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Portugal

Starting anew with the Left Bloc

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Starting anew

This chapter does not aim to be a political or social essay on the history of the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc). Neither is it a journalistic account or report. Both authors are founding members of the Left Bloc and have belonged to its leadership from the start. We are in fact an active part of this story: the way we look at and write about 12 years of existence of the Left Bloc comes from our personal commitment.

We accepted the challenge proposed by the editors. In the last 12 years several articles have been written on the Left Bloc or by Left Bloc members in various anticapitalist newspapers, mainly in Europe.

However, with this chapter, we present further information which allows the reader to get a clearer picture of how and in which political climate the Bloc was founded and how it has developed. Why was the decision taken to launch a new organisation instead of an alliance or coalition? How was it done? How did the former organizations relate to this process? Did they fuse in the Left Bloc? How do you become a member? How are the leaderships elected? Who chooses the comrades who will eventually become MPs or councillors if they are elected? What does our parliamentary work look like? How do we use our strong presence in Parliament? What does our political and social work outside Parliament look like? Do we define ourselves as anticapitalists? How do we relate to other political forces on the left? Are we clear about forming a government with social democracy or not? Which were the major and more difficult choices the Left Bloc had to face?

Actually, these are some of the core questions which both of us have been asked over the years when talking to members of other European anticapitalist organizations.

A success so far.... very much due to the initial choices

From the start, and especially after, or just before, another success of the Left Bloc, many political commentators, journalists and politicians from other groups have predicted and announced its imminent demise. The "caviar left", the "impossible union between Trotskyists and Maoists", a bunch of "trendy intellectuals aside from social reality", were some of the epithets we have been awarded. When the Left Bloc won 3% of the votes some commentators predicted that it had reached a peak from which it could only fall. But the Left Bloc continued to grow, to 6.8% and 10%. Not only did the Left Bloc not disappear, it became an inescapable political force which changed the political landscape. It has become a party that counts, able to prove in practice that we are not doomed to be smashed by neo-liberal capitalism and that some small victories are possible even in the context of a fierce capitalist offensive. This is particularly relevant in a defensive period, since it is important to show that struggle pays. Today it is impossible to imagine Portuguese politics without the Left Bloc. As to the criticism of being just a bunch of trendy intellectuals (as opposed to the Communist Party who is supposed to be "the" working class party, even for right wing commentators), one just has to attend any of our national conferences or public meetings, to realize how plural and diverse the Left Bloc is in terms of jobs, culture, generation, political experience.

People of all ages, retired, casually employed youth, unemployed, service workers, factory workers, rural workers, intellectuals, university teachers, students, immigrants, people who lived underground or left the country before 1974 and people for whom the Left Bloc is the first politically organized militancy, the Left Bloc has many colours.

Nearly 12 years after its foundation, we are convinced that the "key" to the success of the Bloc rests on the initial decision to set up a new party, instead of a coalition or an alliance of forces. This new party was not founded on the basis of historical or programmatic affinities and a priori ideological cohesion, but rather on a common understanding and analysis of the current global political situation, the role of capitalism and imperialism and therefore on the basis of the political confrontations which would shape our activity.

The possibility of building this regroupment in a very defensive situation, with people from different political origins and traditions, implied that we had to be able to formulate concrete political proposals and to have an impact on society. That is why started by discussing not a programme of historical reference, but a programme of political intervention.

One of the consequences of this decision was, over the years, the building of a new and strong political leadership.

The workers' movement and the Portuguese political parties

It may be difficult to understand the changes that the Left Bloc brought about without setting it in the context of Portuguese society and its specific political and social history. The Portuguese bourgeoisie had been weak in the 19th and 20th centuries compared to other European ones. The late industrialization of the country gave rise to a working class which was still embryonic at the end of the 19th century. In 1910 the monarchy was overthrown and the Republic installed.

From 1910 to 1926 (when the fascist coup took place), the major current within the workers' movement was the anarchists. Their newspaper "A Batalha" (The Battle) was the most read paper in the country. The Socialist Party (SP), social-democrats linked to the Second International, was already weak. After agreeing with the decision of Portugal to enter the First World War, their credibility declined to the point that they virtually disappeared, only re-emerging as an organization again in 1973, a year before the fall of the dictatorship. Today the SP is a quite inorganic force within the labour movement, in spite of the number of votes it gets among sectors of the working class and the poor.

The Communist Party (CP) was founded in 1921. It was not, as in most countries, a split from social democracy, but rather a convergence of anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and other sectors of the working class. In fact the CP was the only political force to survive the strong and severe repression that the dictatorship imposed on the working class, intellectuals and society as a whole after 1926, although later some other organizations were created under dictatorship.

In the mid 1940s, the CP adopted a strategy of entering the national trade unions created by the Salazar regime. To some extent it proved to be useful, as they were able to influence the leaderships and call for some strikes in very difficult repressive conditions. A large confederation of trade-unions, the CGTP-Intersindical, was created in 1970, when the regime had somewhat softened.

Together with the prestige of the CP leaders (who endured many years of prison, torture, and of living underground),

this has allowed the CP to have control of the organized workers movement when the dictatorship was overthrown in 1974 and thereafter. This partially explains why the workers' movement, dismembered by the repression and without a public existence, was not able to stand autonomously. Moreover, even during the pre-revolutionary years of 1974/5, only a minority of advanced workers raised the question of taking power.

The working class and the left parties at the fall of the dictatorship

25th April 1974 marked the end of a 48 year dictatorship and the start of a pre-revolutionary process which was to last until November 1975. On 30 April Álvaro Cunhal (the CP General Secretary) returned from his long exile in the former USSR and Mário Soares (the SP leader) comes back from Paris. A huge crowd greets them as their trains arrive at Lisbon Central Station. 1st May 1974 saw the largest ever demonstration in Portugal, 1.5 million people gathering at a football stadium with the two leaders side by side speaking to the crowd.

Of all the organizations that became open and legal after April 1974, the CP was obviously the largest and best organized. But other organizations, especially with a Maoist origin (coming from a 1964 split of the CP, following the impact of the Sino-Soviet conflict), were also very important. UniÃO Democrática Popular (UDP) had, at one time, several thousand members and managed to elect one MP in Lisbon on several occasions (in 1975 for the Constituent Assembly, in 1976 for the first elected Parliament and again in 1979). Also organisations like Movement of the Socialist Left (MES), with its origins among Left Catholics, students and intellectuals, played an important role against the colonial war before 1974. The Proletarian Revolutionary Party (PRP) was a split from the CP who turned into armed struggle in last years of dictatorship. The Communist Internationalist League (LCI), the Portuguese section of the Fourth International, was founded only a few months before April 1974 but it also played an important role in that period, not only in its mistrust of the large alliance of classes with the military advocated by the CP but also in contributing to an independent organisation of workers and of the soldiers. Soldados Unidos Vencerão (United Soldiers will Win) (SUV) were very much influenced by the LCI who later became the Partido Socialista Revolucionário (PSR) in 1979.

In May 1974, Ernest Mandel was the invited speaker at a very large meeting held in Lisbon, called by several organisations besides the LCI. The question of independence of the former colonies was key.

However, with the normalisation following November 1975 most of these organisations collapsed or were incapable of resisting the capitalist offensive that followed. Some, like MES, even dissolved into a large talking shop. The UDP and PSR were the organisations most able to fight back and resist. Even though that first experience was not very successful, the UDP and PSR made an electoral coalition in 1983 in Lisbon and Porto.

Throughout the 1980s the PSR was engaged in several important activities like feminist work, student work against the fees, anti-racist work, anti-militarist work (for which we paid with the murder of José Carvalho, one of our leaders, by a band of skinheads in 1989). The end of the 1980s and 1990s were also marked by several experiences of opening up and relating to other currents and individuals. In 1987, Combate, formerly the PSR monthly newspaper, turned into a much wider project where several journalists and intellectuals formed the majority of editorial board although they were not members of the PSR. That allowed for a much wider audience and the collaboration of different sectors of the Left who were certainly not prepared to join the PSR but who played a major role in these years of resistance and strong debate.

In 1991 an important group left or was expelled from the CP. While some of them quickly joined the SP, others, like Miguel Portas, were to set up a new group called Política XXI. By the end of 1997, the PSR and Política XXI

formed a coalition in the local elections in Lisbon and Porto.

The question of abortion: from a taboo to the 1998 referendum

The 1886 Portuguese Penal Code considered abortion a crime and women could be sentenced to from two to eight years in prison. In 1974, some small but radical women's groups raised the question of legalizing abortion. A small group of doctors even organized a clinic where early abortions could be performed within a safe setting. This clinic was to be closed later on, during the normalization years. The LCI was the first political force to also stand for abortion rights. But as late as 1978, several years after the fall of the dictatorship and when abortion was already legal in many European countries, the CP claimed that it was not a question felt by working-class women who, according to them, were only worried about the rise in the cost of living and not interested in abortion rights.

In 1979, the National Abortion and Contraception Campaign (CNAC) was set up, petitioning for a change in the law. Later that year, Maria Antónia Palla, a journalist, was taken to court and was accused of incitement to abortion, because she had produced a TV programme on backstreet abortion in 1976! In the same year, Conceição Massano, a young woman from a village in Alentejo, was denounced by a neighbour who had read her diary where she had written about an earlier experience of abortion. The solidarity movement was so strong that none of the judges convicted them.

Only in 1984 did the law make its first change, proposed by the SP: abortion became legal in case of rape, where the mother's health was really in danger (up to 12 weeks of pregnancy) or in case of malformation of the foetus (up to 24 weeks). In all other cases, that is, when a woman decided to terminate a pregnancy because she did not want to have that child, abortion remained forbidden; the penalty also changed, reduced to up to three years of imprisonment.

In 1998 the SP was in government with a relative majority in Parliament. A group of young socialist MPs introduced a bill to decriminalise abortion on demand up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. It was passed by three votes. Under the pressure of the conservatives, and being himself quite conservative on this issue, the Prime Minister António Guterres proposed a referendum on "Do you agree with decriminalising abortion when requested by women, up to ten weeks into pregnancy, and performed in an authorised health institution?"

It was held on 28 June 1998: only 31.9% voted, a massive abstention for Portuguese standards: the NO result had an extremely narrow victory, 50.07% to 48.28% who voted YES. So, the penal code which criminalised abortion, with the threat of up to three years in jail, did not change then. It had to wait until the new referendum which took place in 2007.

The aftermath of the referendum and the founding of the Left Bloc

Profound defeats often contribute to the dismantling of political organizations. But they may also be an opportunity to learn from its lessons and to build new alternatives. That is precisely what happened in Portugal after the first referendum on abortion, which came in a period of political retreat, after an accumulation of right wing offensives and a series of defeats for the working class.

Most of the present leaders of the Left Bloc as well as many members of the three founding organizations were then engaged in the campaign, either in their former party's campaign or in a broad umbrella movement which campaigned for decriminalisation, together with feminists, members of the CP and members of the SP (very divided internally on that question). The broad pro-choice movement did not really have a strategy to win. It both underestimated the offensive of the Catholic Church and of the right while making its campaign too self-confident.

The weakness of the radical left then became more apparent, leading to debates within each of the three organisations that later founded the Left Bloc. What is the value of a left organisation if we are neither able to stop the attacks of the ruling class nor to win a referendum on abortion?

It was LuÃ-s Fazenda, at the time the General Secretary of UDP, who took the initiative to contact first Fernando Rosas, a well-known and respected historian, a former CP militant and a former leader of the Movimento Reorganizativo do Partido do Proletariado (MRPP) who became a fellow traveller of the PSR in the 1980s. He then contacted Francisco LouÃ£ who contacted Miguel Portas from PolÃ-tica XXI. In a video produced at the Left Bloc's tenth anniversary, Fernando Rosas recalls his first meeting with Fazenda: "His idea was very clearly to go forward in creating a new political project, not just an electoral coalition". The four of them started to meet regularly to discuss their analysis of capitalism, imperialism, the political forces in Portugal and the political answers that were so badly needed.

At a later stage, meetings took place not just among the four of them but of delegations from each of the three organisations and also some independents who became very enthusiastic about the possibility of creating a larger left platform. When a quite broad political agreement was reached, the next difficult decision was whether to create just an electoral coalition or an alliance or else to found a new party

Founding a quite unorthodox new party

After several months of meetings it became clear that an electoral coalition or an alliance would show little ambition. It would have been too short a project leaving many left militants with the impression that they were together just to secure seats in Parliament and not necessarily to make the much needed changes.

This proved to be right. The fact that the Left Bloc was set up as a new party made it possible for many activists from the left -trade-unionists, members of workers' committees, feminists, ecologists, activists from other social movements, along with many well-known left intellectuals, to take part in the process. So we brought together very different traditions, coming from the CP, Maoist or revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) currents, as well as people from independent social movements.

At the end of 1998, start of 1999, each of the three organisations held a conference to explicitly discuss and vote on the question of making just an electoral coalition or launching a new party. Although at each conference there were militants who just wanted a coalition, the vast majority of delegates voted enthusiastically for the proposal of setting up a new party.

The Left Bloc was deliberately not a homogeneous political force with a defined ideological profile. Besides being a pluralist organization, its definition stemmed more from the concrete needs of intervention, the political confrontations that were bound to shape our activity than from an a priori ideological cohesion. So, the appeal that brought together the founding members of the Left Bloc was at the same time vague and very ambitious.

Bloco de Esquerda foundation: the appeal "Starting Anew" (1999)

"Bloco takes over the great traditions of popular struggle in the country, learning from other experiences and challenges. Bloco renews the legacy of Socialism and incorporates the convergent contributions of several citizens, powers and movements that have throughout the years been engaged in searching for alternatives to capitalism. This is the starting point to build a popular, plural, effective, influential and militant Left able to rebuild Hope."

Between February and April 1999, many public meetings took place in the main urban centres of Portugal, having as speakers not just one of the leaders of the three organizations but also independents such as Fernando Rosas or José Mário Branco. These meetings were always packed, they attracted many people, not just the organizations' rank-and-file but also many young people who had started to radicalize, and older militants from all left currents, "orphans" of former left organizations who had never given in to reformist ideas. Since affiliation to the Left Bloc is on an individual not on a collective basis, this allowed many left individuals and activists to join without having to make a choice between each of the three currents.

Fernando Rosas commented recently: "I think that a very important factor was the political and personal trust that was established between the four founders and the commitment that was established among us that the Bloc was more important than the sum of each of its components. Therefore we agreed that different political positions could be overtly expressed, but also that no public declarations should be made BEFORE we had attempted to have a common position on the subject."

A document was signed between the organizations in early 1999. Besides the rule quoted above, it established that the three founding organizations would continue to exist as long as they felt the need for it, and also contained details such as who would be the first candidate in European elections and the first candidate in Lisbon. These safeguards proved to be useful in later years.

How are leaderships elected?

We have often been asked this question. The best way to answer is to explain the preparation of our national conferences, which take place every two years. Any group of 20 Left Bloc members may present a political platform to be discussed and voted on. Each platform has equal rights: the organizing committee of the conference (composed by some members of the outgoing leadership plus one representative per platform) ensures the publication and diffusion to all members of a bulletin with the various platforms and contributions, as well as the calendar of debates between the platforms and the dates for election of delegates. At the conference, the platforms present a slate for the leadership, which has to include parity between men and women. Slates not linked to one of the political platforms are not allowed, since for us a leadership should not be a sum of individuals but the result of the expression of concrete political points of view.

The Mesa Nacional (National Leadership) of the Bloc, about 80 members, is elected at the national conference, in direct proportion to the votes that each platform scored. At its first meeting, the National Leadership elects a Political Committee of 15-20 members that takes major political decisions in between meetings of the National Leadership which are held every two months.

Since the Left Bloc's foundation, the three organizations that founded the Left Bloc and the majority of independents have always been part of the same platform. In the early years, independents had a quota of 50% and the remaining 50% were distributed equally among the three currents. It is still an unwritten rule that the three founding

organisations have the same number of members in the National Leadership.

A peculiar and innovative way of being anticapitalists

Soon after its foundation it was clear that the Left Bloc was much more than the sum of its initial parts. A "shared hegemony" in the leadership, together with an extraordinary skill in creating political responses and a high level of political confrontation gave the Left Bloc a wide audience, built trust and many hundreds of people joined the party, which now has around 9,000 members.

The Left Bloc has always been able to combine its presence in Parliament with an intense contact with workers, students and intellectuals. While this happens all year round, it becomes more intense and visible in summer, when the Left Bloc holds public meetings in popular places, near the coast and the beaches. Over the summer of 2010, for instance, these meetings attracted some 20,000 people.

The Left Bloc is no longer seen as just a protest party, but a party posing an alternative. Even in Parliament the Left Bloc has succeeded in getting several proposals approved, the first, in 1999, being to consider violence against women a public crime. Many more could be cited. The Left Bloc is therefore seen as a party which can lead to some, albeit sometimes small, victories.

From its early days, the Left Bloc has allowed political representation of its initial components. So far there has not been a fusion of the founding organisations, they have changed into political associations with their own websites and educational activity, without competing with the initiatives of the Left Bloc.

The Left Bloc is an anticapitalist force, heterogeneous but with a strong and cohesive leadership, plural and with diversity in its membership and leadership. There are Marxists and non-Marxists. But the Left Bloc has learned from the very beginning that plurality may be expressed as polyphony, not as cacophony as Luis Fazenda likes to say. We do not measure our anti-capitalism by the number of times we use the word anticapitalist or revolutionary in our resolutions or leaflets. We are not a party that makes abstract propaganda for socialism. In our opinion, the idea that most demands can only be fulfilled under socialism may turn out to be dangerous and demobilizing. We have sometimes been accused of not having a strategy and of relying too much on tactics. From our point of view this is both unfair and wrong. The interview with Francisco Louçã explains this point very well.

Present and future challenges

This chapter was not supposed to deal with the current situation. But what we are living now in Portugal is not a "normal" situation. The consequences of the economic crisis and the rejection by the Portuguese Parliament of PEC-IV (the proposed austerity package) on 23 March 2011 led to the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Sócrates and to new national elections which will take place on 5th June.

At the beginning of April Sócrates asked the European Commission for help concerning the Portuguese debt. Shortly after, a troika composed of a representative of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), another from the European Central Bank and also a European Union commissioner came to Portugal to assess the situation. They met with the right-wing parties: Partido Social Democrata (PSD) and Centro Democrático e Social (CDS) and with the SP. Both the CP and the Left Bloc have refused to meet with entities that nobody elected and refused to pretend that they were open to negotiate with them.

At the start of May, the Portuguese troika of PS, PSD and CDS signed an agreement with the international troika accepting the conditions imposed on Portugal in order to get a loan of 78 billion Euros. The content and consequences of the agreement are devastating: of the 78 billion, 54 billion will be used in paying back those who have lent us money, 12 billion to recapitalize the banks. There will be only 12 billion Euros left. It is predicted that in two years' time we will be an additional 100,000 unemployed, adding to the already existing 700,000, social benefits will be reduced dramatically, company taxes be diminished and VAT will go up.

Besides opposing this agreement and its consequences, The Left Bloc has concrete proposals:

1) An audit of the debt, so that we know exactly to whom we owe and why we owe. As Francisco Louçã said, when we go to a restaurant we do not pay the bill before we have checked it. In fact we propose that the part of the debt that results, for instance, from corruption be taken out from the debt.

2) Immediately initiate a process of renegotiating the debt, payment deadlines and interest rates

3) Create a bailout fund with money coming from taxes on transfers to off shore accounts, and taxation of stock market operations

Obviously the results of the elections are difficult to predict. We live in a period of strong and deep crisis and recessions do not favour the Left. A small party would not have the capability of facing the present situation. But a party like the Left Bloc speaks for millions of people in TV debates and will be in contact with many others during the campaign.

The crisis and the debt are a challenge. We aim to take the challenge and transform it into a new opportunity to build a larger left. Our strategy is clearly to become a new leadership for the left, alternative to the SP's leadership.

Chronology of important events for the Bloc

1999 - Up to the end of February, the project of the Left Bloc is presented in public meetings by its founders. These meetings are always packed and a new enthusiasm and hope is felt. End of February, the Bloc becomes a new political party.

In May the Bloc takes part in the mobilizations against the NATO intervention in Kosovo. In June European elections take place. Miguel Portas is the 1st candidate on a national slate. The Bloc has its first electoral experience of many to come. The result was only 1.79% but very promising.

By the end of August a referendum on independence took place in Timor-Leste a former Portuguese colony occupied by Indonesia since 1975. The outcome is a massive victory for the pro-independence movement but the pro-Indonesian paramilitary forces do not accept the defeat and spread terror and horror in the population. In Portugal the largest solidarity movement ever seen takes to the streets with daily initiatives and the Bloc plays a major role in it.

In October National elections take place. The Bloc elects two MPs: Francisco Louçã and Luís Fazenda. When the parliamentary session opens, they stand up for 2 full days, until the other parties accept that one of them is to sit in the first row, (as the leaders of all parliamentary forces do). A fifth party is represented in Parliament, something the

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other forces find hard to accept. Moreover, the Socialist Party, with the most votes, elected 115 MPs, exactly one half of Parliamentary members, which obliged it to make alliances either with its Left or with the right.

2000 - The first bill that the Bloc proposed in Parliament, that violence against women is considered a public crime, is approved.

The Bloc starts to change the political landscape of the country, not only by its cutting-edge proposals in Parliament but mainly because its two MPs and other leaders are present in every important struggle: whether it is a factory that is about to close, or a member of the Roma community that is beaten to death at a police station, the Bloc is always present in solidarity. Also, the existence of two MPs gives them a much wider audience in the media, particularly on television. The concrete proposals of the Bloc, in particular in what concerns the tax reform system and social security become widely known

In March the Bloc hosts the 1st meeting of the European Anticapitalist Left, where the Scottish Socialist Party, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Red-Green Alliance are the other participating organisations.

2001 - Presidential elections take place at the end of January. The Bloc presents Fernando Rosas as a candidate. He scores 2.98%.

The G8 meets in Genoa. The Bloc is present at the anti-G8 demonstration with a delegation. From then onwards, the Bloc will always be present and establish links with the anti-globalisation movement.

When Bush occupies Afghanistan, the Bloc starts to build a long term anti-war movement.

Local elections take place in December and the Bloc is present for the 1st time. Although the result was rather modest as compared to the National elections, it has meant the beginning of a slow organization and political intervention at the local level.

2002 - The disastrous result of the Socialist Party in the local elections, in particular in large cities, leads to the Prime-Minister's resignation and the call for new National Elections, which take place in March. A coalition between the conservative party (PSD) and the Christian-democrats (PP) wins by comfortable majority. The Bloc elects 3 MPs: Francisco Louçã and Luís Fazenda are again elected in Lisbon and João Teixeira Lopes in Porto (the 2nd largest city). This was a major breakthrough that no organization of the radical left has ever achieved before.

The coalition government led by Prime Minister Durão Barroso (now president of the European Commission) initiates a series of attacks on working class rights, by changing the laws existing since 1975/76. The hot debates in Parliament between Francisco Louçã and Durão Barroso became widely popular. The Bloc fought this new Working bill in Parliament and in society. In December a general strike takes place and the Bloc is very involved and its leaders are most welcome at any workplace.

2003 - The Bloc takes a major role in organizing initiatives against the forthcoming invasion of Iraq by Britain and the USA. Traditionally, the CP has organized a "Peace movement" which was a sort of umbrella for its satellite organizations, therefore limiting the participation of a wider audience. Besides holding several public meetings across the country, the Bloc was also able to organize a huge public meeting in Lisbon with speakers ranging from Francisco Louçã, one MP from the Communist party, Carvalho da Silva (the leader of CGTP), Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo (catholic, former candidate to the presidency in 1986), the former president Mário Soares, and even some Conservatives who were against the war.

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Moreover, when Bush, Blair, Aznar and Durão Barroso met in the Azores and signed the agreement to invade Iraq, the Bloc organized a demonstration outside the military basis of Lajes, with 300 people and the presence of Francisco Louçã.

2004 - A petition for a new referendum on abortion gets to Parliament. The law requires 35,000 signatures, the broad movement created along 2003 and 2004 reaches 121,151. The right wing coalition refuses to call for a new referendum.

The exhaustion of Barroso's government increases as shown by the results of the European elections held in the beginning of June. Soon afterwards, Barroso is chosen to become President of the European Commission and resigns as Prime-Minister. The Bloc calls for new elections, but President Sampaio chooses Santana Lopes (from Barroso's party) as Prime-Minister. The disaster goes on and by the end of November the Parliament is dissolved and new National elections are called for February 2005.

By the end of 2004 and beginning of 2005, the 3 founding organizations of the Bloc ceased to exist as such, turning into political associations.

2005 - In the February elections the Socialist party wins with absolute majority. The Bloc elects 8 MP's (4 in Lisbon, 2 in Setúbal and 2 in Porto, 4 men and 4 women). A new and very difficult political period starts then, with Prime Minister Sócrates implementing all the anti-working class reforms that Barroso did not achieve.

At its 4th Conference, the Bloc clearly defines itself as anticapitalist force.

2006 - Presidential elections take place in January. Francisco Louçã stands as a candidate. End of 2005 and January 2006 a very strong and militant campaign runs throughout the whole country. This campaign shows the popular roots of the Bloc while also reinforcing it. Francisco Louçã scored 5.3% of the votes. Mário Soares (former president and the official candidate of the Socialist Party won 14.3%, while Manuel Alegre, a Socialist party member and vice-president of the Parliament won 20.7% presenting himself as an independent candidate and passing Soares to his left.

After the presidential elections, Bloco underwent an internal debate about the strategic course: it assumed/defined the aim of becoming an alternative to the Socialist Party, in order to debate the majority within the Left.

In September the Bloc organised a March for Jobs that crisscrossed the country: two to three public meetings every day, with many workers present. Sometimes, the workers of companies that were going bankrupt or threatened with closure contacted us or we went to these companies.

A general protest against Sócrates' policies takes place in October. The Bloc supports the trade-unions mobilizations against cuts in pensions, jobs and public services.

2007 - In February a new referendum on decriminalization of abortion takes place. The YES wins. The Bloc campaigned in the most difficult areas of the country (where the NO had won in 1998) and also helped boost the plural and broad civic movements who determined a victorious political line.

At its 5th Conference, the Bloc clarifies its participation in political activities at International level. It also defends climate justice and ecological revolution as part of the socialist transformation process.

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In September the Bloc organizes a March against precariousness which affects over one million workers in Portugal, mostly (but not exclusively) young people.

2008 - The government attacks on Education bring over 100,000 teachers to demonstrate twice that year.

2009 - At its 6th Conference, the Bloc discusses the participation of some left parties in governmental coalitions in Europe, concluding that they led to very serious defeats (see text).

Three elections take place in 2009: for European Parliament, where the Bloc scored 10.3% and elected 3 MEPs; national elections where we went from 8 to 16 MPs, not only electing one more MP from Lisbon and one more from Porto but also broadening the regional representation (1 MP from Braga, Aveiro, Coimbra, Elyria, Santarem and Faro); and local elections where we elected several members to local parliaments.

2010 - The Bloc decides to support Manuel Alegre as candidate for the presidential elections which will take place in January 2011.

The political and social situation is worsening. Besides all legislation already approved by the government, which takes social benefits from the poor and does not touch the banks and the rich, the situation is to become even worse with the 2011 Budget. November the 24th a general strike takes place, called by the two main trade-union confederations. It is estimated that 3 million people went on strike.

At the end of November, a NATO summit takes place in Lisbon and the Bloc is much involved in anti-Nato activities, either with other forces or with a concert against NATO organized by the Bloc.

2011 - The Left is defeated at the presidential elections hold in January, since Cavaco Silva, the historical leader of the right, is elected in the first round. Manuel Alegre scores only 20% of the votes, the same as 5 years before.

As the government of the Socialist Party hardens its attacks both on working class and the unemployed and retired, the Bloc sets in Parliament a censure motion against the government, which was discussed (but defeated) on March 10th.

The rejection by the Parliament of PECIV (Stability and Growth programme), presented by Prime Minister José Sócrates March 17th led to his resignation and the call for new General Elections which will take place 5th June.

In April the IMF settles down and starts to impose its conditions for a loan to Portugal.

Meanwhile, the Bloc has started the preparation of its VIIth National Conference to be held May 7-8th. The development of a strategy against precariousness as well as a programme for a Left Government able to defeat the IMF are at the centre of the debate.

Alda Sousa, April 2011