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What's Behind the Left Bloc's Success?

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV418 - November 2009 -

Publication date: Monday 30 November 2009

Raphie de Santos a supporter of the Fourth International whose mother escaped to Portugal in the 1930s from Franco's Spain, only to seek refuge in Scotland during the 1950s from Salazar's dictatorship, takes a look at the evolution of Portugal's Left Bloc.

Portugal's left Bloc have achieved a major break through in the last five months. They polled nearly 11% and 10% respectively in the recent European and parliamentary legislative elections in June and September of this year. For a party that is firmly established outside of left social democracy this is a major achievement. How did it happen?

Their success is owed to a combination of objective and subjective factors. The objective factors are rooted in Portugal's twentieth century history while the subjective factors are linked to how the Left Bloc was formed and how they operate and engage with people in Portugal. The left in Britain and particularly in England can learn from the development and practice of the Left Bloc as they to seek to make a major breakthrough.

Portugal's Situation

Portugal was ruled by a right wing military dictatorship for over 30 years. The primary resistance to it during this period was the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). The dictatorship was overthrown in 1974 by a military coup organised by the young officers who had been conscripted to fight in imperialist wars in Africa. This coup evolved over a period of eighteen months into a revolutionary movement involving millions of people. They seized land and workers and peoples councils where set up all over Portugal. A situation of dual power developed between this new form of revolutionary democracy and a counter posed capitalist democracy. Only a failed left wing counter military coup finally drove the revolution in the direction of a capitalist democracy.

The PCP despite their role in facilitating the emergence of the new capitalist democracy remained popular and gained up to 20% of the popular vote in a series of elections in the years after the revolution. They also, controlled the major trade union confederation.

At the same time a number of Trotskyist and Maoist and other revolutionary groups emerged from the revolution as a diversity of ideas and solutions exploded during the eighteen month revolutionary period after the 1974 coup. However, they were fragmented and small and lived in the shadow of the large PCP.

The PCP was however very bureaucratic and set out to control all the social movements. They were also, Western Europe's most Stalinist communist party. For example they backed the coup against former Soviet leader Gorbachev.

In addition to these factors Portugal is and remains one of the poorest countries in Western Europe. It also, had/has the influence of a right wing Catholic Church which supported the dictatorship and has had a strong role in forming reactionary social attitudes on women and homosexuality. Finally Portugal because of its colonial past has a multicultural population.

Building the Revolutionary Party

The Revolutionary Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Revolucionário, PSR) the Portuguese section of the Fourth International had in an open and democratic way tried to build a party using the classical methods that we have seen attempted in Britain by several organisations.

The PSR's success was modest – never gaining more than 2% in elections despite them having a "correct programme" which was clearly presented to the Portuguese population and having the "right" line on most of the key issues which arose in Portugal. They turned to other currents on the left in an attempt to create a wider party that could attract the thousands of activists that were involved in the wider political and social campaigns.

The Origins of Left Bloc

The Left Bloc was formed by three currents that had emerged from the revolution. These groups were : the People's Democratic Union (União Democrática Popular, UDP) a pro-Albanian Maoist group (Portugal has a large peasant population);the Revolutionary Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Revolucionário, PSR) the Portuguese section of the Fourth International ; and Politics XXI (Polâtica XXI, PXXI) a group of ex-Communist party thinkers. The Left Bloc's real success was attracting initially hundreds and now thousands of independent activists from the political movements.

Discussions on the formation of the Left Bloc began in mid-1998. The PSR, UDP and Politics XXI took the first steps to reaching a basic political agreement and setting the basis for the new movement, without rushing into a fusion, without dissolving the existing organisations and without requiring unity in all areas of activity.

The presence from the beginning of independents who supported the project was a crucial aspect of the Bloc and gave it a much broader appeal than that of a simple electoral alliance of the three organisations.

At the same time a political and organisational agreement between the organisations committed them to make the Bloc a space for the convergence of positions and practices, not an area for political disputes, thereby enabling rapid progress in building the structures needed for the electoral and political campaigns that followed.

A key to the success of this coming together of the different left tendencies was a desire to build a movement/party that could play a key role in changing society. This meant putting aside all political and personal ambitions. It required a maturity driven by the desire to build a socialist society and accepting that no one party or individual had all the answers. It also, was a realisation that there are many paths to being an activist and militant and these are shaped by each individual's objective and subjective conditions.

The Left Bloc has become increasingly popular of the last ten years, especially among youth, with imaginative campaigns and dynamic proposals, the majority of its support comes from colleges, cities and educated youth or adults from the countryside, gathering both urban educated communities and dynamic labor unions, together with defenders of human rights and women's rights, the rights of immigrants and minorities (they are especially involved in supporting a strongly multicultural society), and also many ecologists. At this point the Bloc is by some seen as an alternative and refreshing "new" left political party to the older and more established Portuguese Communist Party and the centre left Socialist Party. It is a diverse entity formed by people with multiple backgrounds.

The Bloc proposed Portugal's first law on domestic violence, which was passed in parliament through the support of the Portuguese Communist Party and the Socialist Party, and other important laws on civil rights and guarantees, including the protection of citizens from racism, xenophobia and discrimination, gay marriage laws, laws for the

protection of workers, legalisation of drugs and anti-bullfighting laws. They have also campaigned for free legal safe abortion laws, allowing women to decide what they want to do with their bodies.

Hundreds of trade union representatives, at a factory level and at national level, appealed for a vote for the Bloc in September 2009's elections. In Portugal they still have workers' commissions (a remnant of the 1974 revolution) that are directly elected in each workplace. In Portugal's biggest workplace, Ford-Volkswagen in Setubal, the Bloc's supporters are the majority.

As example of the Bloc's innovative campaigning style they created a board game and circulated among young people. If the dice fell on a social problem you had to move back, if it fell on one of the Left Bloc's proposals you could move forward and win. It was a big hit.

Collective Revolving Leadership

The Left Bloc operates a policy of having a revolving collectivist leadership.

This is to avoid a situation where the party depends on one or a few individuals. When the Bloc first had members of the Portuguese parliament it revolved the representatives every 5 months. The National committee of 80 people meets every two months. It is elected in proportion to the voting on the major resolutions at the annual conference.

Women must have minimum of 30-40 percent of all positions in the party. This goes right down to the election to the NC based on support for resolutions

Lessons for Britain

Britain has not in last 35 years lived under military dictatorship or had eighteen months of a revolutionary situation. But its labour movement and to a lesser extent its political movements have been dominated by one party – the Labour Party - like the Communist Party has in Portugal. In both countries there has been disillusionment with this control. In Portugal it was the creation of unified, democratic and open force that has persuaded people to join it and vote for it. This has happened in Britain in Scotland with the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) in the period 1999 to 2003. Sadly the spilt in the party has fragmented the left in Scotland and confused its supporters and electoral base. But the SSP has learnt the lessons at the root of the split and is slowly rebuilding itself as a credible left alternative to the new Labour and the Scottish Nationalist Party.

The SSP shows the potential for attracting independent socialist and activists to a new socialist project if the project has open and democratic a structure and can campaign in a popular way without diluting its politics. That is the task facing socialists in England.

It is time as the left Bloc did in Portugal to put personal and particular party ambitions aside. The most severe capitalist crisis is since the 1930s depression offers socialists a unique opportunity to build anti-capitalist left parties outside of social democracy. History will not look kindly upon us if we fail not for want of trying but because of the petty self interest of individuals and political groups.