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Spain

The crisis of the United Left remains open

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At the end of October 2000 the sixth Federal Assembly (congress) of the United Left - Izquierda Unida (IU) - took place. The victory of the list led by Gaspar Llamazares (ex-coordinator general of the IU in Asturias and a member of the leadership of the Communist Party of Spain - PCE) with 42.59% - as opposed to that led by Francisco Frutos (Secretary General of the PCE) with 39.38%, and that headed by Angeles Maestro (ex-deputy and member of the PCE leadership) with 18.02% - allows us to maintain some hope that a new stage in the life of the organisation will help it emerge from its current impasse. But the narrowness of the victory obtained by a very heterogeneous bloc and the particular conditions in which this relative triumph occurred did not give very much margin for optimism concerning the ability of the new leadership to emerge from the crisis of political orientation in which the IU finds itself.

The context in which the preparatory process for this Assembly took place was that of a prolonged crisis, which began during the municipal and autonomous Community elections of 1995, worsened after the coming to power of the rightwing Popular Party (PP) in 1996 and the expulsions [1] from IU in 1997, and deepened with the electoral setbacks of 1999 and March 2000. [2] If we add that with the exception of the campaign for a 35 hour working week the IU has experienced a process of internalisation of its crisis in a general framework of relative social demobilisation (in which the responsibility of the majority trade union leaderships is fundamental) and has continued to zigzag to achieve an agreed programme of government with the PSOE, it is easy to understand why passivity has been the dominant trait of IU members and why the percentage of participation was so low in the debates and election of delegates.

The problem of the replacement of Julio Anguita, Co-ordinator General of the IU, became the main subject of the debates. The basic political debate was thus obscured by polemics concerning the candidatures to this post. Hence the draft Political and Organisational Theses were very little discussed and, except so far as the Basque conflict is concerned, there were no significant political controversies, beyond statutory subjects of secondary importance.

Despite everything, it cannot be denied that the presentation of the three candidatures was a manifestation of the existence of at least three different points of view on the crisis of the organisation and how to resolve it. For the list of Frutos, the electoral defeat of the IU was above all the product of its presence in the pact of Lizarra with the Basque nationalist parties and the lack of homogeneity and centralisation of the organisation. For that of Angeles Maestro, the basic problem has been the conciliatory behaviour, reaffirmed in the course of recent years, towards the trade unions and the PSOE above all, during the pact signed during the last general elections; its list called for the reconstruction of an IU with a more confrontational attitude to these forces, more "Communist", centralized and homogeneous, taking autonomous action initiatives. For the team represented by Llamazares, the crisis was the fruit of the weakening of pluralism and the internal federalism of Izquierda Unida and bad relations with both "old" and "new" social movements. For our part, finally, we insisted on the combination of external (new cycle of right wing government and social demobilisation) and internal (the constants turning by relation to the PSOE and the Basque conflict, the resolution of internal conflicts through intrusions on the autonomy of the federations and the lack of political education in relations with the social movements) causes.

The presentation of the candidature of the Secretary General of the PCE, Francisco Frutos, against Llamazares added a new line of fracture inside the majority to this panorama. For there was, on the one hand, those who were ready to impose the discipline of the PCE inside the IU and on the other those who defended the autonomy of this latter against their own party. The fact that finally Julio Anguita decided to make public his support for the list of Llamazares and his agreement to appear on it as number 2 aggravated this conflict. The choice of Anguita had

contradictory effects: if it won some support for Llamazares' list, doubts appeared as to his will to genuinely break with the recent past. Because of the relative complexity of the processes of differentiation there was a diversity of "sensibilities" in the three candidatures. Thus, Llamazares' list embraced both the sectors who had supported the recent electoral pact with the PSOE and others, like Espacio Alternativo, who had openly criticised this agreement; which seems to us, despite this important divergence, indicative of a will to open a new stage in which respect for pluralism, federalism notably the political autonomy of the Basque federation to develop its own policy and the sovereignty of the IU in relation to the leadership of the PCE, can be guaranteed. To this we should add that during the Assembly, Llamazares stressed the importance of strengthening links with the alternative movements and avoided any defence of the electoral pact with the PSOE.

Among those supporting the candidature of Frutos were significant sectors of the PCE apparatus in Madrid, Andalusia and other regions, firm partisans of the urgency of turning to the right on the Basque question as well as strengthening the image of a "party of government", obsessed with a conception of internal homogeneity which would render still more difficult the presence of currents like ours.

As to Angeles Maestro's list, it embraced both members of the PCE leadership (who might be qualified as nostalgic for "actually existing socialism") and other militants, more radical and anti-Stalinist, but for the most part marked by sectarian traits, which stopped us from having good relations until now. They defended a document which was presented as a political alternative to the official document but in reality was no such thing, except on the trade union question. Although their platform did not contain an explicit critique of the electoral pact with the PSOE, it is perhaps this question that allowed it to capitalise on the discontent of some of the delegates against the two main candidates, who have not made a genuine self-criticism on this subject. The existence of several axes of differentiation also explains why members of the critical sector of the Workers Commissions trade union divided, some supporting the candidature of Llamazares (recognising that the central battle was for the defeat of Frutos) and the others that of Maestro (with a discourse more critical of the trade union leaderships). The small PASOC (Party of Socialist Action) was divided between the candidature of Llamazares (thus according more importance to the confrontation with the PCE leadership) and that of Frutos (giving priority to the anti-Anguita position). Another little party, the Republican Left, remained outside the game, except for one dissident member who finally appeared on Frutos' list.

An important result of this Assembly was, then, the internal fracture of the three founding parties of the IU and, notably, of the majority party, the PCE, whose plurality is finally expressing itself and mixing openly with other components of the IU.

Espacio Alternativo approached this Assembly in difficult conditions. It should be recalled first that, despite the fact that during the 5th Federal Assembly of 1997 EA presented its own list (in alliance with a minority current from Madrid) which gained 9% of the votes, since this date some comrades have left IU (this was the case in Extremadura and La Rioja but also individual members in other federations), even if they remain linked to our network of collectives. This has not stopped our extension to other regions (Murcia, the Baléarics and Castilla y León) and notably among youth, during the student mobilisations of last spring; but we have not been able to capitalise on all this inside the IU with a more significant presence at this Assembly.

EA had around 4% of the delegates, so the problem was posed of how to combine its own political profile with support for one of the candidatures. The first task was accomplished through a political document which, under the title "For a "left of the left" alternative, federalist and pluralist", was published in the Bulletin of Debate which was distributed throughout the organisation and received some support in the form of amendments to the official text. We argued in this document that the IU should recover its political credibility by affirming its willingness to develop a project of a left alternative, clearly differentiated from the social-liberal, social-democrat statist or nationalist type projects. On the basis of this contribution, we abstained on the official theses, shared by Llamazares and Frutos. During the Assembly we also distributed a special number of our publication *Corriente alterna* as well as the manifesto which had been approved by our Second Confederal Meeting last May.

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The most difficult subject to resolve was that of the candidature. Once the presentation of our own list was ruled out, given that it was very difficult to count on the 10% of support necessary, we decided almost unanimously to join the list of Llamazares. The reasons for this were that, despite our political differences with him and the other members of this list, only this candidature offered certain guarantees of the IU's turning outwards in order to improve its relations with the social movements, respecting internal plurality and the federal character and the policy of the Basque organisation. Our final decision was taken during a Confederal Co-ordination a week before the Assembly, although since our second meeting in May we had improved relations with Llamazares and his team (it was precisely at this meeting that the latter had participated at a round table on "The Left Alternative in Europe" with a representative of the Bloco de Esquerda from Portugal, another from the LCR in France and a comrade from Espacio Alternativo)

Finally, among the 32 posts obtained by the winning list at this Assembly (as against 30 for Frutos and 13 for Maestro), we won two of them: one for Concha Denche (until now Federal Secretary of the Environment) and the other for Oscar Matute (a member of the leadership of Esker Batua, the Basque federation). There are still other members of our current who can be elected among the 75 members which correspond to the Federations for the definitive composition of the new Federal Political Council. One of our comrades will also probably be a member of the new Permanent Commission.

Some days before the Federal Assembly, one of the best Spanish experts on Gramsci, Rafael DÃ-az Salazar, published an article in the newspaper El Pais under the headline "The futures of the IU". [3] In his opinion, the main dilemma of this formation is between an alternative eco-socialism and a "Communist refoundation": the first option is associated with a "neo-communist" articulation of the social question and the ecological question around a renewed anti-capitalist project; the second is identified by him with a turning inwards and a reluctance to make a critique of the past which prevents a renewal of the links with the new generations.

The author openly opts for the first alternative and points to the support for such an option represented by collectives like that around the alternative left review Viento Sur. [4] Even if the choices are more complex than would appear from this article, we can certainly agree with him on the necessity of going in the direction he suggests.

For in reality during the Assembly of the IU there was a triple choice: there is now a "post-communist" IU (represented by Llamazares) faced with two variants of "Communist refoundation", one (that of Frutos) which resembles that of Cossutta in Italy, and another (that of Maestro) which oscillates between the Portuguese model of Cunhal and another of the "Castroist" type. One can then say that the winning list was defined more by what it did not wish to repeat (a return to the past under one form or another) than by a clear anti-capitalist project, for the radical eco-socialist influence inside this bloc is still very weak.

The new leadership will find itself facing several challenges. The first and most immediate is that of ending the "internal war". The defeat, for the first time in the history of the IU, of a Secretary General of the PCE by another member of his own leadership announces a new type of relationship and opens a scenario of conflicts inside this party, which moreover should begin to prepare for its Congress, set for December 2001. The new Co-ordinator will probably try to neutralise these tensions inside the IU with a policy of integration of the Frutos sector in the federal leadership, which could have contradictory effects: on the one hand, it could help to "pacify" the IU but, on the other, the price could be to give it too many powers and block the process of "renovation". It is not by chance that one of the responsibilities demanded by the Frutos sector is that of international policy, where recently there has been a return to more "campist" discourses and where relations with the Communist parties of all the regions of the world (including the Chinese and Russian CPs, present at this last Assembly) continue to be privileged. In any case it is clear that debate inside the PCE will be more tense and a rupture may be difficult to avoid in the medium term.

It is necessary to take account also of the profound division which exists in the two biggest federations, those of Andalusia and Madrid, and the danger of fractioning inside the Basque federation (where the PCE, in the minority,

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continues to push towards an increasingly moderate line). Faced with these conflicts the new leadership will try to strengthen the federal character of the IU and ask at the same time for respect for the criteria of plurality and cohesion in public discourse; but its political authority and its ability to resist the combined pressures of Andalusia, Madrid and the leadership of the PCE are still to be proved. To all this should be added another sizeable obstacle: a serious financial crisis, produced not only by the electoral defeat but also bad management over the recent period; developing political initiatives and campaigns with very slender resources and a substantial reduction of the apparatus, will not be easy for a formation which has "forgotten" the necessary education on the need for a solid base of self-financing as guarantee of political survival; there is thus the risk that, through lack of means to finance full timers, the institutional representatives in the Spanish and European parliaments will also concentrate the political responsibilities in the federal leadership.

The second problem is that of demonstrating with short term gestures and initiatives the real will to begin a new phase in relations with the social movements and with the national and nationalist lefts, despite the difficulties. All this is a priority, for dialogue with the PSOE, whose new leadership continues to evolve around the "Third Way", should play a secondary role. Without however abandoning the task of making a balance sheet of the municipal pacts with this party and attempting to revise them by developing objectives which push to the left and help to prepare a counteroffensive against the central government of the PP.

The third and undoubtedly the most important problem is finding the axes and themes of a response to the political and social situation so as to rally all the forces of the IU around objectives of intervention which transcend the internal confrontation. In this framework, there are some proposals that we should develop: a reformulation of the campaign for the 35 hours, a unitary pressure on the trade unions against the "flexibilisation of the labour market" and for social rights in the EU; a firm defence of a dialogue-based solution to the Basque conflict based on the recognition of the right to self-determination; a radical opposition to the penal reforms that the government of the PP is pushing through Parliament under the pretext of the "anti-terrorist struggle", and a reaffirmation of a plurinational federalist project against the neo-Spanish centralism of the PP and sectors of the PSOE and the IU; finally, a clear and practical support to the movements against capitalist "globalisation" and the initiatives which are also beginning to develop in co-ordination with those which exist at the scale of the EU. Around these latter and other activities it may be possible to make new links with a social and cultural left which seems to be taking on a new breath and emerging from the dominant perplexity and resignation. For it is only with the preparation of a renewed social opposition that it will be possible to do better in future electoral confrontations. In any case, it will be on this terrain that Espacio Alternativo will try to work and strengthen itself, as a political organisation working both inside and outside the IU, according to the agreements taken during our meeting in May.

On the Basque conflict there was an amendment from the Basque and Navarre federations to the official document discussed during this Assembly which reaffirmed, among other things, the right of the two communities to decide on "their relations with the rest of the Spanish state, including the possibility of independence", that is the right to self-determination.

This text was accepted inside the delegates' commission where it was debated and finally incorporated into the official document; but, a few days afterwards, the first critical voices among the leaders close to Frutos and Llamazares were heard. It is then probable that this will become the first test of the new leadership's willingness to respect the policy of Eker Batua which, despite ETA's unjustifiable and deadly attacks, continues to defend the right of all Basque citizens to decide on their future.

[1] A little before Izquierda Unida's 5th federal Assembly (held in Madrid on December 5-7th, 1997) the Julio Anguita leadership expelled the New Left current (Democratic Party of the New Left), close to the PSOE, as well as other sectors. Espacio Alternativo although the political opposite of

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this current had then argued that divergences should be resolved with this current in the framework of the debate of the 5th Assembly and not through administrative measures which, in many cases, went beyond the rules defined by the federal statutes. The expulsion of the New Left led the majority of Iniciativa per Catalunya (IU in Catalonia) to leave the IU.

[2] See IV 320, April 2000 and 321, May 2000.

[3] This article appeared on October 26, 2000, on the eve of the IU's Federal Assembly.

[4] The author makes a very positive mention of the "important collectives of intellectuals of magazines like Mientras tanto, Viento Sur or El Viejo Topo"; it should be said that Viento Sur is the review of the collectives linked to the Alternative Left - which works inside Espacio Alternativo - and the Basque organisation Zutik; some members of Espacio Alternativo participate in the editorial boards of Mientras tanto and others collaborate with El Viejo Topo, which does not really have a proper collective.