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IC 2013 discussion

A contribution to the broad parties debate

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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This is a counter report to both the texts from the Bureau [“To continue the debate on broad parties”](#) and from SA [“The debate on broad parties”](#) for the IC meeting in March.

Davies (Socialist Resistance, Britain) – 30th January 2013

Since the last World Congress the building of broad parties, to fill the space to the left of social democracy, has acquired a new urgency – particularly in Europe. This is driven by the severity of the economic crisis, the unresolved crisis of working class representation, and the need for political leadership in the struggle against austerity.

We have seen a dramatic rise in the level of class struggle in Spain and Portugal and of course in Greece - which is its epicentre. We have seen the remarkable rise of Syriza in the June elections in Greece winning 27% of the vote and coming close to defeating the pro-austerity parties and forming an anti-austerity government of the left. The France Front de Gauche, with Melenchon, came fourth in the first round of the presidential election last year with 3,984,822 votes -11.10% of the total vote.

Syriza's role, in particular, both its election results and its role in the mass mobilisations and social movements, have shown the huge possibilities such a party represents in this situation. Syriza provided a political space for the left to organise. It provided a crucial governmental dimension to the struggles in Greece after 19 general strikes and hundreds of mobilisations. It put on the agenda, for the first time for many decades, the possibility of a government of the radical left being elected in Europe. This in turn has raised the question of building more such parties, both to give political leadership against austerity and to build solidarity if a Syriza-led government is elected.

But what is the political character of Syriza? It is not a revolutionary party, of course. And most IC comrades would agree that despite having a very radical programme it is not an anti-capitalist party. The Bureau, to its great credit, produced a statement prior to the June elections supporting Syriza's call for the unity of the Greek left and for a Government of the anti-austerity parties. And it was after its call for a Government of the left (i.e. a credible governmental proposal) that Syriza's support dramatically surged.

Despite all this the text from the Bureau, at this IC, draws the conclusion that the approach adopted by the World Congress (as set out in the Role and Tasks of the FI document) which calls for the building of anti-capitalist parties based on the example of the NPA in France was correct and remains correct. It says: ‘... the experiences of the last ten years make it necessary to maintain the problematic of the last Congress of building broad anti-capitalist parties.’ It elaborates this with the following:

‘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.’

In fact the World Congress text itself is quoted in the Bureau text - in one of the paragraphs in the addendum highlighted in yellow. This goes further, conflating anti-capitalism with and revolutionary organisation, which, in my view, is extremely problematic. It says the following:

‘Revolutionary Marxist militants, nuclei, currents and organisations must pose the problem of the construction of anti-capitalist, revolutionary political formations, with the perspective of establishing a new independent political

representation of the working class...'

It is hard to see this as other than as a description of a revolutionary party, not a broad left formation. Whilst we should be fully in favour of revolutionary recomposition and regroupment we should not conflate it with building a broad party of the left, either on the lines of Syriza or the RGA in Denmark.

I didn't agree with this approach to the building of broad parties when it was taken at the World Congress and I don't agree with it now. Nor do I agree with the Bureau's conclusion regarding the balance sheet of all this. In fact I think that the balance sheet shows the reverse: i.e. that the heavy stress on the anti-capitalist character of such parties (and with scant regard to left parties of a different character) has been a mistake and has led to ambiguities in regard to broad parties of other political characterisations.

At the World Congress I presented a set of amendments from SR to the ["Role and Tasks of the FI" text](#) to the effect that we should build broad parties to the left of social democracy which are of a political character appropriate to the political realities. This might mean an anti-capitalist party but it might not. It might mean building a left reformist party or a left party short of being anti-capitalist in character.

There were three strands to the debate on this at the World Congress:

- The first was the majority position as mentioned above; which not only called for anti-capitalist parties but blurred the distinction between broad parties and the FI and its sections: i.e. it was ambiguous as to whether such parties were seen as a model for a new "broader" international.
- The second position was that of SR, which called for building parties to the left of social democracy with their political character determined by the national political situations – anti-capitalist if possible otherwise radical left, left reformist, or parties based on the unions. This approach saw the emergence of such left-wing parties as important, whatever their precise political character, providing there were open and democratic organisations and useful to the workers movement and the struggle against austerity.
- The third was those (reflected in the SA US text today) who, whilst saying that they are not opposed, in principle, to participation in broad parties, denounce every practical example and use every problem of the past against further involvement in such parties.

I voted against the "Role and Tasks of the FI" text mainly because of the undue stress it placed on building anti-capitalist parties. The implication of this was that left parties of any other political character, left reformist, or radical left, for example, were either problematic or of little consequence. In fact the text had nothing to say about such parties. Even Die Linke, the most important party to emerge to the left of Social Democracy in the period before the Congress, was not mentioned in the text, presumably because it did not fit the script.

This appeared to change to some extent in the Bureau discussion on the text we have today when it was said that: "of course we are in favour of joining Die Linke, but it is not the kind of party we would want to build". But why would not want to build it if to do so would advance the struggle of the workers' movement in Germany? This would make no sense. It is true that it is not the kind of party we would want it to end up being, but that is a different matter altogether. This, however, raises the issue of how we would work inside it and how we would seek to shape it.

The whole approach (of stressing anti-capitalist parties) was and is far too proscriptive. It fails to take into account the political realities in most European countries where the construction of an anti-capitalist party is not at the present

time on the agenda. Broad parties emerge in response to a political reality, or if they don't they won't last very long. The character of such parties is determined by the state of the class struggle, the political conditions at the national level, and the history and shape of the labour movement and of the left in that particular country. We can't determine, in advance, what the character of such parties will be - although we might (hopefully) have a certain influence.

Whether we (as FI sections) join and work inside such a party should be determined by two principal factors. First and most important is whether to do so would advance the struggle of the workers and the oppressed. The second is internal democracy, which is essential if it is to be a party which can have a broad influence in the workers movement - an influence broader than we can have directly as a revolutionary current. If there is no democracy in such a party, or no structure to facilitate it, or if it impossible to form a platform or a tendency around which to organise, there may be little point in joining it - which appears to be the case with the Front de Gauche for example.

Syriza, on the other hand, is an open and democratic party. Other currents which join it get representation on its leading bodies. At the recent Syriza conference the radical anti-capitalist platform of which Kokkino is a part won 25% of the vote. This is not to say that Syriza will not make concessions to the right under the pressures which are being applied to it, particularly if it wins the next election and comes under massive pressure from the right, but it is to say that the way to guard against such retreats is not to denounce it from the outside but to be part of an organised left inside it in order to campaign against such retreats.

Today, in Greece, any policy other than calling for unity around Syriza, and working inside Syriza to build it in the most effective way, is to miss an historic opportunity - which had been the case with the KKE and Antarsya who have stood outside and opposed it in the elections. Syriza, however, remains in the vanguard of the struggle against austerity in Europe and is the party of the radical left most likely to make a governmental breakthrough.

There is also an additional problem with the insistence that such parties must be anti-capitalist. That is that 'anti-capitalist' is very difficult concept to specify. There are many views as to what it is resulting in many ambiguities. Some on the left regard Syriza as anti-capitalist and others don't (I don't by the way). But it is not an easy definition. Syriza's programme (its election manifesto for example) is at least as radical as some broad parties who regard themselves as firmly anti-capitalist - although Syriza has greater diversity. Its programme, for example, appears to be very similar to that of the left of the Left Block.

Syriza, it should be remembered, has refused any kind of coalition arrangement with PASOK and the pro-austerity parties. It was given the opportunity to attempt form a government after the ND failed, but was only prepared to talk to the left anti-austerity parties, and were unable to form a government as a result. This is very different to the Front de Gauche, for example, and a long way to its left.

It is argued that left reformist and radical left parties tend to be unstable formations, likely to bend under pressure. There is much speculation amongst it's opponents as to whether Syriza will collapse under pressure and move to the right, particularly if it forms a government. Some argue that it is preparing for this already.

There is certainly no guarantee against this, of course, and there may be some substance to these fears. But no party can be sure it will stand the test until it is required to stand the test. Being defined as anti-capitalist is no guarantee against bending under pressure, as the Danish comrades can testify. Even defining yourself as revolutionary is not a guarantee against such a development as the Brazilian comrades are aware.

None of these dangers are reasons for abstention from such parties, however. Such parties can play an important (even crucial) role even if they ultimately fail - as was the case with Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. The RC emerged from the PCI as a broad, pluralist party that fused the best of the communist tradition, was rooted in working

class struggles, and with a deep engagement with new social movements - particularly the anti-globalisation movement and the movement against the Iraq war in 2002-03. It was central to a series of mass mobilisations. Then, after the disastrous decision to participate as a minor partner in Romano Prodi's centre-left government of 2006-08, it completely lost its parliamentary representation and split in the most acrimonious way with its fragments collapsing to the right.

So was it a mistake to have joined and helped to build Rifondazione? Absolutely not. What are we supposed to do when forces emerge from a Stalinist past and begin to play a major role in the class struggle? Or even from social democracy? Should we say that they are not left enough and turn our backs on them? Should we say that although they are moving left at the moment we will abstain because they might turn to the right in the future - or they might collapse into a coalition government? None of this would make any sense. We should fight within them to maximise the role they and attempt to keep them in a left direction – which is exactly what the Italian comrades did (to great effect in my view) in Rifondazione.

In fact Rifondazione, and particularly its youth movement (in which our comrades were very influential), played major role in mass mobilisations in Italy at the end of the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s. It was the vanguard of a European wide movement with the highpoint being Genoa. Should we say that this was a negative experience because Fausto Berinotti (who led and popularised the RC) ended up collapsing to the right? No we should not. The legacy of those struggles remained. The question then arises as to what can replace it and how can the gains, which were made, be defended.

None of these experiences, in my view, are reasons for abstaining from such organisations. If there is space to intervene into them on the basis of our own politics and advance the struggle, we should do so. They are, however, very good reasons for ensuring that our sections remain organised in our own right (either as a current or a platform) when they are inside and building such parties. Our sections should always remain organised within such parties. This allows us both to ensure that we maximise our influence on the direction of the party and to act collectively if the broad organisation moves in the wrong direction, collapses under pressure, or goes into a coalition with capitalist parties.

The recent example of how to do this is the Danish comrades in the RGA. When the RGA voted for the budget in Parliament, against opposition which they had mounted, they were able to very effectively separate themselves politically and take independent stance on the issue.

Die Linke - where we have the ISL inside it, the RSB outside – is another example of an important left party which has a democratic structure where it is possible to join and work inside it. Platforms can be formed which can campaign within the party and at its conferences. It is very hard to envisage circumstances where it would be correct to be outside such an organisation.

It was likewise right to be inside the PT in Brazil in its earlier period. Did the comrades remain adequately organised inside it? Clearly not, and a heavy price was paid, but they have now made a very good and critical balance sheet of that period from which we should learn the lessons.

On the SA text

As indicated above I do not support the text from SA. It takes no account of current political realities, particularly in Europe, making no mention Syriza for example. The text is wrong, in my view, on the criterion it sets for joining broad parties. It argues that we should only do so if it advances the construction of a mass revolutionary party (on less). It puts it this way: “The major criterion determining whether revolutionary socialists should participate in, build or

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construct such parties is whether or not it advances the construction of the mass revolutionary socialist party of the Leninist type.'

This is fundamentally wrong in my view. The major criterion is whether joining such an organisation, and our involvement in it, can advance the struggle of the working class and the oppressed. Whether it can start to address the crisis or working class representation. If it is able do such things, and we are involved in it, we will also build our own forces, but that is not the primary consideration.

The text claims to be in favour of building broad parties yet its speaks about them in entirely negative terms and counterposes such parties to revolutionary organisations talking about: 'Vaguely defined anti-capitalism and socialism, including a vague reference to a future break with the state power, are no substitute for disciplined revolutionary socialist parties armed with a program for socialist revolution.'

Of course they are not a substitute for a programme of socialist revolution but if they can play a role in advancing the struggles of the working class they can put us in a better position to argue for and advance such a programme.

The text warns us against electoralism. It says for example: 'These 'useful' parties have more often than not been more electoral/parliamentary in nature than parties aimed at mass mobilizations to exercise working class power in the streets...'

Of course there is always a danger of electoralism, but what is the text referring to. Was Syriza electoralist when it entered the elections last years? Absolutely not. Syriza's election intervention was a crucial part of the mass struggle taking place in Greece at that time. It gave the struggle a political dimension and a governmental vision at a time when multiple general strikes and thousands of demonstration and occupation of workplaces and government buildings had reached something of an impasse.