

Positive Developments in the European Left

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One of Socialist Voice's editors outlines some recent positive developments in the European left.

LeftViews recently published an article by Alex Callinicos [[1](#)], a central leader of Britain's Socialist Workers Party, on the state of the left in Europe. While conceding that there have been some gains, overall the picture he painted was dire.

Callinicos is an insightful writer on leftwing politics in Europe, and much of his analysis rings true. I'm certainly not going to try to offer a different analysis from my vantage point well west of the Atlantic.

But by itself, his article might leave Socialist Voice readers with a picture of unrelieved gloom, when in fact there are some bright spots of note. In Germany and Portugal, leftwing parties made modest but important gains in last month's elections, while in France and England we're seeing constructive steps towards greater unity on the left.

Germany

Press accounts of the September 27 German elections stressed the collapse of the Social Democratic party (SPD) vote by one-third to 23%, its worst showing since 1953. It is questionable whether the SPD's decline can properly be interpreted as a loss for the "Left," since the SPD's program and conduct in office has been virtually indistinguishable from those of the explicitly neoliberal parties. Much less media attention has been paid to the growth of the vote for Die Linke (The Left) which took 11.9%, 3.2 percentage points more than in the previous election. The party now has 76 members in the Bundestag, up from 54. In most parts of the former East Germany, Die Linke is now the largest party.

Die Linke was founded in 2007 by the merger of the former East German Communist party with a left-wing split-off from the SPD. In this election it called for a 10 euro minimum wage, a wealth tax, and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Portugal

In the Portuguese elections, also held on September 27, the neoliberal Socialist Party held on to power, but its vote fell from 45% in 2005 (which gave it a majority in the legislature) to just over 36%, its the lowest vote since 1991. At the same time, the Left Bloc increased its vote from 6% to nearly 10%, and doubled its representation in the Assembly from 8 to 16 members.

In a 2007 interview, Left Bloc leader Francisco Louça described the party as "a pluralist party of the socialist Left."

"When the Bloc was formed, eight years ago, we made a political choice which I believe is still valid: to create our party on the basis of the political confrontations which define our activity and not on

the basis of a priori ideological cohesion. We thus brought together very different traditions, coming from the Communist Party, Maoist or revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist) currents, as well as people from independent social movements. The possibility of building this regroupment, in a very defensive situation, implied that we were able to formulate political proposals and to have an impact on society. So we started not by discussing a programme of historical reference, but a programme of political intervention.

“We defined ourselves as socialists shortly after our foundation, in a double sense: initially, by rejecting “real socialism” (Stalinism, the experiences of the USSR, Eastern Europe or China), then by identifying ourselves with the anti-capitalist struggle, against the social-democratic experience and its current social-liberal version.

“In this sense, we defend the idea of collective ownership. But what is really important, in particular for the organizations which followed the path of small minority groups, is to find the means of expressing political ideas which fight to have an influence on the masses. So we translated our socialist ideas into specific proposals, very much linked to the modalities of political life in Portugal.

“For example, we recently proposed the socialization of the services of water, energy, etc., and one of our principal campaigns this year centres on the defence, the modernization and the transformation of the national health service. That enables us to concretize our perspective of socialization on the basis of social needs and concrete struggles.” [2]

France

In France, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA – formed in February 2009 on the initiative of the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, which then dissolved itself) recently called on the entire “anti-neoliberal and anticapitalist Left” to begin discussions about joint action in the 2010 regional elections.

A first meeting on September 28 resulted in a joint declaration signed by six groups: the Federation for a Social and Ecological Alternative (FASE), United Left, Alternatives, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), the French Communist Party (PCF), the Communist Party of French Workers (PCOF), and the Left Party (PG). Two other groups, the Social Forum of Popular Neighbourhoods (FSQP) and Workers’ Struggle (LO), attended the meeting as observers.

The declaration says, in part:

“In a situation characterized by a growing attack by the political right and the employers against the broad sweep of social and democratic rights, we issue a call to support and build the broadest and most united mobilizations and struggles possible around a perspective of political and social confrontation with the government and the employers. The ultimate goal is to inflict a defeat on this reactionary power.

“Issues are not lacking – the privatization of the postal service, the proliferation of layoffs, the spread of Sunday work days, the trend toward temporary and part-time work and insecure living conditions, the undermining of the right to education for all, the increase in hospitalization fees, the erosion of public freedoms, and the mass deportations of immigrant workers.

“Many demonstrations and social and political initiatives are taking place as we meet in the early fall. We support them all, such as the proposed referendum on the privatization of the postal service, the demonstration for women’s rights on October 17, the marches for jobs, against job insecurity and layoffs or the initiatives in response to the “climate” summit in Copenhagen. ...

"In the face of an increasingly brutal and savage capitalist system and a government determined to accelerate the pace of its attacks, nothing should stand in the way of the necessary construction of an alternative to the logic of the capitalist and productivist system. On this basis, we must strive to win the majority of workers and citizens to the perspectives opened by a militant political Left. These are our priorities.

"However, given the determination of the Sarkozy government, we are witnessing instead a new shift to the right by the soft Left as it attempts to build a centre-left coalition ... This is a Left that continues to shift to the right and thus risks its own electoral prospects as the unfortunate situation in Italy recently proves.

"In this context, the forces that make up the anti-neoliberal and anticapitalist Left have a duty to do everything possible to defeat the right and offer a different path – a political outlet that could implement a program reflecting the demands of the mass mobilizations in the regions, a regional program that is a real alternative to liberalism and productivism.

"The overall challenge is not only to counter the political onslaught of the right and liberalism and defend the demands of the workers movement, but even more to reverse the balance of forces at the polls and in the struggles. ...

"Together we can help reverse the relationship of forces between the political right, the employers and the popular classes in struggle and at the polling booths." [Translation by Richard Fidler of original text in French [\[3\]](#).]

The delegates agreed to take the statement back to their organizations for discussion, and to meet again on October 7.

England

Callinicos's article is particularly scathing about Britain, where despite "a decade's sustained efforts at socialist regroupment," there is still no united Left electoral alternative to the Conservatives and New Labour. He describes the Respect party led by George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob as "once the most promising product of these efforts," but – perhaps understandably – he is silent about the role of the SWP's 2007 walkout in weakening that group.

Several British groups, including the SWP, have this year called for renewed efforts at left unity, but none of these appeals has yet produced anything resembling a practical result. The failures of previous combinations have left a legacy of distrust that will be difficult to overcome.

So it is encouraging to see the following statement, adopted unanimously on September 30 by the Steering Committee of Green Left [\[4\]](#), the ecosocialist wing of the Green Party of England and Wales:

"Green Left calls upon our fellow Green Party members in Birmingham not to stand a candidate in the constituency of Birmingham Hall Green in the coming general election in order to give a strong, progressive and environmentally aware candidate the chance of taking the seat.

"We believe that Salma Yaqoob of Respect is the candidate most likely to do this and her victory would be a victory for all those opposing the policies of privatisation, war, greed, racism and environmental destruction.

"We believe that this is an opportunity for the progressive movement in Birmingham to unite behind one candidate and not to make the mistakes of the European election, where a divided Left opened

the way to the election of racists and bigots.

“For the benefit of the people of Birmingham and of radical politics in this country we ask the Green Party in Birmingham to stand aside and not to oppose Salma Yaqoob. We are firmly of the belief that this will benefit both the Green and progressive movements in this country and send out a signal that we are serious in challenging the neo-liberal economic policies of the three main parties as well as Fascism and racism.”

In my experience (in politics and elsewhere), the best way to get disparate groups to unite is often to identify a specific project and “just do it.” By unilaterally declaring its support for Respect in Birmingham, Green Left is setting an example that could well do much more to advance the cause of united Left action than any attempt to resolve all political disagreements in advance. It’s a small step forward, but it definitely bears watching.

a LeftViews article by Ian Angus

P.S.

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LeftViews is Socialist Voice’s forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion.

Footnotes

[1] See: [Political Crisis, Economic Crisis: Challenges for the Radical Left](#)

[2] See: [Portugal: Where is the Left Bloc going?](#)

[3] See: [Déclaration unitaire FASE, GU, Alternatifs, NPA, PCF, PCOF, PG](#)

[4] <http://greenleftblog.blogspot.com/>