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European Left

Party of the European Left's Summer University: What scorecard for the radical left in government?

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Among the many discussions that took place during the annual Party of the European Left's Summer University (outside Berlin, in late July) was a seminar by representatives of various left-wing parties that have been, or are currently, part of regional, state or national governments. (Republished from Links.)

The question of the non-social-democratic left's ability to function as a genuine anti-capitalist alternative to the existing political elite, while at the same time being in government in coalition with the elements of the same elite, has been a key point of discussion on the left in Europe.

"The Left and Political Power" seminar was moderated by Gunna Starck from the Red-Green Alliance of Denmark, with the participation of speakers from three key affiliates of the European Left that have had significant experiences of being in government. They were Helmut Markov (Die Linke, Germany), Rosalia Martin (United Left, Spain) and Jussi Salamo (Left Alliance, Finland).

Finland

Jussi Salamo explained the way the Left Alliance of Finland attempted to function while being part of a six-party "left-right" government coalition from June 2011 to March 2014. It saw its role as relieving the worst excesses of the previous "centre-right" administration, which he called "the most right-wing government in the country's history".

Due to the Left Alliance's relatively small size within the grand coalition, coupled with the fact that it failed to prevent the passing of austerity legislation while within the coalition, there was a severe decline in the party's popularity. However, its decision to leave the governing coalition in March 2014 in opposition to cuts to various social welfare programs has since boosted its political standing and popularity. The party now appears as a "voice of reason" within parliament, in the face of the threat presented by both the neoliberal-minded coalition government and the Eurosceptic and right-wing opposition of the True Finns party.

Salamo also pointed out that the radical left in Finland has had an established role in forming coalition governments with centre-left and social-democratic parties throughout its history. In particular, the Communist Party of Finland and the Finnish People's Democratic League played a fundamental part in forming governments and attaining cabinet positions with the Social Democratic Party of Finland throughout 1960s-1980s.

United Left

Speaking on behalf of the United Left (IU) of Spain, Rosalia Martin talked about the experience of governing in a coalition with the social-democratic Socialist Workers' Party of Spain (PSOE) in the regional government of the autonomous community (state) of Andalusia. As part of the coalition, IU was put in charge of overseeing state public works and housing.

IU's original aim in entering a PSOE administration was twofold: to keep the welfare system safe from the austerity measures carried out by the conservative national People's Party (PP) government of prime minister Mariano Rajoy,

and to implement anti-corruption legislation against the ruling political elite in Madrid. The alternative to the coalition with the PSOE was a PP government in Andalusia, which has been ruled by the PSOE since the end of the Franco dictatorship.

Martin stated that the PSOE-IU government of Andalusia was constantly under pressure from the right-wing media, seeking to exploit any mismanagement of economic and social problems within the state and use it as evidence in its media war against IU. The government has also been facing the economic challenge of implementing an austerity-free budget, even in the face of an income cut of €2.5 billion. Martin claimed that essential welfare and social services such as education, health care and public sector jobs have been mostly shielded.

On the other hand, while being part of the government, IU has been playing a key role in supporting and organising the Andalusian movements against evictions and in support of maintaining and expanding social housing. In particular, it was instrumental in passing and implementing the housing eviction law of April 2013. This legislation allows the Andalusian government to expropriate properties of banks and mortgage companies that forcibly evict homeowners. The occupants and homeowners are allowed to stay in the properties, as long as they pay 25% of their net monthly income in rent to their lenders.

The law also gives the regional government the ability to fine banks and mortgage companies if they keep houses that are fit to live in empty beyond a certain time. At the same time, the movement against evictions and in defence of evicted tenants, the Mortgage Victims Platform has been one of the most visible and active grassroots campaigns in Andalusia and IU members have actively campaigned in it, helping prompt the party to implement the new housing law.

IU faced possible expulsion from the coalition government in April this year, after the attempts by the PSOE to deprive it of the housing and public works portfolios, but the local PSOE leadership retreated when they realised that the IU was prepared to risk the coalition over the issue.

At the same time, the Andalusian government has become a painful thorn in the side of Mariano Rajoy. Indeed, the IU's resistance to passing austerity measures and its efforts to institute the new housing law have been cited by the national government as "a major risk for the reputation of the Spanish state, and a danger to the financial stability and the stipulations of the banking system". The national government has appealed the law to the Spanish Constitutional Court.

Martin summed up the purpose IU's participation in government as uniting the popular forces opposed to the agenda and the politics of both the PP and the PSOE, as well as institutionalising the forces of popular participation and providing a political voice to the growing grassroots and social movements within the country.

Die Linke

Helmut Markov, Die Linke's deputy prime minister of the Brandenburg state government, gave an overview of the left's history of governing within a "red-red" coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since the 2009 election for the state.

In the aftermath of that election, where Die Linke outpolled the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the SPD was forced to abandon its previous coalition with chancellor Merkel's regional counterparts and instead form government with Die Linke. For the first time in Brandenburg since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of

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Germany, the effective successor of the former East German ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party, was in the position to form part of a government.

"The parliamentary left-wing forces should never seek to become a part of the government or to speak about their desire to govern. Actions speak louder than words, and the action that is required is simply to govern according to their principles", Markov said.

Markov added that in order to govern in line with the party's principles, Die Linke had developed a program of progressive legislation that greatly benefitted the working families of Brandenburg, as well as small businesses and entrepreneurs that actively invest in and conduct business within the local economy. Die Linke had played a key role in:

âEurosç Implementing the first state-wide minimum wage (â –8.50 per hour).

âEurosç Encouraging the generation of socially conscious private investment, particularly in the area of green technologies and renewable energy.

âEurosç Lowering the eligible voting age in the state election from 18 to 16 years.

âEurosç Ensuring that German police officials serving in Afghanistan were pulled back to duties in Brandenburg.

âEurosç Lifting the sanctions for refugees regarding their freedom of movement throughout the state.

âEurosç Focusing on the creation of public school teachers and educators.

âEurosç Guaranteeing a sustainable and ethical supply of energy, as well as affordable electricity prices for all citizens across Brandenburg.

âEurosç Ensuring that Brandenburg has the highest level of renewable energy generation, compared to other fuels, than any other state in Germany.

Markov recalled how, similar to the IU experience in Andalusia, Die Linke had been faced with difficult and sometimes impossible expectations, particularly in the face of the spending cuts and austerity measures that the state government was required to implement as part of the federal budget (from 2010 until now). In particular, he pointed out that the state government was required to eliminate 10,000 public service jobs as part of the cuts to the Brandenburg state budget.

Being a smaller part of a coalition with a party that does not fundamentally oppose austerity measures meant that Die Linke could not reverse or stop their implementation without forcing the state government to collapse and bringing on a new election. The only real option left was to ensure the maximum number of social and public service structures remained intact, and that the cuts were redirected into other spheres of the state budget.

In one instance, a number of state-employed forestry workers were sent into early retirement with redundancy packages that would guarantee their standard of living and with programs for re-training in another field of work. That example showed that, while Die Linke's attempts at holding back austerity resulted in a marginally better outcome for workers, it still placed the party on the same level of responsibility as the SPD.

Markov also pointed out that Die Linke had learned from its previous bad experience of forming a coalition with the SPD in the Berlin state government (2001-2011). When in power, a government of the left is under the constant surveillance by opposition parties, the media and the big business, and ready to present any misstep as weakness and an opportunity to erode its support among the working class.

Markov finished off by saying that any left-wing party that enters government, whether on its own or in coalition with a less progressive political force, has very little room for mistakes and bad decisions. On top of that, it faces the dual challenge of maintaining criticism and organising actions against the ruling federal government, now an SPD-CDU grand coalition, while working with the local political elements of the same coalition.

Some reflections

For this participant, the presentations and subsequent discussion at the seminar gave rise to the following reflections.

First, with the balance of forces still largely skewed against the radical left and revolutionary forces in Europe (with the possible exception of Greece and potential exception of Spain), electoral victories like those in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, that have given radical forces outright majorities, remain quite unlikely, even in the best of imaginable scenarios.

Second, any left-wing party that wins a minority of seats that are decisive for determining who will govern will always face a dilemma. Entering into a coalition with reformist, and sometimes conservative forces, implies that the left parties will be held at least partially responsible for any piece of legislation or economic measure that ultimately serves the country's economic and political elite.

On the other hand, on entering government the left can have an opportunity not otherwise available: to enact legislation favouring and supported by the popular majority. If successful, this process can improve life for the left's support base, impart confidence to its struggles and fortify it against attacks by right-wing forces and the media aligned with them. Demonstrating the movement's ability to not only mobilise but also implement changes in policy (as has been the case in Andalusia), can help movements grow and organise.

Third, upon entering government, left-wing political parties also have the additional challenge of maintaining themselves in power long enough to implement the policies they originally propose. And just how much austerity can a left-wing political party allow to pass without seriously losing popular support? For instance, for IU in Andalusia, being in coalition with PSOE meant having to pass a total of a -2.5 billion in cuts in the last two years. Being a minority with only 12 of the coalition's 59 seats has meant that IU's ability to influence the direction of spending cuts has been limited.

The example of the Die Linke-SPD coalition in Brandenburg demonstrates that the only way a left-wing party can balance progressive legislation with accepting austerity is by ensuring that the overwhelming bulk of the original program is implemented before any austerity measures are introduced, and that it is understood that such measures having been forced on a government that will do everything in its power to reverse them as soon as possible.

The specific national context in which the decision to participate in a ruling coalition is taken is also critical. In Europe, for example, cases as varied as Sinn Fein's participation in the Northern Ireland government, the Dutch Socialist Party's participation in regional coalitions with centre-right forces, and the decision of IU's Extremadura federation to keep the PP in government in that state, show how complex and unique local factors can be.

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Whatever judgments are made in such cases, the bottom line is surely that even the most progressive laws, budget measures and economic initiatives have to rest on the conscious support of a mass social movement fighting for an all-round alternative to the status quo. Such a movement will accept that a progressive government will at times be forced to retreat in the face of a more powerful enemy—but on condition that basic goals are not abandoned, nor the actual balance of forces and institutional arrangements accepted as unchangeable, nor any actual gains won accepted as the most that can be achieved.

It is interesting to note how the parties that presented at the PEL summer school on their experience in government are now doing in the polls.

In Andalusia, a July 30 University of Granada poll shows that the steady growth in support for IU during the first two years of the IU-PSOE administration (reaching a high of 18.7% compared to its 11.4% 2012 election result) has now stopped, with new arrival Podemos taking 6.6% behind an IU that has slipped back to 10%.

In Brandenburg, which goes to elections on September 14, an August 27 Infratest Dimat poll has Die Linke on 21%, compared to the 27.2% it won in the 2009 state election.

In Finland, the Left Alliance is at 8.2% in the latest Taloustukimus poll, down from the 9.3% it won in the May 25 European election but still up from the 7% to 7.7% scores it was getting while supporting the previous governing coalition (the Left Alliance's peak in national elections was 11.2%, won in 1995).

As matters stand, the conditions under which European left parties committed to anti-capitalist transformation decide to participate as minority partners in governments run by social-democratic majorities looks like remaining the trickiest of decisions to be faced in the coming period.

However, the rise of Syriza and the latest polling from Spain, which give Podemos and IU combined more than the PSOE, point to a future where the shoe may finally be on the other foot—what proportion of a social democracy in crisis will be prepared to be take part in coalitions committed to putting the interest of people before that of the corporate elites?