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Debate

Building broad anti-capitalist parties - a necessary step

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The results of the European elections have re-opened a discussion on the building of the anti-capitalist left in Europe.

One of the first to take up this discussion was Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers Party, the largest and most influential of the groups on the British far left. Murray Smith, although today living in France and active in the LCR, was for a number of years a leading member of the Scottish Socialist Party (a new anti-capitalist party which has made a significant breakthrough in Scotland), and Alan Thornett, leading member of the International Socialist Group (British section of the Fourth International) and member of the leadership of Respect - The Unity Coalition, have also contributed. These contributions can all be consulted elsewhere on the International Viewpoint website:

[The European Radical Left Tested Electorally](#) - Alex Callinicos

[The European elections and the anti-capitalist left](#) - Murray Smith

[A reply to Alex Callinicos](#) - Alan Thornett

Political situation, anti-capitalist party and revolutionary party in Europe

The articles by Alex Callinicos and Murray Smith open a necessary discussion on the problems of orientation and construction in Europe. Unlike Callinicos, we do not start from the existence of so-called models: electoral coalitions of the "Respect" type, broad parties like the Scottish Socialist Party or electoral alliances like LCR-LO. These forms of political intervention or organization are too much the specific product of the history of the class struggles and the revolutionary movement of each country. They are not generalizable. We choose rather to start from the broad features of the political situation in Europe and clarify certain important questions of orientation.

Political effects of bourgeois attacks

1 The situation in Europe is marked by the brutality of the new offensive around neoliberal counter-reforms: the reduction of unemployment benefit and demolition of social security in Germany; pensions and social security reform and new privatizations in France; attacks on pensions, the health system and social security in Holland. After the "Thatcherism" of the 1980s in Britain, a new wave of deconstruction of the social relationships established after 1945 is underway. This radicalism of the capitalist attacks results from a sharpening of inter-imperialist competition in the framework of the current phase of globalization, with the European bourgeoisies seeking to carve out new margins of manoeuvre in relation to the USA and the Asian powers.

2 The brutality of these attacks creates new social and political tensions. This provokes social resistance through strikes, struggles and demonstrations (demonstrations in Germany against the Hartz 4 plan, strikes and demonstrations in France against pensions reform and the privatization of EDF, demonstrations and strikes in

Holland) as well as a rejection of the ultra neoliberal policy of the governments: rejection of the neoliberal right in France and Italy but also of Schröder's SPD-Green government or Blair's government.

3 The brutality of these attacks also generates elements of political crisis: a crisis of political representation with the confirmation of high abstention rates in most countries, and a weakening of all the political apparatuses on the right and the left - how can a governmental party establish a social basis while endorsing neoliberal restructuring? This weakening is accompanied by internal divisions, here again on both right and left. In France, the majority party is riven by a confrontation between the president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac and the future president of the party, Nicolas Sarkozy. On the left, although the general evolution of the majority sectors of the trade union movement and the institutional left in Europe is to the right, in a growing integration with social liberalism, fractures and divisions are emerging. In Germany a part of the union bureaucracy and the SPD, in the image of the posture of Oscar Lafontaine, opposes Schröder. In France, against all expectations, Laurent Fabius - one of those who incarnate social-liberalism - is calling for a "no" in the referendum on the European Constitution. The steamroller is such that it leads to fractures and sharp turns.

4 These evolutions repose the question of the analysis of social democracy and the left in general. Contrary to what is often presented by the British SWP, we do not think that the Socialist Parties have become bourgeois parties [rather than bourgeois workers' parties - tr note]. That has never been our analysis. In the same way, if we have underestimated the fact that the popular electorate can use the left to beat the right - but we were not the only ones, the most surprised being the socialists themselves - we explained in the documents of our last congress that in the framework of alternation, the socialist parties could win an electoral majority. What we have explained and what we maintain is that under the pressures of neoliberal capitalist globalization, social democracy has undergone a process of "social-liberalization", with a rightwards shift in its politics and an advanced social interpenetration of its leadership with the highest levels of administration and the capitalist summits. We have noted that this process leads - in an uneven fashion - to the delinking of significant sectors of the popular classes from the organizations of the traditional left. In practice the improved electoral standing of the PS, or the stabilization of the PCF's electoral score, are not reflected in the growth of these parties, nor by a dynamic of reconstruction of the left. The electoral gains of the PS in 2003 are not reflected in a dynamic comparable to that of the 1970s with the Union of the Left or the developments of the Italian or Spanish CPs.

5 But all these struggles, all these confrontations, have until now ended in setbacks or social defeats. Neither the strength of the anti-war movement nor the dynamic of the movement for global justice has reversed the deep underlying tendencies of the situation. As a result, the capitalist offensive is deepening and, globally, the positions of the traditional workers' movement are pushed back. This has effects on the level of consciousness of broad sectors but it is not strong enough to outflank the trade union apparatuses, which accept the neoliberal framework. These defeats have effects on the morale of wage earners; and although, in certain historic circumstances, the experience and lessons of partial defeats have led to the development of workers' organizations, the social movements and the growth of class struggle currents, this is not the case today. The successive waves of struggles, but also setbacks, weigh on the radical currents. As Alex Callinicos puts it, "the relation of social and political struggles with the electoral process is extremely complex, combined and indirect" but it is this combination of factors that explains for example, the setback for the LCR-LO lists in France. As for the electoral results of the PRC in Italy, which have improved, we cannot consider them as those of a radical left organization "strictly speaking". In many aspects, it can be placed on the radical left but its implantation as well as its electoral influence smack above all of a segment of the traditional communist movement.

Anti-capitalist politics

6 In these conditions what are the key elements of an anti-capitalist political orientation? First, because

revolutionaries “have no interests distinct from the working class”, they must reaffirm a policy of unity and class independence. That requires a tactic of a united front of the workers and all their organizations - which we carry out through social mobilizations, of the anti-war movement or the movement for global justice, combined with the defence of an anti-capitalist programme. We would like to use this article to reject all the accusations that have been made against the LCR, claiming that we have been “external” to the movement of rejection of the right. Our stand against the government and the right - unity of action of all the social, trade union and political left - was first concretized in the struggles. This orientation was then translated into the electoral campaign, presenting our action as that of the real opposition against the government and the right. We did not, it is true, call for a vote for the left in the second round. This question is a question of electoral tactics, linked to the French particularities of the majority ballot over two rounds, so this is not the last word of a united front policy. We unceasingly, throughout the whole electoral campaign, made proposals for common action to the whole left. Our arguments differentiated between right and left. We have never had so much influence on the internal debates on the left. That is why, for any observer of French political life, the accusation of “anti-politics” does not stand. Since the presidential campaign of 2002, with Olivier Besancenot, we have never done so much “politics”. But we did not call for a vote for the left, judging that, during these elections, to call for such a vote was to give a blank cheque to the SP leaders. Moreover, even if the majority of our voters did vote in the second round for the left, few people have reproached us for our failure to call for a vote. For beyond the vote for the left, there is not the same type of relationship between the wage earners and the traditional left as existed in the 1930s or 1970s. A vote for the SP - or even for the French CP - is more a vote against the right than a vote of support for the policy of the SP. Once again, there are not, as in the 1930s or 1970s, interconnected relations between struggles, the organic growth of the reformist organizations and a political outcome to the struggles which would be a PS-PC government. The meaning of the call for a vote is not the same today as in the 1970s because the labour movement does not have the same relations with the reformist leaderships.

7 This tactic of the united front should be accompanied by the defence of an anticapitalist programme, what we have called in France an emergency social and democratic plan in the service of the workers. From this viewpoint, we would like to stipulate that our electoral campaigns, contrary to what Alex Callinicos has said, are not “openly revolutionary socialist”, in the sense that our electoral programmes take up the totality of the revolutionary programme. No, we choose some key themes of the transitional programme - the struggle for a ban on collective layoffs, wage increases, the defence of public services and democratic rights - and we explain that these immediate and anti-capitalist demands can only be satisfied by social mobilization and a government which breaks with the bourgeoisie, a workers' government.

This government is defined by the tasks it must accomplish to satisfy the main popular demands and to begin to break with the capitalist institutions.

This formula remains “algebraic” - it can moreover go under a number of names: anti-capitalist government, a government as loyal to the workers as the right is to the bosses and so on. - but it allows us to make a distinction from all the governmental policies of management of the state and the capitalist economy. It is not a question of avoiding the question of power, as Holloway or others suggest we should do. The revolutionary left must face the question of power and of government but by giving its own responses, not by entering class collaborationist governments. Of course, the topicality of a discussion on this question depends on the political situation in each country, but it is decisive to define a general orientation on this question of power. Thus, there should be some flexibility in forming electoral alliances, but there where these alliances are confronted with the governmental question, we cannot skirt the question... under the threat of paralysis or break up of the coalitions that we set up. The building of an anti-capitalist party, as a medium and long-term project, should clarify its positions on the governmental questions. This debate is a debate on the entire international radical left: should we participate in or support governments dominated by social-liberalism? The response of the PT in Brazil with Lula, that of the PRC in Italy, that of the CPs of the European left is positive. These parties lead or prepare to support or participate in this type of government. We think, as the whole of historical experience teaches us, that this is a grave error. This type of participation subordinates the workers' movement to the interests of the dominant classes. It holds back the dynamic of mass mobilization. It provokes disillusionment and demoralization. It is this that underpins our opposition to the

politics of class conciliation.

Towards a new party - how?

8 The united front and the anti-capitalist programme are the two fundamental pillars of the construction of a new anti-capitalist force. But this perspective is, more fundamentally, a coordinate of the new historical period. From 1992 onwards, the LCR indicated that its activity took place in the following triptych: “new epoch, new programme, new party”. The crisis of neoliberal policies, the social resistance and the evolution of social democracy and the decline of Stalinism freed up a space for a new political force, for a refoundation of the workers' movement. That means that the politics of revolutionary organizations should define, at each stage, initiatives to advance along this road. That presupposes firstly defining the content of a new party. It should include, to a good extent, the essential elements of the transitional programme, combining immediate demands, demands for an anti-capitalist transformation of society and a perspective of power linking the necessity of a workers' government and democratic socialism. It should be clear that an anti-capitalist party rejects support for or participation in governments of management of the established order. This party has, then, a “class struggle” strategic and programmatic delimitation but these latter are not completed in the sense that they do not precise a priori the modalities of revolutionary conquest of power, and leave a series of programmatic questions open. In fact many programmatic definitions will be made on the basis of experience, but the foundations of this new party should be solid. In the same way, although the choice between reform and revolution, or different conceptions of the revolution, is not a discriminant in building this party - we can work with partisans of a transformation of society by radical reforms - the basis of this party should clarify key questions: class struggle, democracy, refusal to participate in governments of capitalist management, internationalism.

How then, do we advance on the political-organizational level? As indicated by Alex Callinicos, in the current period, it is improbable that a new party will be born in similar conditions to those of the 1920s, resulting either from a fusion of the revolutionary wing and currents originating from social democracy and moving towards revolutionary positions, or from a fusion between the revolutionary Marxist nuclei and entire parts of the socialist or communist parties. New hypotheses should be retained. The axis of a new party will probably be exterior to the old traditional organizations. Its social and political base will rest on the new generations, experiences of struggle and social movements. It will take up the red thread of revolutionary history while expressing above all a revolutionary policy for the 21st century. But this new party will not be established by decree. It should result from a whole process of political experiences marked by events or the convergence of significant forces which create the conditions for a reorganization of the workers' movement and the construction of a new party. In Scotland, it is the specific combination of the social question and the national question which has made possible the emergence of the SSP. In Portugal, it is the convergence of several currents originating in the CP, the UDP (ex-Maoist), the PSR (section of the Fourth International) and independent personalities which has given birth to the Left Bloc. It is decisive that the revolutionaries organize this process on “class struggle” bases, but they can only constitute this new party on the basis of a dynamic that largely goes beyond the current framework of the revolutionary organization. A new party cannot be a self-disguising of the revolutionary organization. The new anti-capitalist force must broadly transcend the revolutionary organization. Without this added value, the new force can only appear as a projection of the revolutionary organization or one of its fronts. In France, while the LCR has for some years taken initiatives for a new political force, it has not proclaimed a new party that would only have been an enlarged LCR, but without its history and without its programmatic bases.

9 This dialectic between revolutionary and new broad party is decisive. The importance of a new political force is indeed the building of a strategic mediation between the current revolutionary organization and the construction of a new mass revolutionary party indispensable to the revolutionary conquest of power by the workers. A mediation linked to an entire historic period where it is necessary to reorganize the workers' movement on a broader basis, and remake a series of experiences on an anti-capitalist basis. This is the practicality of a new political representation for

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the workers. But all this experience of a broad party should be undertaken without forgetting the objective - the socialist revolution - and thus the building of a party which capable of achieving its goals, which presupposes the preparation and education not only of militants but also of sectors of the mass movement. That also supposes preserving, cultivating and strengthening the animation of a revolutionary current inside this broad party. And this pursuit of the construction of a revolutionary leadership through a broad party in unfinished contours can only be done if the new party is much broader, much more extensive than the revolutionary organization. If the conditions of a real transcendence of the revolutionary organization do not exist, if the forms of a new force are less significant than those of the revolutionary organization, and we hurry the rhythms and modalities of construction of such a party, we lose in substance - programme, history, and revolutionary experience - without gaining in political and organizational breadth. Thus, inasmuch as the conditions for a broad party do not exist, the accumulation of forces for a revolutionary leadership in the broad sense is done essentially through the construction of the revolutionary organization and by initiatives favouring the conditions for this new party, rather than by the proclamation of a new force on the cheap.