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Portugal

8th Congress of the Left Bloc: Defeat the Troika

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This article is intended, not so much to provide a report of all the debates of the congress, but rather to reflect on the strategic challenges that the members of the Left Bloc [1] have decided by their majority vote to take up. If I had to sum up in a phrase the meaning of what has been adopted, I would say that the Bloc has taken great risks in order to be up to meeting the challenges of the present situation. The idea that permeated the congress was expressed right from Francisco Louça's opening speech: "The Bloc is here to win and to change". This idea was present in the interventions of Pedro Filipe Soares, Alda Sousa, Luis Fazenda, Jorge Costas, Marisa Matias, Joao Semedo, Catarina Martins and many others. In other words, it is a collective attitude, of a bloc, the Left Bloc.

This congress took place after a major electoral setback for the Bloc in the legislative elections of June 2011, the effect of what Fernando Rosas called "a vote of panic", but also after a rapid learning curve by the popular classes as to the devastating social effects of the policies implemented by the government of Passos Coelho under the diktats of the Troika, whose political spokeswoman is Chancellor Angela Merkel. This learning is accompanied by a growing social mobilization, of which the demonstrations on September 15, 2012 were the most recent expression; demonstrations which, regardless of the differences in the political situation, were compared with the legendary revolutionary First of May 1974, and which, according to the Left Bloc, "changed the country". Broad layers of the population have thus gone from having confidence in the recipes of the austerity measures to the slogan "Que se lixe a Troika" (more or less, "the Troika can go and get f..."). In this context, the debate between the different contributions presented at this 8th Congress [3] far from being an expression of pessimism among the membership, was proof of vitality, of hope in the potential that the people demonstrates when it engages in struggles and of confidence in Bloc's own forces, its analyses and its alternatives. Thus, the theme of the congress was nothing less than "defeat the Troika".

The congress had to solve two problems: the launch of a new public leadership and the definition of the strategic objective of the new period of struggle. It had to do so taking into account two vectors that are consistently present in political action and in the life of organizations: the need for change and for continuity. Perseverance, the ability to orient without losing sight of the chosen path and the patient building of the organization are the principal qualities of the Bloc. You cannot understand anything if you do not see the importance of this way of understanding the activity of a revolutionary organization which was born from an agreement between various forces and which has attracted thousands of activists to its ranks. The other aspect, of innovation and initiative, has not been lacking but up until now the Bloc has not been faced with the need to replace its principal leaders, whereas it now had to deal with the absence of one of its founders, Miguel Portas, recently deceased, and with the changes in the tasks of Francisco Louça, who has been for the Portuguese people the most identifiable face and voice of the Bloc.

New ways of conducting politics

Louça recently publicly expressed his right and his decision to no longer assume the responsibilities of political co-ordinator of the Bloc and of its parliamentary group, as well as his function of spokesman in Parliament. He did so by a political explanation that breaks with the tradition of those who exercise public functions, who cling to their positions, of which they believe themselves to be the owners, who do not hide their intention of remaining professional politicians. To replace the public personality and the political role played by Louça since the founding of the Left Bloc required a high degree of agreement within the party. In an organization which has important political, social and electoral responsibilities, which is present in the media on a daily basis, such a change, as well as the agreement necessary to effect it, are not minor matters.

Louça reminded the media present as well as the delegates of the Bloc, that not only would he continue his political activity (and that, as a result, I should add, he was ready to be part of the future leadership of the Bloc if the delegates decided to elect him, which they did), but that he could not imagine living without fighting and arguing. He simply wanted to change his role and his responsibilities. He thus short-circuited the worries of Bloc members as well as the twisted interpretations of the spokespersons of the Right and showed that the Bloc can operate in a way that is alternative and unconventional.

The congress addressed this first problem by electing Catarina Martins and Joao Semedo as political coordinators and spokespersons of the Bloc. A formula that seems to me correct, but at the same time risky, given the inertia and the customs of politics in societies that tend towards the concentration of responsibilities in one person. As for replacing the function of parliamentary spokesperson of the Bloc, it was not a decision for the congress to take and was not discussed.

I have no doubt that Louça's voluntaristic decision not to become fixed as indispensable in the institutional or organic representation of the Bloc innovates "good practices" of organizations and deals a blow to the "political class": it combats in a practical way the populist discourse about politics and politicians, distances the left of the Left from disrepute and makes it possible to test the capabilities of other activists. And, above all, it is a decision that demonstrates to the Portuguese people, to those who are fighting and those who are waiting to see, that the members of the Bloc want to be and are "worthy of confidence" for those below.

The political axes

The other key issue that the congress had to resolve was the strategic reorientation of the Bloc or, rather, the discourse and the political orientation of the party. The congress worked to reformulate and bring up to date the objectives and the alternatives of the Bloc in the era of the debt crisis and the new formulation of a proposal that can unify the struggles and the hopes of the working class and the people: the government of the Left.

In my opinion, the discourse of the Bloc, "the Left against the debt" can be synthesized as follows:

1. Portugal's debt is not a debt of the people, because the people did not contract it; so we must denounce the neo-liberal discourse which makes the victims feel guilty and exonerates those who are responsible for it.
2. The Troika has a central role in Portugal: to save the banks.
3. The so-called "reforms" are a direct attack on rights, workers and public services; with as a result the accelerated and massive pauperization of voters of all parties and the absolute poverty of the working classes and of wide layers of the population which until yesterday still had a different status.
4. The country and its economy are collapsing. This is the result of transfers of income from the South to the North of the EU, of the irresponsibility of public and private authorities in Portugal and throughout the EU, of privatization, of the rescue of the banks, etc.
5. The present model of the euro favours an institutional construction that deepens inequalities, favours creditors, imposes austerity, with the goal of increasing unemployment in order to exert pressure on the labour "factor", imposes sacrifices in an authoritarian manner on the subject classes and takes us further away from the possibility of getting out of the crisis. So it is necessary to break with the neoliberal political logic.

The situation is changing rapidly

The pace of political events has accelerated, as is indicated by the changes and the electoral instability in some countries of Southern Europe. We are faced with new defeats, very soon and more definitive, or, on the contrary, we are at the beginning of a new popular resistance, of electoral progress by left formations which were until then not very influential (Greece), or at the potential growth of options that break with the dominant policies (Portugal). The speed with which tens of thousands of people are learning, their mobilization and their necessary (and probable) organization enable us to encourage in Portugal the possibility of changing the present state of affairs in society and on the political terrain. It is more than likely that the movement of social protest will grow: building it is one of the central tasks that the Bloc has fixed for itself.

That opens up a space of social confrontation, allows to influence and win over the bases of the other parties and thus modify in a positive way the relationship of forces between social classes and between political orientations. These are the material bases that make possible a new hegemony within the left and within society. Under these conditions a window of opportunity is opening to surpass the Socialist Party (PSP) in political influence and on the electoral terrain. Everything will depend on having the adroitness and audacity to formulate protests and proposals. The capacity to formulate proposals is central for a party whose aspiration is not only to make propaganda, but to be useful for popular struggles and demands in the present and in the future (the Left Bloc has largely demonstrated this by its achievements), and which claims to not only assert its anti-capitalist identity, but wants to lead the political struggle for socialism.

The attitude towards the Troika and the memorandum marks the border between policy options. It is not a question of proposing, as the PSP do, a toned-down austerity: the problem is austerity itself. The Left Bloc introduces an important dimension: the interest of the working classes is the interest of the country, which the Left Bloc defends to ensure the future of the nation. That is why it wants to defend the country against the government of Passos Coelho and why the first priority of the Bloc following on the congress is to take the government, because it is necessary, and if it convinces the people, it is possible.

The government of the Left

It is obvious that the alternation between neoliberals and social liberals, between parties of the Right and self-proclaimed parties of the Left which implement right-wing policies is useless, worthless, that has already been verified. In Greece for months now, and in Portugal today, it is possible to defend as a political task on the horizon (close in the first case, in the second medium-term) the need for a new government against the Troika, because either we manage to defeat it or there will be an irreparable catastrophic defeat of the working class and of the whole country.

That is why the strategy of the Bloc focuses on the issue of political and social unity around the break with the memorandum and traces on the horizon the privileged instrument to break with the Troika: a government of the Left which does not accept submission to the memorandum and which throws it in the rubbish bin.

In my opinion, the slogan of a government of the Left is not propagandist, because then it would be just one more of the many formulas without practical application. It is a slogan which responds to three objectives: to give a political perspective to all of the revolts in Portugal, to draw the attention of the social movement to the need for a major confrontation with neoliberal policies, and above all to show the working classes that the Left Bloc has decided to take on the tasks of a government which will oppose the markets, their diktats and their institutions.

The masses now see the need for the struggle, but they also see the wall formed by a government in the hands of their enemies. No one can deny the obvious. The fight against the Troika necessitates having instruments, like the

government, which are supported by mobilizations and which are at the service of these mobilizations so that they can break the demands of the debt. To leave the struggle for the government to an undefined future in Portugal is like saying to the people: we are not able to solve the problems. And then once again there would be emptiness, bringing resignation, the “useful vote” and the lesser evil. The lessons of Syriza in Greece are very much present in the reasoning put forward and, of course, in the debates of the congress of the Left Bloc.

The fight for the government of the Left is a step that the masses can grasp as being necessary and giving time to prepare new and more decisive confrontations: making incursions into private property, putting an end to the dictatorship of the markets, consolidating democracy in every domain and rights at every level. The fight for a government of the Left can fit into a growing dynamic of social and political antagonism. Not to conduct it would be to reduce ourselves to the inane.

Profile and dynamics

The Left Bloc is a party which at present has a very limited electoral and political weight. How can it propose, against all the odds, a government? In such a government would all the parties who self-proclaim themselves to be on the left, or who are considered by their base to be on the left, be represented? The establishment of a government of the left must overcome the static and short-term debate on the possibility of governing with this or that party. On the question of which parties might be present in a government of the left, the Bloc starts from an affirmation: We will be. And the others? Which ones? What is at issue is not the present parties, the question is to influence the consciousness of broad layers of the population, impoverished, enslaved and indignant, which voted yesterday, or did not, for various parties. The question is that it is possible to disconnect from electoral inertia because their vote “does not belong to anyone”. The fight for a government of the Left can be used in the present situation as a catalyst for a profound political recomposition of the masses, as we have seen in Greece.

Certainly such a government of the Left necessitates a prior reconfiguration of the present political map. It requires the people to become a new protagonist. It cannot be the arithmetical product of the present political forces. Quite the contrary, it must be based on a new governmental majority, social and political, around fundamental questions that involve a 180-degree turn in the direction of the economy. The defining element for being in the government can be nothing other than the question of the attitude to the memorandum. The spokespersons of the PSP declared, during the congress of the Bloc, that to break with the memorandum would be an irresponsible attitude. This was the first effect of the proposal. Let us hope that the second will be the alienation of the PSP’s voters from the compassionate austerity that it offers.

Content and alternatives

The Left Bloc concentrates the break with the Troika around four main points:

1 Cancellation, according to the terminology used by the Bloc, of abusive and illegitimate debt and renegotiation of the rest at a pace that makes economic recovery possible.

2 Revaluation of wages, rights, benefits and public services.

3. The nationalization of the banks that have been taken over by the state and the mobilization of resources for public investment, job creation, increased environmental sustainability and the re-appropriation of key public assets which

have been privatized (energy, telecommunications, etc.).

4 A tax reform to combat fraud and shift the tax burden onto capital.

This is an emergency programme, a programme to stop barbarity and social collapse. The government of the Left is a common-sense proposal to get rid of the yoke of the Troika. This is not a "perfect" revolutionary programme to build a socialist society, abstractly worked out and idealized. It is a programme that makes it possible, under present conditions, to meet essential social and collective needs and that facilitates the breaking of the masses from neoliberalism and social liberalism, which can encourage them to take the road of self-management, anti-capitalism and socialism. It is designed to achieve the unity of a large number of people (the majority) on a number of bases (solid and leading to a break). This is a project that can restore confidence to the people and prepare them to take the next step: to put an end to capitalism.

The European dimension of the conflict

The Left Bloc warns against a false dichotomy: stay in the European Union by agreeing to the imposition of austerity or leave the euro with the immediate impoverishment of the whole country. That is why it puts forward the need for a new European constituent process, far removed from the present model based on equilibriums and the intergovernmental constraints that destroy the very idea of the European Union. It proposes at the same time the pooling of the debt, a bigger and more redistributive European budget, the struggle against fiscal dumping and tax havens for fraudsters, a new European Central Bank subject to elected institutions, whose mission would be to guarantee jobs and funding for states, and finally the harmonization of the minimum wage and social benefits throughout the EU. This is still an emergency programme to turn the situation round and to encourage the struggle.

Which, once more, imposes international tasks. Whereas the European bourgeoisie recognizes no borders in attacking workers, passes over popular sovereignty, organizes the flight of capital and gets juicy profits, the political action of the Left is cramped within strict national frameworks, which it respects. Faced with the orientation of Merkel and her bankers there is no solid political Left within the EU, capable of overcoming the disaster and the stagnation in which social democracy, which has lost its way and is in decline, has engulfed the voters.

It is not possible to ensure progress by a government of the Left on a national level without taking new steps forward in other countries. Today, more than ever, effective coordination of forces between the countries of the South of Europe is urgent, so as to make it possible, in turn, to encourage new expressions of solidarity in the North. The general strike and the mobilizations on November 14 in different countries pave the way for the convergence of social struggles. It is essential to establish its political correlation.

And after that? At the same time as the Left Bloc sets concrete objectives for a government of the Left, it projects the socialism for which it is fighting ("emancipation, fruit of all emancipations"), capable of resolving in favour of the people and of the planet – the material basis of life - the confrontation with the market. The path towards socialism and socialism itself are made of democratic material. The Left Bloc understands that socialism is total democracy or else it is not socialism.

Thoughts in conclusion

Our comrades of the Bloc, those in Portugal who are our people, have taken decisions and our internationalist duty

begins by knowing them, understanding them and respecting them. We are also obliged to keep our minds open to arguments, which does not exempt us from being able to express doubts and to have our own criteria.

For the oldest participants in our struggle for, a metaphor may make clearer my position with regard to the proposal of the government of the Left. It could be compared to the slogan of the "workers' government", never realized, which we understand as the antechamber of the seizure of power, of socialism, etc. It was not yet a revolutionary government of workers' councils; it was supposed to precede it and lead to it. It was a "common sense" formula: since the governments of the bourgeoisie are not in our service, let us take care of public affairs. It was to be a government that would channel energies, would guide them and make it possible to follow the path and approach the transition. In fact, it was a government whose mission was to disappear almost immediately, once the working class had seen the need to go further - to break with the capitalist system. The difference between this abstract construction of the "workers' government" and the present proposal of the government of the Left is that the latter moves forward in time according to the maturation of the conditions for the revolutionary seizure of power by the masses. Whereas the opportunity and the challenge of the tasks of government are coming closer to the present time, the time scale for the socialist revolution is getting longer. The time to take governmental power is approaching, whereas probably the moment of the final confrontation is receding. Or not. We do not know. The threshold of sensitivity of the bourgeoisie to the loss of its power and profits is extremely active. But, in any case, no one has a clock that marks the rhythms and the tasks of the class struggle and there is no predetermined timetable.

The success or failure of the proposals will depend on a long sequence of decisions that the comrades of the Bloc will adopt. It will also depend on the progress of the class struggle in Europe. The government of the Left has therefore multiple meanings, everything will depend on the concrete content and on the dynamic that it will have. It would be absurd to think that it is a magic formula free of errors and of dangers that will distort it. But it is even more absurd to judge the formula by starting from a model which defines a priori its results and the need to correct it.

It is unnecessary to remind ourselves that in politics only those who dare can win. That is why it would be very conservative and therefore ineffective to not adopt decisions on the grounds that we are not sure of success or of the absence of political dangers. And, worse yet, to make commentaries from the outside, in the name of supposed principles of the Left, whose only result would be to remain quiet, restful, reasonable, but reduced to the condition of spectators of a work that others are carrying out. An expression of the peasants of my country comes to mind: only one who transports can fall over, but only one who ploughs and who is not afraid of hail, can harvest.

November 15, 2012

Manuel Garçon, a member of the editorial board of the journal *Viento Sur*, was part of the delegation of Izquierda anticapitalista (IA, Anticapitalist Left, section of the Fourth International in the Spanish state) to the Congress of the Left Bloc.

[1] The Left Bloc is an anticapitalist party in Portugal, founded in 1998 on the initiative of three political forces: the People's Democratic Union (UDP, of Maoist origin), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR, Portuguese section of the Fourth International) and Polítika XXI (a regroupment of activists from the PCP, whose conservative Stalinist orientation they criticized). In the 1999 elections it two members elected to Parliament, with 2.44 per cent of the popular vote. Subsequently it progressed regularly: 2.74 per cent and 3 MPs in 2002, 3.61 per cent and 8 MPs in 2005, 9.81 per cent and 16 MPs in 2009. In the legislative elections on June 5, 2011, the Left Bloc saw a drop in its support, getting 558,062 votes (5.19 per cent) and 8 MPs. Among the 29 signatories of the call launched on 27 August 2012, which led to the imposing demonstrations against the Troika on September 15 - the largest since May 1, 1974, with more than 10 per cent of the Portuguese population in the streets - the only activists linked to a political party were with the Left Bloc (see the series of articles in *International Viewpoint* 453, October 2012).

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[3] Two motions were submitted to the vote of the delegates: Motion A, which obtained 348 votes (80.3 per cent) and 61 members in the National Council and Motion B which got 74 votes and 19 members in the national Council. The National Council is the leadership of the Bloc, which has 8,514 members.