

Statement

European election: 'An alarm is ringing' — time 'to build the broadest possible left unity'

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June 14, 2009 — The European election results are not good reading for the workers' movement. Across Europe the turnout was only 43.2% and the main winner was the centre right. Centre-right governments in France, Italy, Germany and Poland all made gains to one degree or another as they did in Austria and Hungary.

On the other hand social-democratic parties, particularly those in government in Britain, Spain and Portugal were in full retreat.

In Britain — where there was toxic mix of economic crisis and political crisis around MPs' expenses corruption — the turnout was even lower at 34.4%, and the results were disastrous for the Labour Party. Its share of the poll collapsed to 15.8%, its worst result for 99 years. It came third after the UK Independence Party (UKIP) — which stood on a dangerous nationalist and anti-migrant ticket — and was beaten by the Tories in Wales.

The implications of this for new Labour can hardly be exaggerated, and it now faces near inevitable defeat at the hands of the Tories in a general election.

In Germany the Social Democratic Party (SPD) vote collapsed to just 21% and the vote for the Socialist Party (SP) in France was also sharply down. In Denmark the vote for the Social Democratic Party went down by 11%.

The surprising aspect of all this is the gains made by centre-right parties which are in government — given that parties in government normally suffer unpopularity in a recession. Particularly since most of them have an approach to the crisis which is even more pro-market, and anti-working class, than the parties of the centre left.

Populist and nationalistic

A key factor behind this is their populist and nationalistic response to the crisis and the way they successfully played the protectionist card, particularly over jobs, whilst stealing the interventionist clothes of the centre left. German Chancellor Angela Merkel pointedly defends German jobs at the expense of others and Sarkozy blames the "Anglo Saxons" for the crisis.

In fact there is a generally nationalistic response to the crisis, which has played into the hands of the right. This includes sections of the workers' movement — [British trade union leader] Derek Simpson is a prime example. He calls for the defence of British jobs and British manufacturing, rather than defending jobs full stop and building a class-based fightback.

The gains made by the centre right go alongside dangerous developments in the vote for far-right and populist parties. In Britain the fascist British National Party (BNP) increased its vote and made a

major breakthrough with two members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The BNP had British jobs for British workers at the centre of their campaign.

This vote is even more dangerous when taken alongside the UKIP vote of 16.5%, which is not fascist of course, but has a range of overlapping features. The English Democrats also nearly doubled its vote (to 1.8%) and its candidate was elected mayor of Doncaster on an anti-gay ticket.

In Holland the far-right Islamophobic party of Geert Wilders won 16.4% of the vote and four MEPs. In Austria, Hungary, Finland and Greece the far-right also made gains.

The collapse of the social-democratic vote opened up a space for a range of forces from the Greens to the radical left in a number of countries. The Greens made gains across Europe in these elections with their representation in the European Parliament rising to nearly 60 MEPs.

The radical left also made important gains — most notably the Left Bloc in Portugal which increased its MEPs from two to three in something of a breakthrough result. The Socialist Party in Ireland won a seat. Die Linke in Germany made further gains. Syriza in Greece won a seat, though this was below its expectation of three. The Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PCR) in Italy won 3.2% of the vote and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France won a solid 4.88% but failed to win a seat.

Greens advance

In Britain the Green party was the biggest left recipient of the votes lost to the main parties, in particular Labour. It increased its vote from 6% to 8.6% (1,303,748 votes), though due to the electoral system this did not add to its two MEPs. The Greens came within a whisker of winning a third seat — and keeping Nick Griffin of the BNP out of the European Parliament at the same time — in the North West, where its candidate, Peter Cranie, a socialist and anti-racist campaigner, was supported by Respect and others for that reason.

Radical left

The dog which hardly barked in Britain was the radical left, which paid the price for years of division.

No2EU received 1%, which five years ago would have been a reasonable result. Respect at that time polled 1.5% (without standing in Scotland). This time, however, with new Labour falling apart, and all the major parties hit by corruption resulting in the biggest transfer of votes ever from the major parties to the small parties, there was a much greater opportunity for the left. From this point of view the No2EU result was not so good, and demonstrated that the radical left was unable to adequately capitalise on the opportunity presented.

This potential was reflected rather more in the Socialist Labour Party's 1.1%. The name itself, despite the moribund nature of the party, the lack of a campaign, and the destructive way it operates, projected it as a socialist alternative to new Labour.

The radical left have to see these elections as a massive wake-up call for reorganisation and unity in advance of the general election. It's clear enough what the agenda of a Tory government will be if it gets a clear mandate. They are already saying it will be a massive austerity program designed to make the working class pay for the crisis and a huge attack on public spending and public services.

Tory agenda

The chances of Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown bringing about a new agenda, which would revive or renew new Labour's fortunes by next year, are remote and the opportunity for the left, which presented itself in the European elections, is likely to continue into the general election despite the first-past-the-post electoral system.

The task now, therefore, is to build the broadest possible unity for the general election. This will not be easy after the events of recent years but it is an imperative of the first order.

Fortunately there have already been several initiatives in this direction [\[1\]](#). Salma Yaqoob has made an appeal for unity as the leader of Respect, and Bob Crow has made an appeal to unite against the BNP.

Very significantly, given recent history, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has also put out an appeal for electoral unity. We strongly welcome this appeal along with its suggestion of a conference of the left to discuss the way forward.

The left has to clear the decks and factional reactions need to be put to one side. What kind of practical unity is possible before the general election will not be clear until discussions begin. But the minimum has to be a common framework for the election even if that cannot be at the present time a common organisation.

The basis for such unity has to be discussed. But it should be based on a plan to defend the working class after the general election. Whoever wins — but especially if David Cameron and the Tories are elected — there will be an unprecedented austerity drive launched. Any new initiative will have to demand that the bankers and the employers pay for the crisis — since they are responsible for it, not the working class.

An election campaign will need to be based on the defence of jobs; the nationalisation of firms declaring redundancies; the full nationalisation of the banks to force them to make credit available. It will need to demand large scale public works to create millions of jobs — especially a massive program of carbon neutral public housing and investment into sustainable development, including in energy and transport.

Time to talk

A new campaign will have to defend public services. It will need to build community campaigns, linked to the trade unions, against rent and council tax rises and evictions and benefit cuts. It will need to defend democratic rights. It will need to defend the rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities against attack. It will need to build joint action against racism, nationalism, and xenophobia, for international solidarity of working people.

Socialist Resistance supporters inside Respect will work for the maximum unity between Respect and any new initiative, which emerges on this basis — though we would fight to ensure that the gains made by Respect over the past five years and carried forward and preserved and not lost in the process.

We therefore urge the SWP leadership to make a direct approach to Respect for discussions about a joint approach to the general election next year. Equally we urge the leaders of No2EU to respond positively to the SWP initiative and enter into discussions.

A common framework with the Green Party is not possible since the political basis does not exist at the moment. But what should be entirely possible is an electoral arrangement to avoid damaging clashes in key constituencies between the Greens and other sections of the left. The Greens have always resisted this in the past but the time has come for a more serious and united approach.

Co-operation of this kind, across the left, must be the minimum target for the general election in 2010.

P.S.

* From Socialist Resistance (Britain):

<http://socialistresistance.org/?p=546>

Footnotes

[1] See [European election: British left discusses urgent need for left unity](#)