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Portugal

Left Bloc elects first European deputy

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The European Parliament elections of June 13, 2004 saw the worst result for the right wing parties since the revolution of April 25, 1974. The Socialist Party was the main beneficiary, but the Left Bloc achieved its best score since it was set up and it was the only party to increase its number of votes in relation to the parliamentary elections of March 2002.

	European elections 2004			Parliamentary elections 2002		
	votes	%	seats	votes	%	seats
PS	1,511,102	44.5	12	2,055,986	37.8	95
PSD	1,129,065	33.2	9	2,181,672	40.1	102
PP				475,515	8.7	14
PCP	308,858	9.1	2	378,640	6.9	12
BE	167,032	4.9	1	149,543	2.7	3
Abst		61.2%			37.7%	

A little more than two years ago the Social Democratic Party (PSD, right wing) and the Popular Party (PP, radical right) gained more than 2.6 million votes or 49% of the total vote. The results of June 13, 2004 thus reflect a great erosion of the social and electoral base of the government. Two years later two thirds of those who voted for the right in 2002 have either abstained or voted for the opposition parties.

The political meaning of this defeat is clear. It reflects the rejection of the anti-social and regressive policies of the right and a massive protest against them. This defeat also expresses the opposition of the great majority of people against those who are responsible for the current state of the country: half a million unemployed, a wages freeze in the civil service, a worsening of the situation of immigrants, privatization of public services like health and social security, the delivery of strategic sectors of the economy to finance capital in a framework of clientelism and corruption, strangling of public education, maintenance of prohibitionist legislation on abortion, support for the occupation of Iraq. The neoliberal strategy of two years of PSD/PP rule was rejected, while the right's attempt to associate itself with Portugal's hosting of the European soccer championship was not successful. [\[1\]](#)

The Socialist Party (PS) was the main beneficiary of the rebuff to the right. The socialists gained 7% in relation to the 2002 parliamentary elections, when they gained their worst ever score in history, despite the fact that they lost a quarter of their 2002 voters (545,000 votes). The death, five days before the elections, of the head of the PS list, former finance minister Sousa Franco, did not seem to have any impact on the results.

An overall analysis of the results indicates that the PS victory is a direct product of the right's disaster. The PS wasted no time on celebrations, immediately plunging itself into internal power struggles. On the question of the occupation of Iraq, it zigzagged once again, giving its agreement to the prolongation of the presence of 120 Portuguese soldiers in Nassiria.

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) was even more pleased with its result since it had feared the worst. However the facts do not justify any satisfaction. The PCP continues to decline from one election to another and its leaders can only celebrate when the downward curve is less steep. Compared with the 1999 European elections, the PCP lost 1.3% and 50,000 votes. In relation to the last parliamentary elections the loss in votes was smaller - 70,000 - even if the very high abstention rate allowed it to increase its percentage. A comparison of the PCP's results and those of the Left Bloc shows that in 73 communes, both rural and urban, the Bloc's vote was higher; the same was true in seven county towns of districts while in metropolitan sectors the PCP and the Bloc are now comparable in terms of electoral strength. Particularly in Lisbon and Porto, in numerous popular sectors the Bloc scored more than the PCP and became the third political force in the country.

There is no reason the PCP leadership should regard these results calmly. They prolong an uninterrupted tendency towards loss of influence in a context of a crisis of renewal of its cadres. The PCP's problem is not that posed by its "renewers" but a leadership which is incapable of reversing or even delaying its process of political, cultural and social regression.

The Left Bloc scored its historic best result on June 13 with 167,000 votes. This is nearly triple - 105,000 votes more - its score at the 1999 European elections, the first election that it contested. In comparison to the last parliamentary elections, it was the only force to increase the number of votes it received - an increase of 15,000. This growth was nationwide and balanced. The Bloc continues to maintain its influence on the younger sectors of the electorate and the result indicates an ability to win new voters.

In other words, the Bloc has stabilized its electoral hard core while continuing to show a capacity for growth. This allows it to face the future with confidence although there is still a great distance between its electoral base and its organic base.

A campaign against the government

These European elections were largely "nationalized" under the pressure of the gravity of the economic and social crisis. It is impossible to regard these results as anything other than a heavy sanction against the government. Also the Left Bloc's results should be interpreted as a reward from the voters to a political force which over two years has pursued a policy of clear opposition to the government.

In this context the typical themes of a European campaign (the proposed Constitution, the referendum, community funds and so on) became peripheral. The Bloc's campaign was centred on two questions, summed up in its slogan "War? Only against unemployment!" The campaign was also distinguished from that of the PCP by the rejection of a sectarian discourse that reduced the pro-employer offensive of the PSD/PP government to a simple continuity of the policy of the PS government. The Bloc criticized the PS for its strategy of integration into the neoliberal EU, its obsession with the public deficit and its ambiguities on the question of abortion (Sousa Franco was a Catholic opposed to free choice) or Iraq, but it never claimed a political equivalence with the breadth of the current government's offensive. The Bloc opposed the idea of a "useful vote" for the PS and the sectarianism of the PCP, with the argument that the best way to punish the government was the alternatives that it proposed. And the Bloc's interventions on the social and parliamentary terrains received popular recognition at these elections.

The opening of the Bloc's list to sectors of the independent left showed that those who involve others in their struggle are rewarded. Three of the most highly placed candidates - Violante Matos (former PS deputy from the island of Madiera), João Semedo (leader of the Communist "renewers") and Diana Andringa (former president of the journalists union) - were independents.

In its initial balance sheet of the European elections, the Bloc's national leadership put forward as its main priority the organizational development of the party, through initiatives of recruitment and organization, sectoral conferences, the education of new activists and so on.

Portugal's political crisis

The result of June 13 narrowed the possibilities of choice of the new president of the European Commission. A conservative from a small EU country was needed. The Prime Minister, Durão Barroso, thus thought he could make an honourable exit after his crushing electoral defeat. [2]

For two weeks, since the end of June, Portugal awaited a decision by the President. [3] on whether elections should be held or the right wing government should continue. The right argued for the second option and supported the candidacy to the post of Prime minister of Pedro Santana Lopes - the national paradigm of the telegenic ultra-populism of the right, former president of the Sporting Lisbon football club and currently mayor of Lisbon (his two years in office have been marked by total incompetence).

After the European result, the entire opposition - as well as the CGTP [4] - demanded elections. Fractures have appeared inside the right. Learning of the possibility of Santana's nomination, finance minister Manuela Ferreira Leite spoke of a "coup d'État" inside the PSD. Inspired by the example of the spontaneous mobilizations which overthrew Aznar in Spain, mobile phones were used to call a mobilization and a rally of 1,000 people, including many well-known intellectuals and artists, before the Palace of Belém demanding that the President call elections. The CGTP called rallies in Lisbon and Porto, while polls showed that a majority of voters wanted elections. The employers' confederations, however, defended the continuity of the PSD/PP government in the name of "political stability".

On July 9 President Sampaio announced his decision and made Santana Lopes Prime Minister. The same night Ferro Rodrigues announced his resignation as secretary general of the PS. After two years of a weak opposition and media difficulties, [5] the PS leadership needed a perspective of power to maintain itself. [6]

This decision opens a new cycle in the Portuguese situation. In the socialist sector we can expect a shift to the right at the next PS congress in November 2004, if one takes into account the politics of the main candidates for its leadership. This will accentuate the disillusionment in the sectors mobilized by the PS in the European campaign.

For the alliance of the PP and PSD, a "Berlusconiization" of the government is likely - it will be more demagogic and spectacular but even more predatory. Its weak legitimacy could be fatal to its offensive, especially if it leads to the development of broad social struggles, absent up until now. Its on this terrain that the Left Bloc must build, relying on the forces it has accumulated in the last two years through its high oppositional profile and its good result in the European elections.

[1] The right wing coalition called itself "Strength of Portugal" and its election poster showed images of fans of the national soccer team under the slogan "confidence and optimism"

[2] The international press did not share the right's joy: Durão Barroso was called the "lowest common denominator" ("The Guardian") and described as somebody whose "obscure character allowed him to emerge as the compromise candidate" ("Financial Times"). According to "The Economist", meanwhile, "The choice of Mr Durão Barroso does not answer Henry Kissinger's famous question, of who to ring if he wanted to

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speak to the leader of Europe”...

[3] Jorge Sampaio was secretary general of the Socialist Party and emerged from its “left wing”. He was President of the Lisbon Municipal Chamber for two terms at the head of a PS-PCP coalition. He was elected president of the Republic in 1996 with the votes of the left, who were opposed to the right wing candidate, former prime minister Cavaco Silva (PSD).

[4] The Confederaç o Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers) is the largest trade union federation, dominated by the PCP. The Uni o Geral dos Trabalhadores (General Union of Workers), divided between the PS and the PSD, did not take any position on the elections.

[5] The PS's second in command, Paulo Pedroso, a former minister of social security, was implicated (along with other public personalities) in a child sexual abuse scandal which has long dominated the airwaves in Portugal. After four months of detention he was not charged and has returned to Parliament.

[6] The growth of the Bloc has made it a force to be reckoned with. Thus, before the presidential decision, the press speculated on supposed agreements made by the Bloc with the PS: “The Bloc gives guarantees to Sampaio on a left majority” (headline from “Publico”, July 7, 2004). The Bloc immediately denied this in a communiqué: “The Bloc has always maintained and will maintain the criteria of approving laws and parliamentary initiatives that correspond to its commitments made before the elections. That is why it will not approve budgets that do not correspond to urgent social needs. In the future it will continue to act as it did before under the governments of Gutteres [PS] or Dur o Barroso [right wing]”.