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Poland

The elections that didn't take place

- IV Online magazine - 2004 - IV360/1 - Autumn 2004 -

Publication date: Friday 1 October 2004

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If not for the low rate of participation (20.87%), neither the liberals nor the radical right would have been able to hope for the good scores they registered at the European elections. Their triumph only reflects the depth of the social crisis in Poland.

The Citizens Platform (PO), the main neoliberal party in Poland, which is preparing to exercise power, won 24.1% of votes cast which, taking the abstention rate into account, amounts to only 6% of the total electorate!

It was again the low rate of participation which allowed the Union of Liberty (UW), the traditional party of the liberal layers in Poland, swept from the political scene after the right had lost the preceding parliamentary elections, to win seats in the European Parliament with 7.3% of votes cast.

The high score - 15.9% - obtained by the League of Polish Families (LPR), a Catholic fundamentalist organization of the anti-European radical right, is generally considered as the surprise of these elections. But a closer examination reveals that the LPR won 50,000 votes less than at the parliamentary and senatorial elections of autumn 2001. It owes its good result to two phenomena - the high abstention rate and a disciplined electorate which turns out for the polls independently of the political situation. The Catholic fundamentalist radio station "Radio Maryja" ("Radio Mary") serves as its link to this electorate.

The party of the authoritarian right, Law and Justice (PiS) won 12.52% of votes cast. Remember that the PiS mayor of Warsaw banned the Gay Pride event in the city. The main demand of the PiS remains the reintroduction of the death penalty in Poland.

The governmental coalition of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Union of Labour (UP) won 9.3% of votes cast, which has been seen as a success since some polls predicted it would fall below the threshold of 5%. The post-Communists were able to rely on a faithful electorate which once again decided to give them a chance. In this coalition the UP plays the role of a "social democratic left", more open towards the global justice movement or trade union demands, but it is only the vassal of the SLD, incapable of independent activity (the best known politician of the current UP is Adam Gierek, son of the first secretary of the party-state from 1970-1980, who played the role of "electoral locomotive" of the coalition in Silesia).

The good result - 5.3% which allowed it to win 3 seats in the European parliament - of the Social Democracy of Poland (SdPI) was a surprise. It is already the third social democratic party in Poland, formed by a group of former members of the SLD and the UP, without any political programme, united by the will to stay on the political scene and hoping that its co-responsibility for the style and quality of the government led by Leszek Miller will be forgotten. Jozef Pinior, former leader of the clandestine Solidarnosc trade union who had been linked to the radical left is one of the European deputies elected for this party.

Another surprise was the low score obtained by Self-Defence (Samoobrona), a populist formation zigzagging between left and right, which only obtained 10.7% of the vote. While advancing a social rhetoric, Samoobrona sold places on its lists to local entrepreneurs (for example in Silesia the owner of a cheap air flights company was head of the party's list).

None of the parties that tried to occupy the space to the left of the SLD-UP and SdPI generated any surprises. The left populist Polish Labour Party (PPP), created by the "August '80" trade union, won 0.5% of the vote. The

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Democratic Left Party (a split from the SLD) only presented candidates in one constituency and won 0.09% on a national scale. The anti-clerical party "Reason" (Racja), which ran in two constituencies, scored 0.3% while "Greens 2004", which ran in three constituencies, won 0.2% nationally. The lists announced some months ago by the "New Left" of Piotr Ikonowicz (former deputy of the Polish Socialist Party) and the ephemeral "Alliance of the Anti-capitalist Left" never materialized.

At the end of the day, the European elections only served to emphasize the defeat of the campaign in favour of the European Union by the government (post-Communist social democratic) and the liberal parties. Anti-EU attitudes stimulated by the rise in VAT and prices and the multiplication of bureaucratic regulations, are increasingly frequent including among the middle classes. It is also an overall defeat of the Polish political system, for even the big parties were incapable of mobilizing their traditional bases.

The policies of the SLD-UP government, which has capitulated on every front to the demands of the right - challenging the labour code, reducing the benefits of the poorest, involving itself in the war in Iraq, giving in to the Church on abortion - has led to the break up of post-Communist social democracy. But the divisions are not at the level of ideas, but on the question of the flight from responsibilities. The radical left, weak and splintered, has not been capable of occupying the ground abandoned.

The radical left in Poland faces the challenge of showing itself capable of addressing workers, who boycotted these elections to a disproportionate degree. Because if the contests for parliamentary seats in Warsaw and in Brussels are anything to go by, the class struggle continues.

A first in the streets

Despite the media hysteria and the omnipresence of the police, nearly 4,000 people demonstrated in Warsaw on April 29 against the European economic summit. Diverse groups from the movement for global justice and the radical left organized the demonstration, which was also supported by unemployed groups from Walbrzych and Pomerania, trades unionists from the OPZZ (the main trade union federation, led by the SLD) and "Solidarnosc'80" (a split from "Solidarnosc"). This was the biggest demonstration organized by the radical left in Poland.

Strike wave continues

The wave of employees' mobilizations in Poland has not peaked. After the campaign for a boycott of Danone in defence of a factory threatened with closure by this multinational in Jaroslaw, a boycott of Nestlé is planned to defend a similarly threatened factory in Poznan. Several hundred dismissed workers from the building company "Jedynka" in Wroclaw are fighting for reinstatement, supported by the Student Committee for the Defence of Workers. The workers at Unionteks, the biggest clothing manufacturer in Lodz, have set up a workers' cooperative, thus saving some jobs after the defeat of their strike. Workers in public transport in Kozenice have struck against the privatization of their company and rail workers in Kielce have launched a hunger strike against the closure of "secondary" lines.