But the new movement has not yet been able to provide solid frameworks and international structures and promote a dynamic of international coordination which goes beyond global days of symbolic action, such as the recent day of 13O against the debt. The initiatives organized by what is left of the former antiglobalization wave like Firenze+10 are quite peripheral to the new movement. And also, the attempts to organize a European movement by the left union currents in Britain as the European Conference Against Austerity don't have enough continental impact to launch a European dynamics. In this scenario there is a triple dynamic at work: driving national-state level resistance to cuts, global protests like 15O and 13O, and specific actions of solidarity with peripheral countries affected by structural adjustment, with Greece and the Spanish state to the fore.

The logic of the current cycle is defensive before an unprecedented intensification of attacks, and develops in a very unfavourable global balance of forces, but it contains offensive elements, in the sense of being disruptive and its ability to destabilize the routine functioning of the institutions, and with an ability to counter-attack. Social struggles

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have not reached a dynamic of victories allowing a building of forces upward and the great battles that have been fought across the EU over the past year have been lost. There could, however, be chances of specific partial victories in the future, such as the case of the payment in kind in the Spanish state for example. In Portugal, the protests of 15S obtained a relevant rectification of the measures envisaged by the government but they were replaced by a tax increase and nobody felt this as a victory. We lack victories that transmit the fundamental message that still needs to be generalized: "Yes we can".

The translation of the mobilizations into stable collective organization (associative, trade union, political and so on) is still very weak (weak and unstable neighbourhood assemblies in the Spanish state for example). The challenge is rebuilding a new social block, whose bases are still fragile, gelatinous, in a fragmented and de-structured society which articulates common interests from the comprehension of social plurality.

Despite the lack of victories, even with an everyday life which is ever more desperate, there is not a sense of defeat in the societies affected by structural adjustment. Even in Greece, where much of the population perceived the defeat of Syriza as the end of the last hope against austerity, there is not a definitive feeling of defeat, a final resignation. The towel has not been thrown in. On the contrary, as adjustment policies are hardened for the whole Euro-Mediterranean region willingness to struggle multiplies.

5. The capacity for citizens' and social mobilization in the street contrasts with the difficulties it meets in the workplace because of unemployment, casualization and transformations in productive organization (subcontracting, outsourcing and so on), elements which hinder the development of a new combative and mobilizing trades unionism. Majority trades unionism still clings to an institutionalized model oriented to "social dialogue" which is strategically exhausted. The magnitude of the attacks and social grassroots reaction through the "indignant" movements pushes mainstream unions, particularly in the south of Europe, towards struggle, but without this implying a change of trade union model or a strategic reflection on the depletion of "social dialogue". They maintain a zigzag orientation (mobilization, failed social dialogue, mobilization in response to new attacks and so on), torn between their orientation towards a non-viable coalition and the need to mobilize to defend social rights and their own future as organizations, but remaining anchored in their institutional and bureaucratic mentality and unwilling to get involved with struggles and social movements they do not control.

At the European level the European of Trade Union Confederation does not offer any coherent alternative of resistance to the adjustment plans or any attempt to articulate the international solidarity of workers. The split between trade unions in the south and centre and northern Europe has widened and deepened with the crisis and the implementation of adjustment policies. The latter accept, more or less explicitly, the official line of the governments of central and northern Europe and of the troika that responsibility for the crisis lies with the workers in the south of Europe, who are unproductive, idle and do not pay taxes. This argument serves the governments and financial elites of central and northern Europe in their efforts to displace domestic social contradictions to the outside.

The day of November 14, 2012, was a step forward in the international trade union coordination of a response to austerity policies, which goes far beyond what has been done so far traditionally (symbolic days of trade union Euro-mobilization). For 14N there were announced general strikes in Portugal, the Spanish State, actions in Greece (where finally nothing happened because the country had had a general strike the 6-7th), Cyprus and Malta, a general strike in French-speaking Belgium and a stoppage of 4 hours by the CGIL in Italy. However the international momentum of 14N was a little less than expected in the end and it seems to have been very much centred around the axis Portugal-Spanish State. The international dimension of 14N served to reinforce the success of national-state level appeals, giving them more credibility although without yet generating the perception of being part of an international solidarity movement in response to the adjustment policies in the collective imagination of Euro-Mediterranean workers. To achieve a "Euro-strike" or "Euro-Mediterranean strike" would be worth more than decades of bureaucratic work of trade union lobbying in Brussels. If 14N remains an exception it will have had little relevance. If it represents a turning point, although very limited and weak, in the internationalization of the strategy of

the official trade union movement it will be significant, but insufficient, progress.

6. The left to the left of social democracy has had difficulties developing within the framework of the crisis and the electoral reflections of social resistance remain limited and contradictory. The left has capitalized less on the unrest than the far right or populist right. The background reasons are to be found in well-known phenomena: the weight of political defeats in recent decades, the absence of ideological references, de-politicization, the lack of credibility of the parties. The rise of the extreme right across the continent is based on xenophobia as a common denominator and the exploitation of social unrest resulting from the crisis and, before that, by the destruction of the welfare state by decades of neo-liberalism. The far right takes the form, albeit with many variants country by country, of a populist “national” right (which in some cases is a “camouflaged” neo-fascist right), with the exception of Golden Dawn in Greece whose model is directly the fascism and Nazism of the 1930s.

The disaffection felt by citizens with the major parties, however, is deepening alongside the electoral punishment of governments (whether rightwing or social liberal) in turn in each country. And in the countries of the periphery social democracy, as we pointed out earlier, suffers a historic crisis bringing it into direct contradiction with its social base. In several places phenomena are occurring whose urgency expresses disaffection and unrest, on the one hand, and the absence of consistent, alternative views on the other. Such is the case with the successes of the Pirate Party first in Sweden and now Germany, with a young middle-class vote identifying neither with social democracy nor the Greens (and although it is a very different phenomenon we should also mention the populist-demagogic candidacy of Beppe Grillo in Italy). Nevertheless, the double context of capitalist crisis and heightening social struggles and re-politicization (even starting from a very low level), is a favourable backdrop for the forces of the left in Europe.

To the left of social democracy the balance of forces between the anti-capitalist and revolutionary currents and the reformist forces has shifted in favour of the latter, even more, in the last period. Many reformist formations benefit electorally from the discredit of social democracy and the absence of a strong anti-capitalist alternative, although this is not true for all of them and some relevant forces in this field, such as Die Linke in Germany, have known a significant weakening. The Greens, on the other hand, at different levels depending on each country, but with a few specific exceptions (as in Great Britain) have become very institutionalized forces and moved much to the right. The European anti-capitalist left appears as credible, in many countries, in the social and activist front, but not in the electoral field. The presidential campaign of the NPA with Poutou is a good proof of this (and on a more modest scale the successive IA campaigns also). Poutou took a modest 1.1% (very small compared with the 11.1% for Mélenchon and the previous 4% for Besancenot) but the political and social echo and sympathy awakened by his candidacy and its proposals were significant, regardless of the result and found sympathy among people who chose the “useful” vote for Mélenchon.

With the retreat of the NPA the anti-capitalist left has “disappeared” as a visible current in the European media-electoral ground in relation to the left reformist groupings, although it remains a relevant current in the area of militancy and social activism. Broad anti-capitalist formations like the Bloco in Portugal or the RGA in Denmark have little European visibility and, in the absence of a European anti-capitalist pole, their international policy swings around to that of the Party of the European Left driven by IU, the FG, Die Linke, and others. There is no need to think that this situation of lack of strong anti-capitalist left visibility has stabilized and again there could be changes. In the last decade we have already seen quick “rises” and “falls” of various forces (PRC in Italy, Die Linke in Germany, the NPA in France and so on) and should not take the current French scenario, for example, as a fixed and irreversible stage, but it is an inescapable reality right now.

The prospects for the bulk of the European anti-capitalist and revolutionary organizations, with a few national exceptions, are those of being able to construct activist forces, with weight in the struggles, but with an inability, at least in the short term, to become strong electoral references, at a time where this is more necessary than ever before the advance of the adjustment policies and the social reorganization involved. So it is necessary to locate the construction of anti-capitalist and revolutionary organizations within the framework of a broader perspective of

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construction of new unitary political tools that take different forms according to country and that can gain a mass audience and influence.

The rise of Syriza marks the dynamic of the European left which has been interpellated by its emergence. It has become the concrete reference in Europe showing that is possible to articulate a political-electoral project able to contest the electoral hegemony of social democracy and aim at a majority. If it does not make big mistakes, its influence on the European left predictably will increase in a context of absence of other major reference points. It is not an anti-capitalist formation and its leadership is located in "left reformist" positions, with a programme and a strategy that will not go "until the end" in a consistent approach of rupture, but it is a project that is located to the left of IU, the Front de Gauche, or Die Linke. Its reformist left-wing component cohabits with radical currents within it that, although in the minority, have a certain weight. And, above all, the political project of Syriza is developing in a context of popular uprising. The evolution of Syriza is uncertain and will be subject to two conflicting pressures: the logic of governability and institutional respectability, on one hand, and the growing social radicalization as a result of the intensification of social attacks, on the other. The anti-capitalist left should not romanticize Syriza uncritically, or show a sectarian attitude. We have to show our sympathy for its social and electoral rise and what it means, and seek a dialogue with its leadership and deepen the relationship with its left-wing currents. But apart from the "real Syriza", the "Syriza symbol" has become the example that "it is possible" to build an alternative. This is the main meaning that it has for the European left.

7. In the countries where the social revolt against adjustment has broken out there is a strong social politicization, although it is a contradictory politicization and starts from a very low level, without clear references (political, cultural, intellectual, historical, organizational and so on), or with overly confusing references and actual results which are not very definitive (although paradoxically the Icelandic "revolution" or the Latin American processes are often idealized). This politicization has not yet led to the organization of policy instruments, or even stable social structures, but it has left behind the period of what Daniel Bensaïd called the "social illusion", of self-sufficiency of the social struggle, of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, or the ideas of "changing the world without taking power" in the manner of Holloway (not in vain the Arab revolutions were, with popular attempts to topple regimes and the fall of dictators, the founding event which remains in the imagination of the youth radicalized against austerity in Europe). Increasingly the "political question" appears as inevitable in relation to the virulence of the attacks on the conditions of life by governments and the de-legitimization that such attacks cause, precisely because of their depth, to parties and institutions. In historical terms the most important variable is the incorporation of the bulk of social activists, the social left today not politically organized, into the construction of new political instruments.

In the Euro-Mediterranean periphery, the implementation of structural adjustment plans shake society as a whole, tending to destroy the party system and destroy the traditional mechanisms of representation. Before the depth of the attacks, the discrediting of social democracy, and the desperate need for solutions, sometimes the debate on the "alternative", on the "political instrument" is directly transformed into debates, strategically hasty and based on a real need at risk of "leapfrogging", on how to form an "alternative government" in the "Latin American" mould.

The rising level of politicization and social struggles has boosted, at the same time and in a contradictory manner, both the instrumental support for the traditional left, and the formation of new alternatives outside the institutional parties. Maybe in the end the instrumental support for what exists will prevail, or the reverse, the impulse toward what's new will prove stronger. Possibly both will end up recombining. The key will be how and with what weights. Also determinant will be the question of what form the "new" takes and if a logic of radical transformation of the system prevails or if on the contrary what expresses a more superficial critique of today's world impose themselves.

The general dynamic favours social radicalization fed by the realization of the impossibility of achieving real changes and the widespread perception that the system and the "markets" are undisturbed. But this radicalization also has significant limits, the weakness of the left, the lack of references, the accumulated weight of losses, the lack of expectations of social change; there is limited strategic clarity in the case of many movements and, in many cases,

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the radicalism is expressed more in forms of struggles and dynamics than in strictly programmatic terms. The fundamental challenge in the period is to make this diffuse anti-systemic awareness acquire more strategic and programmatic consistency (clarifying what it means to be “anti-capitalist”, or have a “revolution”, how to change the world and so on).

In some countries there will be new instruments that might gravitate around reformist forces but offer a profile of breaking with austerity and connecting with the rising social radicalism (perhaps Alternative Galega de Esquerdas in Galicia winning 9% of the vote and 14 Deputies in the elections of October 21, 2012 is the most recent example of this). Others will see alliances between radical and anti-capitalist currents and/or sectors of the social left form the axis of new groupings and instruments. Even with different scenarios, different routes and different final results, the task of the anti-capitalist currents will be to work for the formation of new political instruments of effective struggle and ensure they have a programme, a strategy and a daily practice that is the most advanced possible.

In the European periphery the situation on the left is very different according to the country. There are instruments to practice politics with a mass audience in Greece and Portugal. In the first case the task is to build Syriza, strengthen its left wing and look to build bridges between it and Antarsia, while working to keep the bulk of the project in a position of rupture with austerity and no compromise with the troika. In Portugal it is to further develop the Bloco Esquerda, whose election prospects are on the rise again. It appears as the party most tied to the new resistance movements, in a scenario on the other hand of mistrust of parties and electoral representation, which submits it to a permanent structural tension and the pressure of the “new” and “emergent”.

In the Spanish state and Italy the question which arises is different: the need to rebuild the left and a political instrument of struggle and defence that has a mass audience, and social and electoral credibility. Anti-capitalist formations like Izquierda Anticapitalista or Sinistra Critica, although they have social impact and credibility as activist currents, do not themselves constitute a political reference. Reformist organizations such as IU in the Spanish case have electoral credibility, and if it deals successfully with its internal tension between its general discourse in opposition to the crisis and its participation in the austerity policies in the Andalusian Government, it can establish itself as an increasingly significant electoral benchmark. But at the same time it cannot by itself constitute the “alternative”, nor can it transform electoral support into organic militancy, lacking political credibility (which is not the same as electoral credibility), real social roots and because it appears as part of the “old” and traditional politics. The question of the political instrument appears, therefore, raised.

The issue on the agenda is rebuilding the left in a society shaken by a huge social transformation process that is destabilizing all areas of social life. As adjustment plans reconfigure society and shake up all the political and social structures, the need to construct new political instruments becomes more evident. On the basis of the rejection of the austerity policies, as we have said before, we have to work to ensure that the new political tools that will be built will have a strategic and programmatic orientation and a daily practice reflecting the need for rupture to the greatest possible extent, a project of social change that is as advanced and developed as possible. The forms that the new political projects to be built will take will be unpredictable and will probably become confusing, with contradictions and programmatic and strategic limits. A variety of national dynamics will combine, according to political traditions, the respective weight of the different currents of the left and the configuration of the social and trade union left. Adjusting tactics to the diversity of contexts and the respective role of each country, anti-capitalist currents must participate actively in attempts and experiences of construction of new, comprehensive and useful political instruments in those countries where this task is yet to be done (the majority!) and have, at the same time, their own ambitious project of party-building and development.