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Europe

Confronting the attacks of the bourgeoisie

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François Sabado recently represented the LCR and the International at the congresses of Espacio Alternativo (which groups together militants identifying with the Fourth International) in the Spanish State and of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) in Portugal. We publish here the main lines of his interventions at these two congresses.

1) Europe is experiencing a new and brutal phase of the ruling-class offensive aimed at speeding up the integration of the continent into capitalist globalisation and remodelling social and economic relations. Since the Lisbon and Barcelona summits, the principal governments of the Union have worked out a strategy aimed at giving the European bourgeoisies fresh room for manoeuvre. This strategy is a response to a new sharpening of inter-imperialist contradictions. These contradictions have been visible during the war in Iraq, but they also express a ruthless struggle to carve out the biggest market share of the world economy. Another example of this new inter-imperialist rivalry is today the policy of weakening the dollar, which in its turn seeks to favour American commodities and companies. Engaged in capitalist globalisation, the European ruling classes are reacting to this increased rivalry by further reorganising economic and social relations.

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Francois Sabado

2) What it comes down to is abandoning what remains of the “European social model”, of developing a series of measures to lower the cost of labour, dismantle social security systems, privatise public services and increase working hours, as German, Belgian and French companies are at present doing by suppressing the mechanisms of reduction of the working week. This attack is being conducted right across the board, in particular in Germany, the country that embodied, from a certain point of view, what we call the “Welfare State”. The Schröder government has gone particularly on the offensive in the recent period, by a Draconian reduction of the rights of the unemployed, by lengthening working hours and reducing the percentage of reimbursement of certain vital medicines. This confirms once again that under a left government - the SPD and the Greens - there is no room for manoeuvre in globalised liberal capitalism for Keynesian or neo-Keynesian policies aimed at stimulating the economy.

3) These policies are being conducted both by right wing governments under Chirac and Berlusconi and by left governments like those of Schröder or Blair. It is worth noting that although the Zapatero government has taken a series of bold measures, for the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq or on “questions of society” (women's rights, gay marriage, etc.) it is fundamentally implementing neo-liberal capitalist policies. Both the Right and the traditional Left subscribe to the neo-liberal agenda, which is leading them to step up the anti-social and anti-democratic offensive. We have to base ourselves on the movements that reject these policies. We also have to make “the concrete analysis of a concrete situation “. When the Right is in government and the Left in opposition, working people can at certain elections use the left parties to express this rejection. During such phases, that doesn't really change the relationship they have with these parties, because we are in a new historical period, characterised by the social-liberal evolution of the Socialist parties and the decline of the parties of Stalinist origin. Thus, the French SP did not at any time participate in the mobilisations that rejected the liberal reforms of the pension system in 2003, but it nevertheless reaped the electoral benefit of this rejection a few months later, in the 2004 regional and European elections. The votes for the Left did not reflect increased confidence in these parties, nor did it demonstrate more control of the mass movement by their apparatuses. But they did reflect, in working class circles, fear and rejection of liberal reforms and a desire to weaken their impact by punishing those who were applying them. When the ultraliberal Right is in government, we organise to kick out such right-wing governments, by mass mobilisations or by the ballot box, and we actively build these mobilisations, because that is obviously one aspect of our fight for an alternative to liberalism. The big difficulty for the anti-capitalist Left is to appear as a useful instrument, including on the electoral level, for conducting this battle to the finish. That is the limit that was shown in France during the recent elections.

Logically, when the social-liberal Left is in government and it implements capitalist plans, sectors of working people reject its liberal policies and express this rejection by punishing them, again on the electoral level. In these cases, without any hesitation, we conduct a policy of mobilising against these governments, bringing out even more sharply the need for a real alternative. Let's not forget that in 1998, the PRC refused to vote for the policies of the Italian centre-left and brought down the government.

So we have to take stock of the sharp changes in the political situation and adjust our tactical objectives accordingly. All the more because if these policies are brutal, if they have scored a series of points and forced the working class to retreat, this very brutality provokes a rejection of liberalism, creating tensions and elements of political crisis in the majority of traditional European political formations. Crisis of the Right - in Italy, in France with the Chirac-Sarkozy duel, in Portugal with the resignation of the Santana government and the calling of new elections... - but also crisis of the social-liberal Left where sectors of Social Democracy consider that adaptation to liberalism has gone too far, especially when there are important social movements that reject it. That is what explains the differentiations that are taking place in Germany, with the emergence of "the Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice" or the position against the European constitution taken by someone like Laurent Fabius in the French SP. These currents are not breaking with the framework of neo-liberal policies but they consider that these policies have gone too far...that these tensions and political crises are undermining the legitimacy of the liberal projects. So we have to follow attentively all these movements of opinion and all these differentiations, in order to find points of support for organising resistance to the capitalist attacks.

4) From this point of view, the results of the referendum in the French SP illustrate well the evolutions of Social Democracy and the repercussions of the social resistance within these parties. Looked at from the rest of Europe, the French SP still demonstrates a certain singularity. It is the only Socialist Party where more than 40 per cent of the members vote "No" to the European constitution. We don't have similar situations in other Socialist parties. The Socialist "lefts" in the other parties are in general calling for a "Yes" vote, as in Spain and Portugal. This 40 per cent of opposition to the Constitution remains a singularity and a point of support in the coming united-front battles for the "No". But the 60 per cent for the "Yes" in the French SP represents a turning point in the evolution of this party. As its principal leader explained, this "Yes" confirms the integration of the French SP into European Social Democracy ...and represents a certain break with the specificities of the Socialist Party of Epinay. The "Yes" is presented by its partisans as a fundamental political act of adhesion to what the leadership calls "left reformism". A "left reformism" that is neither left nor reformist but which appears as a break with the history of a SP that is anchored in the union of the Left... So the "Yes" of the SP in France confirms a deepening of a whole process of adaptation of this party to present-day capitalist politics and economics...which oblige the traditional Left, when it goes into government, to conduct frontal attacks against the living standards and working conditions of working people.

5) In this unfavourable context for workers, not only the working class, but even broader social layers, in fact the majority, nevertheless reject neo-liberalism. That leads to increasingly short and regular cycles of alternating governments of Left and Right. The "outgoing" governments are regularly kicked...out. So these resistances are reflected in by-elections or at general elections, by majorities against the governments in place; against the Right in France, in Italy, in Spain and probably soon in Portugal; against the social-liberal Left in Britain or Germany. The workers who suffer social defeats or come up against blockages in the struggles they engage in tend to use the ballot paper to punish the governments in place. As far as social conflicts are concerned, the situation is unequal, depending on the country.

– Italy has just experienced a massive general strike, with more than 6 million strikers. The Netherlands have seen one of the biggest strikes in recent years against the government's social reforms.

– Germany has seen a wave of demonstrations against the 2010 Agenda of Chancellor Schröder and strikes against lay-offs which up to now have been unsuccessful.

– In France, the strikes against pension reform or the privatisation of electricity and gas and the mobilisations against the social security reforms have ended in defeat.

When we are dealing with struggles and social movements, each national conjuncture is specific, marked by the ups and downs of the class struggle, but the overall relationship of social and political forces regularly sustains movements of social resistance.

That is not where the problem is. The difficulties lie elsewhere. The characteristics of the historical period, the balance-sheet of the previous century, the obstacles that any perspective of social transformation comes up against, have fundamental consequences for the most militant or advanced sectors: struggles do not lead to the development of a consciousness of the need for the socialist transformation of society, still less a revolutionary consciousness. The social movements, the unions, the parties, as well as the “class struggle” currents, are not experiencing organic growth. The electoral space conquered by revolutionary or anti-capitalist formations like the LCR in France in the 2002 presidential elections or the Left Bloc in Portugal during recent elections, are more the result of the crisis of the traditional Left - in particular the Communist parties - than of self-activity of the mass movement...

6) In this context, a new phenomenon has appeared, free from the grip of the problems of the traditional workers' movement - the global justice movement, in particular the youth. This is a movement of decisive importance for building a relationship of forces against the liberal projects and also for the renewal of generations of the Left and the anti-capitalist organisations. This movement may not be up to confronting the scale of capitalist attacks, the processes of capitalist globalisation or armed globalisation, illustrated by the war that is raging in Iraq. But having said that, it has strategic importance as a broad united front against globalisation, a front of all the currents, of all the experiences, of all the associations, but also as a forum to debate and exchange ideas on the question of a political and programmatic alternative.

7) In this context, the elements of an alternative must be articulated around three axes:

a) A policy of united action. The phase in which we are at present intervening is a defensive phase for the workers' movement, a phase of resistance. That implies taking a positive approach to and participating in all the movements, all the struggles, even the most elementary, in order to try and give fresh confidence to workers and young people, in order to win even partial victories. In this context we have to develop a united front approach in mobilisations, aiming to build mass movements that are unitary, democratic and pluralist. That is what we do when we build antiwar movements, or in the global justice movement. That is also our response on the question of the European Constitution. Particularly in the countries confronted with referendums, we launch a battle for a united “No” of all the left forces opposed to the constitution.

b) Elements of programmatic response. The refounding of a programmatic project that combines social questions in the broadest sense of the term, taking in feminism and ecology, in an anti-capitalist perspective. We have to take the national question into account in all the countries where it is posed, there too combining it with the social question. These programmatic responses must start from the aspirations and demands of the mass movement in order to push them “right to the end”. A red thread must guide our approach: the logic of social rights, the satisfaction of social needs must take precedence over the logic of profit and capitalist profitability. As was indicated in the theme of the LCR's electoral campaign: “Our lives must take precedence over their profits”. So a democratic and social emergency programme must pose the questions of sharing out wealth differently and of making inroads into the private property of the big companies and of capital, either by the defence and extension of public services or by measures that encroach on the power of the employers. This programme can be expressed - as it is by the Left Bloc in Portugal - in the demand for five measures such as: a plan for jobs, against unemployment and job insecurity, the refusal to turn hospitals into limited companies, the right to free abortion on demand, the regularisation of illegal immigrants and the fight against corruption. But we know that any serious application of a plan against job insecurity

means today, in the liberal Europe that we know, a confrontation with the employers and the government, a break from the principles that now govern the capitalist economy...

c) A position on the questions of power and of government. The question of the anti-capitalist alternative must also include an answer on the questions of power and of government. This question is posed in the debates within the Left. It can even, directly or indirectly, be posed for us in our intervention. This question has for a long time divided the workers' movement. It also divides the Left to the left of the Socialist parties, and in particular differentiates anti-capitalist formations from currents linked to the Communist milieu. It is also one of the differences between the Conference of the Anti-capitalist Left and the European Left Party, which is made up of many Communist parties, most of which agree on the need to govern with the Socialists... In France, the government of the plural Left included the Socialist Party, but also the PCF and the Greens. In Germany, the PDS (which came out of the former ruling party of the GDR) is part of coalitions that govern regions and major cities such as Berlin, along with the SPD and the Greens. In Spain, the leadership of the United Left defends a policy of a "majority of the lefts" in order to support the Zapatero government. The left sector, organised in particular by our comrades of Espacio Alternativo, rejects this proposition and defends a policy of "left opposition" to the government. More recently, the leadership of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy has made a turn, seeking to create the conditions for participation in a government dominated by the centre-left and by Romano Prodi, ex-president of the European Commission! Our comrades, while proposing an electoral agreement against the parties of the Right, are today conducting a fight against Rifondazione taking part in this kind of government which, as in the past, will endorse the capitalist policies of all the governments that place themselves in the liberal framework... Outside of the European situation, in Brazil, we are confronted with the question of participation in government. The balance sheet of two years of the Lula government has confirmed its first measures. By respecting the agreements with the IMF and the policies of the financial markets, the Lula government has carried out a third-rate agrarian reform, has adopted a liberal-style reform of civil service pensions and has not reduced the levels of unemployment and poverty. The result has been demobilisation and disillusion of the sectors that are loyal to the PT. The question is posed of the PT left, and in particular the Socialist Democracy tendency, breaking with the government. It is impossible to build an alternative to the Lula government ... while at the same time participating in this government. For our current, the question of the government must be linked to its policies. We are in favour of governments that break with capitalism, undertaking social transformations that open the way to socialism. In fact, you cannot satisfy the main demands of working people without breaking with capitalist institutions and the capitalist economy. That's why the anti-capitalist left cannot participate in governments that place themselves in this framework. That's what leads, for example, our Portuguese comrades to refuse any participation in or support to a SP government, contrary to the Portuguese Communist Party, which is by the way very anti-Socialist... They also reject any global parliamentary agreement with the Socialists and they will judge each case, each measure, each law, on its merits, voting for what is good for the workers while combating what is bad.

8) We are entering a new phase of building anti-capitalist formations and revolutionary currents and organisations. The new characteristics of the period place on the agenda the search for new paths towards the formation of a broad anti-capitalist party. That implies, to start with, a discussion on content - a programme, a profile and political outlines that define an alternative to social-liberalism, in particular on questions of government (see above). We also have to seek the coming together, the convergence of forces of varying political origin and culture which are broader than the existing organisations.

In each case of the emergence of these new forces, the dialogue between political organisations or currents is decisive. Political content and dynamic forms of organisation are also decisive, all the more so since anti-capitalist currents are at this stage confronted with the following contradiction: they can occupy a significant political space - as do the Left Bloc in Portugal or the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) - without that corresponding to a high level of self-activity of the mass movement. Their development results in particular from the crisis of the traditional Left, from the social-liberal evolution of the SPs and the decline of the CPs, linked to specific national conjunctures. As a result our anti-capitalist or revolutionary organisations experience tensions and contradictions between their significant presence in political life, in the media and in political institutions, and a politico-organisational reality that is well below their influence. That should lead us to define "demanding political content", aiming to develop our organisations, while

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preserving their independence and their capacity to encourage the political and social activity of working people.