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Germany and Portugal

Social democracy punished

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At the centre and south of Europe – in Germany and Portugal – parliamentary elections on September 27, 2009 marked a historic electoral setback for social democracy. In Germany the SPD lost a third of its electorate, or more than 4.5 million votes, in five years, and with 23% of those voting obtained its lowest score since 1949. In Portugal, the PSP of the outgoing prime minister José Sócrates lost a fifth of its electorate, or more than 500,000 votes, and with 35.56% of the votes it no longer has an absolute majority in Parliament. This was its worst result since 1991.

The SPD, after having followed a policy of dismantling of historic social entitlements from 1998 to 2005 and after having committed armed forces to a foreign intervention (Kosovo) in violation of the German Constitution, for which it had already suffered an electoral sanction, in 2005 entered a “grand coalition” government with the CDU-CSU, led by Angela Merkel (CDU). It is paying for it now. According to a poll, voters who had abandoned the SPD at this election chose abstention (1.6 million), preferred the original to the copy by voting for the CDU (620,000), or opted for organisations of the opposition (780,000 voting for Die Linke and 710,000 for the Greens, out of government since 2004).

Having won an absolute majority in Parliament in 2005, the Portuguese PS continued and deepened the policy of anti-social counter-reforms begun by José Manuel Durão Barroso (of the centrist PSD). Faced with crisis, the PS government chose to bail out the bankers instead of establishing a public banking policy. It dismantled the Labour Code to facilitate dismissals and generalised job insecurity, while unemployment has according to official figures gone above 500,000, with nearly half of that number having no unemployment benefit. It has begun the counter reform of teaching and waged an open war against the civil service as no preceding government had dared to do. The socialist electorate massively opted for abstention (which reached a record 39.46% of those registered to vote), but also turned to the left (above all the Left Bloc) and the right (the free market CDS-PP).

Breakthrough of the radical left

The decline of social democracy has carved out an electoral space for the organisations of the radical left, Die Linke (The Left) and Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc, BE).

Die Linke – fruit of the merger of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, originating from the former East German state party) and the Work and Social Justice Electoral Alternative (WASG, founded by social democrats and trade unionists disappointed by the policies of the SPD government as well as by revolutionary left and social movement activists) – made significant progress, obtaining 11.9% and 76 deputies (8.7% and 54 in September 2005). For the first time, it passed the 5% threshold in all the western Länder (federal states), obtaining an average of 8.3% in the former Federal Republic of Germany (and 26.4% in the former East Germany). It centered its campaign on the “reconstitution of the social state”, in particular for the minimum wage at 10 Euros per hour, and for the withdrawal of the German army from Afghanistan. It also registered good scores in the two regional elections on September 27, in the Länder of Brandenburg (ex GDR, 27.2%) and Schleswig-Holstein (former FRG, 6.0 %), after having already broken through at the regional elections of August 30, 2009 (21.3% in Saarland, former FRG, as well as in two Länder of the former GDR: 20.6% in Saxony and 27.4% in Thuringia).

The results for Die Linke reflect elements of social resistance in the face of neoliberal policies and a polarisation to the left of a part of the electorate, the trade union movement and the social movements. The conjuncture of the

economic crisis and the crisis of the traditional parties effectively opens a space on the radical left, but this situation also raises political debates on orientation in Die Linke. The party is divided. Its majority seeks an institutional insertion and, as has already happened in the Berlin Land, would wish to administer the crisis of capitalism in alliance with the SPD. Oskar Lafontaine has not abandoned the idea of governing the Saarland in alliance with the SPD and the Greens. Such alliances would also be arithmetically possible in Thuringia, Brandenburg or Saxony-Anhalt. They would open the way to a veritable integration of Die Linke in governmental politics in Germany, realising the aspirations of those who, nostalgic for the East German party state, find that the quarantine to which they have been subjected has lasted long enough.

Paradoxically the success of Die Linke could thus accelerate the polarisation between old and new left. The anti-capitalist wing is a minority. To face the dangers ahead, they should not only be capable of defending the gains of their party – the demand for Germany's withdrawal from NATO, which remains a barrier to the integration of their party – but also formulating an alternative orientation in the coming struggles.

In Portugal, on the contrary, it is the new radical left, clearly anti-capitalist, which progresses. Emerging from the alliance between three anti-capitalist forces (The Popular Democratic Union, of Maoist origin, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, Portuguese section of the Fourth International, and Política XXI, a current which has broken to the left from the CP) the Bloco de Esquerda recorded a historic success. With 557,091 votes (9.85%), against 364,430 (6.35%) in 2005, it doubled its parliamentary representation (16 deputies). But above all it obtained a real national representation, with deputies not only in Lisbon, Porto and Setubal, but also in Aveiro, Braga, Coimbra, Faro, Leiria and Santarem. It became the fourth biggest party nationally, ahead of the PCP (which, with 446,172 votes – 7.88% – was up by 14,163 votes in relation to 2005 and obtained 15 deputies, up by one). This success should help the Bloco to also improve its results in the local elections which are to take place on October 11.

To the question posed, notably in the last days of the electoral campaign, of possible agreements of parliamentary majority or government, between the Bloco and the Portuguese PS, the response of Francisco Louça has been clear. It can be summed up in three letters – "Nao" (No). This position is an example and a point of support for the whole European anti-capitalist left in the coming political battles.

Evoking the future after the announcement of the results, Francisco Louça, coordinator of the BE, announced three immediate priorities. "The first is social aid for the unemployed to whom José Sócrates (PS prime minister) has withdrawn unemployment benefit. A strong left will be in a better position to fight against job insecurity and for the abrogation of the new Labour Code" he said. The second is to put an end to the current evaluation of teachers. "The PS will cry victory despite the loss of its absolute majority and of many votes. But today Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues (outgoing education minister) has lost her seat. We have stood up for education, we will continue to do so." The third priority of the Bloc is a tax on big fortunes to finance the convergence of pensions with the minimum wage and for the full pension after 40 years of work. With the historic strengthening of the Bloc, "nothing will be as it was before" said Louça. "The BE is an alternative left, a left of combat, which sanctions the arrogance and absolutism of the absolute majority of the PS... we are in the opposition against the new privatisations announced, like that of the airports, in the opposition against the destruction of public services, in the opposition against the destruction of the national health sector" he concluded.

Commenting on these results, Alda Sousa, former BE deputy, writes: "In Parliament, the Bloc and the CP together have 31 deputies, representing 18% of the votes. Never has there been such a result to the left of the PS. In the minority in Parliament, the PS would be obliged to choose to pass the proposals of the left – like those we will present and which stem from our programme and our mandate – or ally with the reactionary right in the form of the PP. The political framework is more polarised. The political and social struggles will grow in the coming months. They can count on the Bloc, which is stronger than ever."

Political instability

If the successes of the radical left are bearers of hope, the governments emerging from these elections will be bourgeois governments, aggressive towards wage earners, whose policies will seek to raise the rate of profit at all costs. The bourgeoisie and its administrators – whether social democrats, like José Sócrates, or Christian Democrats like Angela Merkel – in no way envisage a “Keynesian turn” in their policies. They seek on the contrary to “restore profitability” and in this goal to increase the exploitation of labour. Hence they will only read from the electoral results the fact that, even if their parties suffered losses – the German Christian Democrats lost votes, in particular in Bavaria, like the PSP – they came first this time and can continue to govern. They can count on the small right wing parties which have been revived by a period in opposition – the CDS-PP in Portugal or the FDP in Germany – whose old refrains (“less taxes”, “less state”) appear as the new ideas after years of social democratic governments.

The rising stars of the radical left, in the south and north of Europe, must shine very brightly to remain visible faced with the apparent luminosity of the big dead or dying stars.

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