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Argentina

The angry vote

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October's mid-term elections in Argentina marked a significant turn in one of the deepest crises the country has ever faced. After more than three years of recession, savage cuts in wages and public services, a growing wave of increasingly militant social struggles, and with the prospect of total financial meltdown lurking just around the corner, everyone expected the ruling Alliance parties to take a beating at the polls.

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What wasn't expected - in a country where voting is compulsory - was the huge number of people who refused to cast a positive vote at all. Even more surprising, alongside this 'angry vote' (voto bronca), was the spectacular increase in the scores of several currents on the socialist and Marxist left.

The British socialist newspaper Socialist Outlook asked Ernesto Herrera, leader of the Fourth International's work in Latin America and a member of the International Commission of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in Uruguay, to comment on the results.

"THE so-called 'voto bronca' or spoiled votes, which reached about 30%, show that a large part of the population is fed up with and no longer believes in the whole political system. That includes some layers of the popular movement who have been involved in struggles and who in the last presidential elections voted for the centre-left Alliance government. In these elections the governing Alliance lost 5 million votes. The Peronists lost votes too, even if they won more than the Alliance.

The progress of the left, on the other hand, is the first sign of a real change in popular awareness. The left began to channel the dissatisfaction of the workers, the unemployed, the students, and the impoverished sections of the middle class. So a part of these broke with the Alliance and the Peronists, but refused to vote, while another part voted for the left.

In total the left won 1.3 million votes, which is very significant. At a national level that represents almost 12% of the vote. Within that, Autonomy and Freedom, led by the former Trotskyist MP Luis Zamora, with positions opposed to corruption and to payment of the foreign debt, but with no very clear programme, capitalised on much of the discontent.

The United Left (IU), which is an alliance between the Communist Party and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Movement (MST), also made gains, as did the PO and the MAS, two other Trotskyist currents, and the Humanist Party, which got more than 300,000 votes. In Buenos Aires these parties of the left won 4 or 5 members of parliament. In some other provinces they did the same. So this is a real change in Argentina, because previously the left has not done well in elections, even though the country has seen some of the most intense levels of popular struggle and radicalisation anywhere.

The problem is that these 1.3 million votes don't translate into a unified proposal from the left. They are the sum of different projects, currents, organisations, which don't even have an agreement for joint work in parliament or in the town halls.

Nonetheless this is the biggest vote the left has ever won in Argentina, and means that an important part of the population is rapidly becoming more political. In the past it was the main opposition party that always capitalised on

the crisis - the Alliance when the Peronists were in government, and vice versa.

On the basis of these electoral gains, do you see any chance of overcoming the divisions which have characterised the left in Argentina for so long?

Not in the short term. At the moment there's no sign of a political agreement between the different currents to work together, either inside or outside parliament. What's more the biggest left vote went to Zamora's Autonomy and Freedom, which expresses somewhat 'anti-party' positions, not only against the parties of the right, but against the forms of organisation and engaging in politics adopted by the radical, Marxist left.

So for the time being there doesn't seem to be any possibility of bringing people together in a political front, like the Broad Front in Uruguay or even the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil. This is one of the most dramatic problems now in the Argentinian situation.

In the various mobilisations of Argentinian society all the left currents do play a part. But this fragmentation of the left does aggravate the divisions that already exist in the trade unions. And it has some negative effects in the different social movements, especially when some of the left use these very impressive mobilisations principally as recruiting grounds for their own organisation, rather than concentrating on building united movements.

This has implications for important sectors like the 'picket movement', which brings together the unemployed, trade unionists, neighbourhood committees, human rights activists, regional movements of different ethnic groups, and which has been at the forefront of many of the recent struggles in Argentina.

They are putting forward the idea of a united social movement, with political demands and even a political programme, but not a party-type organisation. It's a bit like what has happened in other parts of Latin America with the Landless Movement in Brazil, with the indigenous movement CONAIE in Ecuador, with the Zapatistas in Mexico, which are social-political movements, but which deeply distrust the political parties.

It's probable that many of the members and supporters of the piqueteros voted for the left organisations. But they don't feel a part of those political movements, and they don't join the organisations, because they see the fragmentation of the left, with no proposals for unity. The most hopeful development was that of the United Left (IU), but the idea was rejected by the other organisations.

Do you see any way out of this impasse?

No, I think the crisis is likely to continue for some time. The neo-liberal project has lost any legitimacy. The ruling classes are not in a position to reassert their hegemony through a coup d'état or anything like that.

But there's simply no credible left alternative like that represented by the PT in Brazil, maybe the Broad Front in Uruguay, or similar alternatives elsewhere. That's the main problem in Argentina today.