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Portugal

Against the marriage of convenience

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On Wednesday 23rd March the Portuguese Prime Minister, Socialist Party member Jose Socrates, resigned after opposition parties overwhelmingly rejected his last-ditch round of austerity measures aimed at preventing the Portuguese economy, considered the weakest in the eurozone, from plunging into chaos. All the opposition parties united to defeat the government's proposals in a parliamentary vote. The question now is what will be proposed on the forthcoming elections, to be held in May or June. A proposal for a broad Socialist Party (PS)-Social Democratic Party (PSD) (centre-right) coalition is being discussed. Francisco Louçã, national spokesperson for the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) stated "The solution for the country is not to put together the PS and PSD to implement IMF policies and impoverish workers, pensioners and casualised youth," and said that elections in such conditions would "defraud the electors".

The choice is not between the austerity of the PS, with or without 'D' or with or without the CDS. The choice is between the deficit and the people, between jobs and usury, between economic growth and recession.

Europe has been agreeing a new austerity package. Empress Merkel presented it to the world as a pact for competitiveness and it was baptised with the name of the Euro-Zone Stability Pact. Any similarity with the electoral program of both of Portugal's main political forces, increasingly referred to as the 'central block' (should that perchance not be the right-wing block?!) is of course purely coincidental.

The blackmail has started and the threats are building up. Appeals for a coalition between the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party, with or without the right-wing CDS, are growing. From within both parties voices have called for such an agreement but also several contenders are emerging as potential best man at this marriage of convenience, such as veteran ex-President Mario Soares, former Socialist Party ministers Luis Amado and Antonio Vitorino, and leading right-wing PSD figures Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Alberto Joao Jardim.

Recently-resigned Socialist Party Prime Minister José Socrates has no program beyond austerity. He has made a promise to carry it out; that's what happened in Brussels, where he voted to approve the agreement on Euro-Zone Stability. The latest of his four rejected austerity programmes included many elements of that agreement. They constitute an attack on the people and the economy, with wage controls, the adoption of limits on public debt in national legislation, an increase in the retirement age to relate it to life expectancy together with harmonisation of corporate taxes, etc. . . . It is a commitment that in the future will make Portugal and Europe even more unequal and which will further reduce social protection. It is also the highway to a prolonged recession.

PSD leader Passos Coelho has written a statement to the international markets. He wrote it in English but his intended audience was German; he wanted to show that that his austerity programme is not so different from that of Socrates. The contradictions in his promises are in plain view and demonstrate the same subservience to the will of Merkel. He had said that he would not touch the level of VAT, but now promises to increase it by 25%. And after the PSD had voted against the Programme for Stability and Growth IV in the National Assembly, Passos Coelho was in Brussels saying that such a plan would serve as the basis of his own programme.

The PS will talk of the danger of the right taking power, but it is with the right that it wants to stay in government after the elections. The PSD will say that the PS is incompetent, but plans to follow the same policies and has no qualms about achieving the great majority which former Finance Minister Teixeira dos Santos has called for. PSD President Cavaco Silva has already met with the parties and is set to propose elections by early June. He is yearning for that

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great central block between the PS and PSD.

The scenario is becoming clearer with each day that passes. Cavaco, the PS and the right want a strong government to impose austerity. The left is mobilising itself to fight that austerity at the ballot box. The choice is not between the austerity of the PS, with or without 'D' or with or without the right-wing CDS. The choice is between the deficit and the people, between jobs and usury, between economic growth and recession. No one on the left can shirk this fight!

March 25, 2011