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Fourth International

# To continue the debate on broad parties

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV461 - June 2013 -

Publication date: Monday 10 June 2013

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**This report was presented to the 2013 International Committee meeting of the Fourth International by Laurent Carasso for the Bureau to introduce a general discussion after the presentation and discussion of reports on the balance sheet of party-building experiences in Pakistan, the Spanish state and France. Contributions on these experiences and on the general discussion are published in our Debate section [“Building new parties of the left”](#).**

The purpose of this document is to relaunch the debate after the day of discussion at the last IC on the Brazilian, Danish, Italian and Portuguese reports

The first debate is clearly identified with the Irish comrades and those of SA, who systematically reject any policy of building broad parties, thinking that we should just stay on the line of building organizations on the programme of the Fourth International.

The second debate, which we have had since the 1990s (at the 1995, 2003 and 2010 Congresses) is between the comrades who participated in debates on the orientation of building broad parties.

The central question is "what do we want to build? ". The debate concerns the definition and boundaries to give to "broad parties"

This debate continued at the last congress of the FI around the resolution on role and tasks:

Is our orientation is to build broad parties bringing together all the currents located to the left of liberal social-democracy, including both "classist" classic reformist social-democrats from the Stalinist parties, "anti-liberal" currents and revolutionary movements?

This definition of broad parties is in general that of parties or groups such as Die Linke, Synaspismos/Syriza, Å–DP, Respect, and Rifondazione or the PT (in the years following its creation).

The orientation adopted at the last World Congress (2010) was that of the building of broad anti-capitalist parties, that is to say, parties placing themselves from the outset in the perspective of the overthrow of the capitalist system, with an acknowledged revolutionary horizon, even if they do not develop a completed revolutionary strategy and if within them they could bring together from political currents of different history and traditions. Such parties may also attract current and activists from radical social movements.

Parties like the PSOL, the NPA, the Bloco, the Danish RGA placed themselves from their creation in such a perspective. This is also the project implemented by Sinistra Critica and Izquierda Anticapitalista.

Everyone understands that there is no impermeable boundary between the two projects, and previous congresses of the FI (1995, 2003) included both perspectives. The starting point of these projects is in all cases the fall of the Berlin Wall and the adoption by the SD parties of an openly neoliberal economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s. This new context disorganised the cohesion of the Stalinist parties and encouraged centrifugal dynamics (on the right and left) in currents emerging from these parties, opening new spaces to the left of social democracy, and making the divisions between earlier revolutionary currents, which were often determined by the attitude to the USSR, clearly no

longer pertinent. The 1980s also showed the limits of building of self-identified revolutionary organizations, created and maintained precisely most often in opposition to Stalinism or classical social democracy.

During the recent discussions, the British comrades explained their disagreement with the prospect of "broad anti-capitalist parties" by the irrelevance of such projects in many countries, starting with England.

## New experiences

In the 1990s new experiences for revolutionaries emerged in several continents:

– 1 / Building broad parties as a milieu bringing together currents to the left of social democracy including reformists and anti-capitalist activists, with as the sole basis rejection of social-liberal management of capitalism by social democracy. We can think that Die Linke, during the 2000s represented this type of party, with the explicit coexistence of socialist anti-capitalist currents, rooted in social movements, trade unions and the global justice movement and currents based on "strong reformism" seeking to establish management alliances with social democracy on a non-neoliberal basis.

The experience of Rifondazione and the Brazilian PT stood roughly in the same area but with different dynamics, our Italian and Brazilian comrades having the hope in the 1990s that the process of building these would give them a socialist strategy, of revolutionary rupture with the capitalist system. In both cases, the question of the relationship to institutions and the state led either to the crisis of the parties or its full integration in the management of the capitalist system. This clearly shows that even without a complete revolutionary strategy, the question of the relationship to the state and the need to place its daily political activity in a perspective of overthrow and not management of the system is essential to stabilize new parties.

This why the orientation developed in our recent World Congresses and explicitly stated at the last congress, taking stock of the Brazilian and Italian experiences in particular, was not only the building of broad parties, but anticapitalist parties seeking to consolidate all currents rejecting the political logic of management of the capitalist system and acting explicitly for a socialist break, a revolutionary rupture based on the activity of social movements.

Four intertwined questions arise concerning the broad parties:

**A / How to build political tools:** a party-instrument at the time of the crisis of Stalinism and of social democracy, different from small propagandist groups, parties capable of organizing the class struggle and integrating the change of period of the 1990s: parties that are actors and not critical currents of SD and Stalinism, useful parties for the exploited. Parties that organize. This immediately raises the question of the type of activity, organization and implementation of these parties, their social base, not just the electoral base but the question of what social strata that party is able to organize.

**B / The question of programme of these parties:** an anticapitalist programme aimed at changing society, the overthrow the system. But the question of the programme is obviously directly related to its reality, not just a reference to congress texts: what relationship between this programme and slogans, the campaigns of the party, the political education of its members/ activists, the reality of its political orientation, all the more so that when we talk about broad parties, incorporating new generations of activists coming to politics from social mobilizations on a given issue. Scottish and English examples have also recently shown how the weak integration in reality of the issues of feminism can have lamentable consequences. But other issues can quickly take on an explosive character, such as

anti-imperialism, Islamophobia, racism, ecology, especially since they also provoke of tensions that must be collectively controlled in a democratic debate on the orientations of these parties.

**C / The question of the relationship to institutions.** First of course the fact that these regroupments take place in contradistinction to social democracy already implies a distinct identity. Does this distinct identity translate as practical independence, independence and lack of collaboration with the Social Democrats in the management of bourgeois political institutions?

This question is obviously related to the programme, but more concretely in the relationship with the state and the party's understanding of its role in society and how political action can translate.

The traditional parties of the labour movement (social democrats, or former Stalinists) are essentially reformist political parties, but also parliamentary parties, for whom the function, the essence of a political party is its parliamentary presence, Institutional activity being the centre of gravity of the party. But this definition is precisely in today's society that of a political party, because by nature, the democratic parliamentary system considers the role of political parties is to represent voters in the management structures of the system, not to organize the exploited and the oppressed to overthrow it! This question of relationship to institutions has determined numerous debates in parties like Rifondazione or the PT, with at particular moments a crossing of the Rubicon leading explicitly to institutional management at the highest level of the state or explicit support to social liberal governments.

But these debates were also present in recent years in broad parties taking a more prominent place in institutions, such as Portugal or Denmark, or recently in France in the NPA.

**D / Relationship to social movements and new forms of radicalization.** The last years of the crisis of capitalism have put into question the usefulness of political parties for the oppressed. Alternating management of the system and attacks against workers by conservative parties and the Social Democrats has considerably increased the discredit of the institutions and the functioning of bourgeois democracy and a deep scepticism about the emancipatory political projects proposed by political parties. This discredit also has rebounded on the parties of the radical left.

The experience of the Indignant in recent years in several countries, after much debate in the global justice movement has also highlighted this contradiction: New layers, new generations rise up, rebel against the system, but assimilate to the system all party political forms, so they appear actually built into the system they claim to fight. At the same time, these new political spaces are sources of rapid anti-capitalist politicization or radicalization.

But at the same time, the capitalist crisis, on the basis of the rejection and disgust generated by the system within the youth and the working class, also opens the way to ultra-reactionary, fascist currents.

## A bundle of contradictions

Broad parties are thus faced with this bundle of contradictions:

- Being parties at odds with social-democratic policy and developing an anticapitalist programme;
- Organizing layers of worker and young people radicalizing faced, with the crisis;

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– Having political activity useful to the oppressed by participating in the organization of social struggles while refusing any institutional collaboration with social liberal managers.

– Having an internal political, democratic and educational life to make real parties, not just electoral political fronts, while consolidating all these parties faced with the pressures of "realism and political seriousness" which grow as much as these parties take an important place in their national political life.

These discussions have brought out several things:

First, of course, is it credible want to build such broad parties in a stabilized fashion?

The question of the reality of this perspective and its forms obviously depend on national circumstances: the situation of the radical left and our own capacity to take initiatives. Not only is there no model, but there may even be situations where the only lasting achievement is fronts of political organization or electoral fronts.

This was the case, for example, in England with Respect. But even in this case, at one point, the issue was clearly raised in Respect of overcoming this framework to move towards a new party, going beyond the political components of the starting point. This would not necessarily have been reflected in an evolution towards revolutionary positions, but would have qualitatively changed the situation. At the time, the SWP has explicitly rejected this development and this was the first step in a crisis of Respect and of the SWP.

But above all, the most important question in recent years has been that of the usefulness of anti-capitalist parties or broad parties faced with the crisis.

There was in Europe, in particular, a dynamic wave in the 1990s and 2000s, driven by the global justice movement and benefiting the radical left.

The strength of the capitalist crisis since 2008 has focused more sharply the demand for anti-capitalist responses but has not brought greater visibility and effectiveness for the European anti-capitalist left, quite the contrary. After the crises of the 2000s (Rifondazione, Respect and SSP) came those of Die Linke and the NPA.

In each case, there are specific causes, but the result is that the parties that appeared to be the driving force of the European radical left came into crisis.

These last years have put at the centre of popular concerns the question of the fight against the structural adjustment plans related to the sovereign debts, in Europe in particular. On the one hand the crisis clarifies workings of a savage capitalist system, on the other it makes even stronger the demand for immediate solutions to the social damage provoked by neoliberal policies.

The key place taken by Syriza at the time of the recent ups and downs of the Greek crisis and by the Front de Gauche in France this last year are explained by this situation.

In the absence of social mobilizations able to confront the root of the capitalist evils and to provoke a social confrontation with the system, the victims of the crisis seek immediate answers to their sufferings produced by the crisis and austerity policies.

We must learn the lessons from this context and have as a priority concern the building of political tools able to fight and propose concrete answers to the social attacks conducted by governments and the capitalists within the framework of the current crisis. The building of anti-austerity fronts or coalitions bringing together the political and social forces opposed to these plans, within the framework of a policy of the united front, must be our essential concern. Proposing united action to the political forces situating themselves in this terrain must be the lever of our action. That means that we must put to the fore of our emergency programmes against austerity containing the essential demands faced with this crisis and able to be used the basis of such fronts.

## Maintain the problemati

At the same time, the experiences of the last ten years make it necessary to maintain the problematic of the last Congress of building broad anti-capitalist parties.

1/ The continuation of the economic, ecological and capitalist crises and their likely worsening in the coming years always more indispensable the determined political action of revolutionaries and anti-capitalists to fight in a frontal and global way this system, the exploitation and oppressions that it generates and maintains.

2 / We maintain the perspective of building political parties going beyond the framework of our sections to organize the social struggles of the exploited and oppressed, seeking to bring together militant currents acting socially and politically on the terrain of anti-capitalism and seeking to give coherence and political effectiveness to their action.

3 / The possibilities and forms largely depend on national circumstances and the reality of our sections. In all cases, the profile that we need is that of openness to other anti-capitalist organizations, but also and especially to the new generations of activists appearing in the social movements.

The experiences of recent years strengthen the need to stabilize such parties by basing them on the forces of the social movements and not on parliamentary positions. This goes alongside the concern of sharing within these parties our analysis of the state and bourgeois institutions

4/ We must also maintain our concern for the international relationships and action of anti-capitalist organizations. Although recent years have marked blocks and setbacks in this area, the preoccupation must be maintained especially given that the international developments of the crisis make such action increasingly necessary. While the last World Congress showed the capabilities of our International to bring organisations together, the efforts to have regional meetings and joint actions are clearly standing still.