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Portugal

Where is the Left Bloc going?

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On June 2-3, 2007 the Fifth National Convention of the Left Bloc took place in Lisbon. Since its creation in 1999, this unitary organization of the anti-capitalist Left in Portugal has strongly consolidated itself and has established a presence in the country. Today it has become a significant force, with 4,200 members, an active presence in struggles and social movements, as well as 350 local councillors and 8 members of Parliament. The following interview with Francisco Louça was conducted on July 7, 2007.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/blococonferencehall2-2.jpg>]

Q. The Left Bloc is a pluralist party of the socialist Left. How does it define itself in relation to the hard core of the socialist programme, in the strong sense of the term, i.e. to the socialization of the large-scale means of production, distribution, credit, etc? How do you tackle the key question of property in your programme? Is it possible to refound an anti-capitalist left without taking a clear position on this question?

A. When the Bloc was formed, eight years ago, we made a political choice which I believe is still valid: to create our party on the basis of the political confrontations which define our activity and not on the basis of a priori ideological cohesion. We thus brought together very different traditions, coming from the Communist Party, Maoist or revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) currents, as well as people from independent social movements. The possibility of building this regroupment, in a very defensive situation, implied that we were able to formulate political proposals and to have an impact on society. So started not by discussing a programme of historical reference, but a programme of political intervention. We defined ourselves as socialists shortly after our foundation, in a double sense: initially, by rejecting "real socialism" (Stalinism, the experiences of the USSR, Eastern Europe or China), then by identifying ourselves with the anti-capitalist struggle, against the social-democratic experience and its current social-liberal version.

In this sense, we defend the idea of collective ownership. But what is really important, in particular for the organizations which followed the path of small minority groups, is to find the means of expressing political ideas which fight to have an influence on the masses. So we translated our socialist ideas into specific proposals, very much linked to the modalities of political life in Portugal.

For example, we recently proposed the socialization of the services of water, energy, etc, and one of our principal campaigns this year centres on the defence, the modernization and the transformation of the national health service. That enables us to concretize our perspective of socialization on the basis of social needs and concrete struggles.

Q. Reading the majority resolution of your June congress, we can see a quite clear difference between the way in which you tackle social questions and environmental questions. On social questions, you put forward defensive demands - refusal of privatizations, defence of a social security system that meets the needs of everyone, etc. -, therefore an anti-liberal programme, compatible with a left Keynesian perspective. On environmental questions, you point out that we cannot answer a problem as serious as climatic disorder without challenging the very logic of capitalism. It seems to me that your approach becomes more radical here, including in the way you choose to formulate things. Is there not here a tension between a minimal social programme, which corresponds to the defence of "possible" objectives – in fact, the term is used on several occasions - and the need to seriously break with capitalism, in particular on ecological questions?

A. On all questions, the only coherent strategy is to break with capitalism. We do not share a left Keynesian perspective, because it is a perspective that is based on the market, a perspective which had a material base in the

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capitalist systems after the Second World War, but which is no longer possible today. We defend on the contrary the idea that the Left, our Left at least, has fight to develop the consciousness and the capacity for action of people, without limiting itself to making propaganda for socialism. Actually, the idea that the only practical alternative is socialism, which cannot be an immediate objective, leads to a perturbation of the thinking of the Left. In order to fight, you have to demand everything, and yet... everything is not possible. We have to break this crazy mirror!

If the central objective of the European bourgeoisies, at least of the Portuguese bourgeoisie, is to suppress part of the indirect wages of workers and to take for itself revenue from taxation, from the socialized part of the state, that forces to us to defend public services as a democratic gain for which we are collectively responsible, and to win the majority of the population to such an objective.

This battle is not defensive! It is the most offensive battle that you can think of, since by putting forward proposals that are specific, and thus possible, people can see that they are applicable. It is what we do in the fields of health and social security. For example, faced with the biggest initiative of this government with a Socialist majority, that is, the reform of social security, we were the only party to present a concrete alternative in terms of methods of financing, the role of taxation or the way services were divided up between the generations. That gave us a very big impact, because everyone could understand that the only argument of the partisans of a liberalization of social security - that it is the only viable alternative - was erroneous. We have to fight clearly for that ground.

Having said that, our congress developed a basic position on the question of the environment that was more programmatic, centred on climatic disturbances, undoubtedly because it was the first time that we had done it. We had to explain why market solutions -the "Al Gore way" - lead to a dead end from the point of view of the transformation of habits of consumption, forms of production, distribution of wealth, North-South relations, etc. That is why we chose a more educational approach.

Q. In the last 20 to 25 years, the cumulative results of neo-liberal policies, the policies of really existing capitalism, have produced a social regression whose effects on class consciousness have been profound. So we can note a general retreat of solidarity to the advantage of "everyone for themselves", which is the expression of the increasing influence of bourgeois ideology... Broad sectors of society are more atomised than ever and are experiencing head-on the material and ideological offensive of capital. This situation favours the multiplication of all sorts of divisions, between those in work and the unemployed, between those who have a permanent job and those in precarious work, between natives of a country and immigrants, old and young, men and women, etc... This general weakening of capacities of resistance marks a qualitative degradation of the relationship of forces. In such a context, to resist durably implies not only organising the social movement around anti-liberal objectives, but also rebuilding it, which supposes the redefinition of a horizon of radical social transformation - what socialism meant for the working-class movement before the Second World War... What do you think about that?

A. It seems to me that the left does not have a very complete answer to this question, because the only possible answer will have to be based on social experience, on the creation of new traditions of struggle. But I believe that there are two elements for a reply. First of all, the capacity for political initiative; secondly, the organization of new social networks, new forms of social intervention. I believe that the key to the strategy of the socialist Left is to take back the initiative and go on the offensive, where it is possible, and to always maintain this orientation. I greatly respect the militants and the tradition of the European radical Left, but I believe that if a party is not able to establish itself as a reference in national political debates, in particular by its capacity for initiative, it will fail. It is absolutely necessary to build this capacity for political action that becomes a reference.

I can give you two examples in our history. The Bloc was formed in 1999, at a moment when, in spite of the rising tide of liberalism, individualism and the privatization of consciousness, Portugal experienced a rather unique

movement of solidarity with the people of Timor, not yet independent and under the military pressure of Indonesia: a nation-wide strike, street demonstrations lasting all day, therefore a mobilization which was not an expression of material interests. How was such a capacity for commitment and initiative possible in an overall defensive climate? The answer is political: certain tensions can make possible important initiatives on concrete themes.

Furthermore, very recently, we won a referendum on abortion with a majority of 60% in favour of one of the most advanced laws in Europe, and that in a very Catholic country, where the weight of the Church on the political world is very strong. That is explained by the capacity for initiative of the supporters of decriminalisation. We were able to divide the centre and the Right, to draw right-wing members of Parliament in behind the movement, and on a key theme: how could we continue to imprison women who have had abortions? That completely changed the terms of reference of the political debate. So it is necessary to be wary of attitudes that are apparently very radical, but which actually lead to a wait-and-see policy, because nothing seems possible. No, many things are possible... on condition that we make choices and create a relationship of forces by taking the initiative where it is possible to take steps forward.

Fundamentally, I believe that you are right. We have to envisage a major reorganization of the social movement in the 21st century. In reality, it will be difficult for the trade unions to organise precarious workers. It is necessary to create other types of networks and social organizations. We have some experiences in this regard. For example, we organised a march for jobs, one year ago, which crisscrossed the country. There were 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. We took this problem very seriously, because there is more or less 10 per cent unemployment in Portugal. And the workers do not see an alternative, because it is difficult. However, in some cases, we obtained significant gains. Militants of the Left Bloc are in the leadership of the workers' commission of one of the most important factories in the country, Volkswagen, in the south of Lisbon, which employs several thousand workers. There, the workers agreed to give up wage increases so that several hundred precarious workers in the factory could be given permanent contracts. That reinforced confidence in solutions of solidarity, and this in an extremely defensive context.

Q. At the end of the 20th century, the global justice movement represented an element of rupture in the field of ideas. So we saw the appearance of a new form of internationalism. Nevertheless, the difficulty that this movement has had in engaging in large-scale social mobilizations also shows some of its limits. Your congress document highlights two European examples – the mobilizations of youth against the CPE in France and of Greek students against the Bologna reforms - which would not have been conceivable without the precedent of the global justice movement. But such examples remain limited. Without large-scale social mobilizations, don't you see a danger that the global justice movement goes round in circles, and that its demonstrations and forums become rituals, without liberating the capacities of social initiative that are essential to a counter-offensive?

A. This danger exists. But the global justice movement nevertheless had an impressive success by showing itself to be capable of organizing an international movement against the war on the basis of new forms of organization that were very attractive and very productive. It made possible the expression of a mass movement of millions of people, which was a decisive factor in beginning to confront imperialism and war. Having said that, you are right, it encounters a real difficulty in organizing broad social sectors. In Portugal, the global justice movement has been much more important as a laboratory of ideas than as a movement capable of organization and initiative.

There were two Portuguese Social Forums, but they were of very modest proportions: the first one was certainly a little less so, thanks to the involvement of the trade-union confederation on a unitary line, but the second was limited to a few hundred people, because of the Communist Party's obsessive desire to control the whole process, which dissuaded many social organizations from taking part in it [\[1\]](#)

. This narrow-minded attitude has had an effect on the capacity for autonomous intervention of the global justice

movement in Portugal. Therefore, the social forums, as organized movements, did not have any influence in Portugal.

Q. Although the international anti-war movement was a spectacular consequence of the global justice movement, it was directed above all against US imperialism and George W. Bush's policy of war without end. Didn't it nourish illusions on the peaceful character of the European imperialisms? Your last congress criticized any support for the intervention of European troops – from Portugal as well as other countries - in Afghanistan. What do you think of the turn of the majority of Rifondazione in Italy in favour of the continuation of the military interventions of NATO member states, provided that they have been approved by the UN, in particular in Afghanistan or, in another context, in Lebanon?

A. It is true that the anti-war movement developed against US and British imperialism. Obviously the positions taken by Chirac and Schröder nourished illusions. But I believe that this division of the imperialist front was also the product of the mobilization of public opinion against the war. It is thus also a success to have paralysed the capacity for unification of the various imperialisms around US super-imperialism. That said, there are today obviously important political debates.

In Italy, I believe that Rifondazione is speaking a double language: in the government, it accepts the imperialist intervention in Afghanistan, whereas in the European Left Party, it approves resolutions in favour of the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan. And this double language is also found in Italy: you cannot take part in a demonstration against the extension of an American base then, a few days afterwards, vote in favour of the same project. People understand that there is a contradiction and that has created a problem between Rifondazione and the anti-war movement.

And yet, the role of Rifondazione was very important at the head of the anti-war movement, and that was one of its strong points in 2003-2004. There is a deficit here which is leading to a very dangerous situation, because a political party must be very clear about its objectives, in particular on war and peace, which are decisive questions in the life of the people. The best tradition of the socialist movement is clear on this subject, from Jaurès to Rosa Luxemburg. There is no such thing as a left-wing policy which is not clear in its opposition to war, militarism and imperialism.

Q. The Left Bloc is a coming together of the anti-liberal socialist Left, but without the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). However, at the European level, the Bloc belongs to the European Left Party, which is dominated by forces coming from the communist movement. How do you explain that the PCP has followed a separate path from that of the Bloc, and that your documents make hardly any mention of it?

The Bloc was built in opposition to liberal policies, therefore in opposition to the Socialist Party, but also to the PCP. We represent a third force, alternative by its programme and its capacity for initiative. Our strategic goal is to reconstruct the relationship of forces within the Left and in society as a whole. In Portugal, the Communist Party, as in some other countries, represents a form of organization in the Stalinist tradition, in which it is the party that directs the trade unions, in which there are movements to organize women and young people.

That does not make it possible for trade unions to represent workers in a unitary fashion and restricts their capacity to organize precarious workers, as well as other social layers. The social force of the PCP depends primarily on this type of party control of the trade-union movement. So it was necessary for us to break with this conception, which weakens the popular movement. It was to contribute to rebuilding the capacity for initiative of this movement that the Bloc was organized as a political and social force.

So we have relations of confrontation, of debate, but sometimes also of convergence with the Communist Party, even

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if we defend a clearly alternative vision. The PCP was the party of the Soviet Union throughout its entire history; now, it is the party of the Chinese Communist Party. It is not comparable to the split in the Italian Communist Party which gave rise to Rifondazione Comunista.

As regards the European Left Party, to which we belong, it should be said that the European Communist Parties are divided. The European Left Party has a non-Stalinist conception, a conception of opening out, of being a network, not a Comintern-style conception. The PCP is not part of it. We do not obey the European Left Party.

None of its decisions is binding on us. It is a network of collaboration that depends on the positions of the national parties. The Red-Green Alliance in Denmark and Respect in England are associated with it... The Communist Parties which form part of it have been transformed, a little bit or a lot, while the PCP is trying to develop a parallel network, with parties of the East, the Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban Communist Parties, etc...

Q. The Left bloc has obtained a growing number of elected representatives, in the national Parliament as well as in the municipalities. With 350 municipal councillors, it has nearly 10% of its members in elected assemblies. Does this not pose a problem for you, insofar as the weight of these elected representatives can tend to adapt your political priorities and activities to those of these institutions, to the detriment of the priority needs of the social movement. Not to mention the impact that elective mandates can have in terms of material and symbolic privileges, which are of course extremely reduced. How does the Bloc organize itself to build bulwarks against such dangers?

A. As you know it, since you also have elected representatives in Switzerland, if a party stands for election and that results in it winning seats, it must fill them where it obtained those votes. In bourgeois democracy, every mass party will have elected representatives and political polarization can be expressed through electoral gains, even though defeats and retreats are inevitable.

In Portugal, our elected councillors do not receive wages and take part in municipal meetings only once week in the big cities, and once a month – or even twice a year - in the small towns. They also participate in some commissions. The local councils have very little power: they are forums for political discussion. We also have members elected to municipal executives, which are elected according to proportional representation. They are generally not in the majority, except in a small town of some 30,000 people, close to Lisbon.

It is true that the fact of having these councillors leads to a demand for political answers to local questions. These questions are also important - housing, transport, public services, education, etc. Some of them are directly related to financial and budgetary policy, but also to the organization of society in the whole of the country, which makes it possible to develop an opposition that is better informed on local conditions.

This obliges us to concentrate a lot of effort and a lot of cadres on municipal matters. Indeed we have to do this work while trying to get out from the four walls of the municipal assemblies in order to explain to the population what is involved in the current confrontations. The PCP on the contrary often allies with the Right in order to obtain posts in the municipal executive, because the Socialist Party and the parties that are in power form a dominant bloc.

This explains why the PCP takes part in municipal governments with the Right and the far Right in several large cities, such as Oporto, Sintra and Coimbra. But what is most important is to maintain a national political profile around central campaigns. For example, over the last year, we have concentrated the bulk of our forces on the march for jobs, directly confronting the employers and the government, as we did in the battle for abortion. The Bloc is widely recognized for that!

Q. The Bloc has made it possible to amalgamate quite different political currents. Not only from new forces and the new generations, but also from older traditions – Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, forces coming from minorities in the PCP, etc. Has the progress of the Bloc been made possible by collaboration between these forces?

A. I wouldn't like to generalise. Portuguese conditions are undoubtedly not extendable to other European countries. In France, for example, the LCR is discussing a broad anti-capitalist party. The experience of SolidaritéS in Switzerland is also different. But what is common to many of these experiences and debates on the European Left, is the will to create a political framework that is broader, more offensive, capable of organizing social activists, of representing both a political and social Left.

The path that we have chosen rests basically on the confidence that can be built in the process of constituting a collective leadership on the basis of common political tasks. This confidence has to be tested in the course of our activity, in our successes and our setbacks, going through an apprenticeship of a will to integrate the various trends and to seek consensus and cohesion. If that succeeds, it becomes possible to engage in politics.

There is indeed a great difference between making propaganda, developing ideas, defending a programme, even of a high quality, and being able to transform that into a political weapon by involving broader social sectors in struggle, by mobilizing them. New forces are coming to us because we have convictions, because we make campaigns, because we give examples of battles to be conducted, because we discuss new ways of organizing ourselves on the left. We reach thousands of people by posing centrally the following questions: how can we transform the present relationship of forces? Where should we concentrate our efforts in order to make the enemy retreat?

Q. The post-1968 generation was educated in political organizations that were very homogeneous on the ideological level, where the work of reappropriation of knowledge, theoretical training and development was very important, often to the detriment of the ability to conduct politics within broader frameworks. Having said that, how do you pose the problem of the education of new cadres, who do not develop only through the practice of the movements, but who also acquire tools for analysis and a serious theoretical training?

A. The theoretical debate and the historical knowledge of our generation are an immense asset. Nothing would have been possible without this critical examination of the history of the workers' movement, without this effort to create a living Marxism. I believe that a party of the socialist Left must take up these reflections again and look further into them. We are perhaps fortunate to be continuing this effort within the framework of a capitalism and a working class which have been transformed, while using Marxism for what it is, that is, as a working tool. Our last congress decided to create a centre of education which addresses itself especially to social activists. Its first courses are starting now and deal with the history of the revolutions of the last century - October, the Spanish Civil War, China, Cuba, Vietnam, May 1968, the Portuguese Revolution - in order to think about the strategic questions which they raised. We are also starting to publish a theoretical review.

We are also making an effort to develop new means of communication, since the role played by newspapers, some decades ago, is being supplanted today by interactive means. Thus, our Internet site has developed in a spectacular way, with thousands of visits every day. We publish on it a weekly dossier on political, historical and other questions, which is aimed at a broad audience. We diffuse radio programmes by streaming. Finally, we want to develop audio-visual production – from clips to documentaries – which can be used as a basis for education and discussion, but also in the campaigns of the Bloc. In September, we will hold a study weekend, "Socialism 2007", to discuss strategy and history, trade-union and ecological struggles, but also cultural questions.

Interview by conducted by Jean Batou of the Swiss organisation SolidaritéS.

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[1] The Portuguese Communist Party is faced with a new situation, since the Bloc represents on the electoral level a force that is comparable to it and has a growing social base. In response to this situation, the PCP is developing an extremely sectarian attitude: in its newspaper and its meetings, it ceaselessly attacks the Bloc, although we have always made the choice of reacting in a unitary way, without sectarianism, to avoid this type of confrontation.