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European Union

We need an alternative project of disobedience to austerity'

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Two major anniversaries recently marked the significant change that has taken place on the Spanish left in the last several years.

May 15 was the sixth anniversary of the Indignados mass mobilisations and protests against the brutal austerity unleashed by Spanish government in the wake of the economic crisis. Meanwhile, May 25 marked the third anniversary since the emergence of Podemos as the political voice of the anti-austerity movement with the election of the five Podemos candidates (including key leader Pablo Iglesias) into the European Parliament.

Most recently, the Spanish political space has been dominated by the aftermath of the presidential elections in France, as well as the leadership election of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

There is also the push for a censure motion by Podemos against the right-wing Popular Party government of Mariano Rajoy on the grounds of illegal electoral financing, and the historic, although non-binding, proposal by the Spanish Congress to remove the remains of fascist dictator Francisco Franco from the "Valley of the Fallen" burial grounds. Franco's grave effectively operates as a shrine to Spain's fascist past.

Denis Rogatyuk of the Green Left Weekly spoke with Miguel Urban, a member of European Parliament for Podemos, and a leader of the Anti-Capitalist tendency in the party.

DR: Following the results of the French presidential elections, you have pointed to the triumph of the so-called "Extreme Centre" against far-right populism. How do you interpret the victory of Emmanuel Macron?

MU: I believe that the French presidential elections in France have made clear a number of tendencies across all of Europe. First, in France, the exhaustion of the Fifth Republic [the current constitutional order established in 1958]. It is the first time in more than 40 years that neither the Socialist Party nor the different variants of the Gaullist right have made it through to the second round.

That is unprecedented, but similar to what happened in the Austrian presidential elections and the Dutch parliamentary elections: we've also seen a similar tendency in Greece, Spain and Italy. Most European countries are witnessing an erosion of the main parties of what Tariq Ali has termed "the extreme centre" — two different ballot papers but with the same socio-economic and political program.

The implosion of the Socialist Party in France, which is the big loser in the politics of the extreme centre, could be described as a form of "zombification". That concept, which I like, was coined by the sociologist Ulrich Beck regarding so-called "zombie institutions" like the Socialist Party: they look to be alive, but are in fact politically dead because they have stopped representing the social and class interests for which they were born.

As for the crisis of European social democracy, I believe it is one of the other significant features that we have seen in France, with [former prime minister] Manuel Valls openly offering himself to Macron (a neoliberal centrist) while [official Socialist Party candidate Benoît] Hamon is discussing with the Greens about creating a new political and social movement in France.

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Then we have seen another basic element which, differently from Spain, has seen the French Gaullist right pay a high electoral price for its corruption cases. If we had been discussing this six months ago - following the primaries of The Republicans in which a record 4.6 million voters participated - we would have seen that the entire world was predicting a second-round run-off between the [traditional right candidate] François Fillon and Marine Le Pen.

Despite that, corruption weighed down the candidacy of Fillon. We can see that the Socialists are not alone in having a crisis, the mainstream right is having one too.

The fourth element to highlight in these elections is the strength of the extreme-right National Front candidate Marie Le Pen, with 33.9% of the vote - double the 2002 vote of her father. The participation rate was also lower compared to 2002, which I think is highly worrying.

Those 11 million votes for Le Pen make the National Front the spear head of the European far right. At this moment in Germany, the far right Alternative for Germany is positioning itself as third option in the opinion polls. It is quite probable that it will recover its upward trend once it resolves the internal differences at its [April] congress. That will mark the first time that the extreme right has entered the Bundestag [established in 1949].

Then we have the case of the presidential elections in Austria last year, where the far right could have won. A large part of the protest vote against capitalist globalisation and the inequalities and lack of democracy of the European project got channeled to the extreme right.

Some people claimed that the first option of the working class of France [in the second round of the presidential election] was the National Front, when in fact its first option, unfortunately, was not Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his left-wing France Unbowed movement, but abstention. After abstention came the National Front, which came first among people with the lowest levels of income and education.

Finally, what was the impact of Macron and Melenchon's France Unbowed? The viruses of the system have a tendency to generate their own fake antibodies, like Macron or Albert Rivera [leader of Citizens, the "Podemos of the right" in Spain]: the former is a banker doing politics, the latter is a financial speculator doing politics, and both of them represent the interests of the "extreme centre".

In the face of the dramatic weakening of the Socialist Party and the Gaullist right, a new political force has emerged that expresses the interests of the French elite in a more complete form: it's Macron, product of banking sector marketing. However, the people at large did not vote for Macron, but rather against Le Pen.

France Unbowed has demonstrated the potential for an alternative left to dispute electoral space among popular layers and young people, which is encouraging. It still has problems of organisation and of a lack of desire to overcome personality politics (due to its link with Podemos). However, the difference is that Podemos has always had an interest in organising the process of change, of stirring along protest, which has not been the case so far with France Unbowed.

Given that we are now living in a phase of political leaps forward and as France Unbowed has more responsibility than other parties on the French left, it needs to be bold and courageous.

The victory of Pedro Sanchez during the recent PSOE primaries clearly signifies a blow against the party's establishment. Do you believe this increases the possibility of a coalition government between PSOE and Podemos in the future?

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We can't interpret the crisis of PSOE simply as a crisis within that party but as the crisis of the Party of European Socialism: this is a crisis of the Western project of social democracy, analogous to the crisis within the Democratic Party in the US.

We can see that within these "zombie" institutions there are groups that want to rebel against the logic of self-immolation that has turned them into parties only serving the interests of the elites. These people who rebel normally gain the support of the membership base, such as was the case with Hamon in France and, more significantly, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US. We are seeing the same process taking place in Spain.

This is not because [re-elected leader Pedro] Sánchez is more to the left than [his main opponent] Susanna DÃ-az. Rather it is because he represents the feelings and sentiments of the ranks against the slide into social liberalism that has ruled the PSOE for so long: it is a rebellion against the party apparatus and Sanchez is able to express that.

But we have also seen that the social democratic party apparatuses strike back: the knives are already out for Hamon in France, while Corbyn has had to constantly face leadership challenges from within Labour, and there was the dirty campaign that was waged during the primaries against Sanders. The same is bound to happen in Spain, as a victory for Sánchez in the primaries means they will not allow what he represents to express itself politically, they are not going to grant him space in the PSOE, the apparatus will not allow it.

Could you comment on the recent Podemos decision to censure the government of Rajoy on the grounds of illegal financing of the Popular Party?

This is an exceptional measure in an exceptional political moment in our country and in Europe as a whole. In no other country in Europe would it be possible for a governing party to be investigated for illegal financing and for the prime minister to be summoned to explain the illegal financing of his own party.

In no other European country have nearly all the former ministers of a government, in this case that of Aznar (1996-2004) been indicted or already been sent to jail. These are not isolated cases because corruption has become a form of governance for the right-wing in Spain. We see a general pillaging of people's rights and of resources

Faced with all that, declarations and parliamentary motions that are never acted on are pointless. The only way out is to remove PP from power and the only way to do it in a democratic way is to move a motion of censure. What is the problem? That they protect each other: the regime is not only comprised of the PP but also has PSOE as one of its main accomplices. Yesterday, for example, the PSOE agreed that the chair of the commission of investigation into illegal party financing was to be someone put forward by the PP!

Anywhere else in Europe this would seem like a bad joke. The censure motion cannot simply be a measure confined within the walls of the parliament: we need it to be a social mobilisation that goes beyond parliamentarians and parties and involves citizens across Spain because we need a censure motion that effectively throws out the regime of 1978 [based on the present Spanish constitution] so as move towards a new constituent process.

It's not a few apples that are rotten, it's the whole basket. We have to change the laws and that is why we need a constituent process where we can decide to change everything that has been working so badly.

Recently, the Spanish Congress has approved a proposal supported by Podemos to remove the remains of fascist dictator Francisco Franco from the "Valley of the Fallen". Do you believe this signifies a new stage in

the fulfilment of the "Law of Historic Memory"?

Unfortunately, the vote was a non-binding resolution, which did not oblige the government to remove the remains of the criminal and fascist dictator from his mausoleum.

It was the umpteenth whitewash by the PSOE on this issue, just like the law of historic memory, which is both insufficient and still not being implemented. The stance of the parties for change and the associations of victims of Francoism is that the time is up for parliamentary resolutions that are never carried out.

Spain is the exception in Europe in that we are the only ones who have not been able to bring the criminals and the dictatorship to justice. There will not be a true democracy in Spain until there is a process of democratic breakthrough that allows justice and compensation for the crimes of Francoism.

The working of justice is blocked in Spain: so before we start changing street names, let's start charging criminals. Yes, we want to remove Franco and eliminate the Valley of the Fallen "that permanent tribute to fascist barbarism" but the most important thing is to put Francoism on trial.

To this end we have started a network of cities to bring legal action against Francoism. First were Pamplona, Cadiz, Zaragoza, Barcelona, the "cities for change", but now cities that are governed by the PNV [Basque Nationalist Party] and the PSOE and are beginning to show interest in bringing lawsuits. We also want parliament to repeal the Law of Amnesty that continues to protect criminals in the country.

What do you see as the strategy of Podemos and other anti-austerity and left-wing pan-European political movements in removing the far-right from its position as an "anti-establishment force"?

The problem for the left "I believe it was [English Marxist] Perry Anderson who said this - is that the far right is seen as much more credible as an anti-establishment option because a part of the left is seen by the popular classes as forming part of the system. We have to break with the logic of occupying the centre, with a Europeanism bereft of ideas that manages misery and austerity.

We need to have clear positions on the part of the left that do not simply appeal to left sentiments, but to the material realities that cut across and are shared by the popular classes of Europe.

We also always say that we cannot advance by just holding up the banner "Welcome Refugees" without also holding up that of "Troika [European Union, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund] Go Home".

Austerity policies have generated a sensation of scarcity within the European population, which leads to calls for expulsions "if there's not enough for everyone, some have to be thrown out.

This the political fuel of the extreme right and the politics of xenophobia. The extreme right gives a straightforward answer – if there's not enough for everyone, somebody has to be expelled. So "The French First" is a simple slogan. To fight this slogan we have to show how irrational economic distribution is.

The key problem here is how this distribution has come about, and how inequality has increased: every moment there are not only more poor but also more rich. Like the slogan of Occupy Wall St: the 1% against the 99% is already reality! Indeed the wealth of the 1% now exceeds that of the 99%. So the war is no longer over resources but

over their distribution.

Why don't we have an extreme right in Spain? Because Podemos has occupied the political space of anti-establishmentism, but before that there were mass mobilisations that changed the common sentiment of social majorities, criticising the model of wealth distribution and not singling out immigrants and blaming them for the crisis, but instead targeting those at the top.

When those at the bottom begin to move, those above begin to fall. This is fundamental. Here the left must be clear in breaking with those elements that would absorb us into the status quo, into being one bit more of the same.

There is an urgent need to stand outside the system rather than within it. A large part of the left continues to be within the system and that is a serious problem.

We shouldn't fetishise about a concrete organisational model: the important thing is to rebuild a certain internationalism for the 21st Century, a European and international project which tackles a false dichotomy: either remaining in the European Union (which means defending neoliberalism and austerity) or attacking the European Union, its liberalism and austerity (which has been the main posture taken by the extreme right).

We need to embrace an alternative project to both, an internationalist project that embodies disobedience towards austerity and the democratic anti-fascist spirit that was there as a foundation for the projects of a socialist Europe. That's the basic, the strategic stance independent of any conjunctural situation.

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