

European Elections: A Europe adrift and an earthquake in France!

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It was a genuine historic shock for Europe and a huge thunderclap in France with the victory of the Front national. The results of the elections confirm the terrible political crisis which is striking Europe. There is a shock wave whose political effects cannot yet be measured. For sure, we should avoid a France-centred reading of electoral results affecting 28 states: according to the political situation in each country, the relationship of forces can vary here and there, but broad trends are nonetheless discernible on the basis of crisis and degradation of the relationship of forces for the worker's movement: massive abstention, rise of the far right, setbacks for the traditional right, considerable weakening of social democracy, maintenance of the radical left with the rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

1. A massive abstention

This is a major trend in all the electoral consultations, in particular the European elections, and the party of abstention remains the biggest party in Europe (with an abstention rate of 57%). These elections confirm the massive rejection of the EU by the popular classes. Since the beginning, the peoples have been left out of the European construction reserved to the dominant classes, to the governments and the technocratic elites, but today the conjuncture of this type of construction and austerity policies which strangle the peoples leads to a massive rejection. This reveals the formidable crisis of political representation which affects nearly all the countries of Europe and opens a phase of sharp political crisis, not only in the European institutions, but in intra-European relations.

Abstention was particularly strong in the popular neighbourhoods, understandably when the European Union promoted by the governments signifies for millions of human beings more austerity, unemployment and poverty. In many cases this abstention boosts the scores of the populist or neo-fascist parties.

2. The rise of far right, populist and neo-fascist parties

The most significant demonstration of this upsurge is the first place achieved by the Front national in the French elections. It is an unprecedented shock. The “French exception” has often been spoken of in European history to evoke popular revolutions and struggles. Once again, there is a certain exception, but this time against the popular movements.

The Front national is rooting itself in French society. According to the polls the FN list attracted 43% of workers who voted, 38% of employees, 37% of the unemployed. The PS lists have attracted 8% of workers, 16% of employees and 14% of the unemployed. One young person in three voted Front national!

The rise of the far right or the “Europhobe parties” submerges the whole continent, but there is a “French exception”, in the size of the FN results, but also because here is a breakthrough of the far right provoked by a very sharp political crisis. First because France is with Germany one of the two key powers of the European Union. Then because the rise of the FN is accompanied in France by a fall of all the other political formations. The traditional right is collapsing under corruption scandals. It is also undergoing an open crisis of leadership. Who can say what will happen to the UMP – the main party of the traditional right – in the coming months? The left, all tendencies combined, is at a low point in scoring barely 34% of votes expressed. We have passed from a bipolar situation to a tri-polar or tripartite one with the right, the PS and the FN.

But the progress of far right or populist formations is not confined to France: the People’s Party in Denmark won 27% of the vote, UKIP in Britain came first with 27% of votes cast, the Austrian FPÖ scored more than 20%, without counting the “anti-Europe” parties – as in Germany, Poland or Sweden – which were strengthened. Finally we should note the overtly fascist organisations like Golden Dawn in Greece which won nearly 10%, or Jobbik in Hungary who beat the social democrats with nearly 15%, who will also mark the political scene in their countries.

It is then a basic political trend, even if there were other scenarios. In Holland, there was a fall in the vote for the Islamophobic party led by Wilders which should be related to the economic upturn in the country, in Finland the “True Finns” fell back in relation to the 2011 parliamentary elections, in Flanders the far right Vlaams Belang saw their vote fall, albeit to the benefit of the Neo-Flemish Alliance, pro-independence and conservative.

In Spain and Portugal, neo-fascist formations are non-existent which is explained by the deep popular rejection of the police state dictatorship after decades of Francoism and Salazarism. We note however the presence of an extreme right in Rajoy’s Popular Party which, with the pressure of the Catholic hierarchy, explains the proposed law restricting abortion rights.

This general upsurge results from the rise of nationalism in a situation of economic crisis and historic weakening of the workers’ movement. Social identity weakens in relation to national identity, class conflict gives way to the “ethnicisation” of social relations, racism infects mass sectors of the popular classes – “it is easier to attack an immigrant than a banker”. This isn’t the first time in the history of Europe that we have been faced with the rise of the extreme right. In the 1930s, the imperatives of a crisis which demanded the super-exploitation of labour to ensure the profits of the big capitalist groups and the need to contain the revolutionary upheavals linked to the propulsive force of the Russian revolution led the dominant classes to the fascist option.

Another indication of the tensions on the continent: the Ukrainian crisis and the possible national dislocations in central Europe could even bring to mind the nationalist confrontations prior to the war of 1914-18. Of course, the situations are not comparable and when we speak of the 1930s, we

can today evoke the “1930s in slow motion”, but it should be added that the configuration of the world, the classes and the relationship of forces are not really the same. Unlike these historic periods marked by the nationalist options of the European bourgeoisies, the dominant classes today choose clearly integration into capitalist globalisation. There are no revolutionary threats imposing fascist solutions on the dominant classes, with violent destruction of the workers’ movement and democratic liberties.

The specificity of the current situation over-determines a certain configuration on the forces of the far right depend. There is a whole variety of organisations. Some are completely integrated into the parliamentary game and have broken with their fascist moorings, like the National Alliance in Italy. Others are openly pro-fascist or even neo-Nazi, like Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary. In northern Europe, these formations specialise in populism and anti-immigrant and Islamophobic hysteria. In France, the Front national combines “leadership” and the “neo-fascist matrix” with objectives of integration into the traditional political game which can create tensions and differentiations. Certainly the FN has evolved, both in terms of some of its themes and its leaders: this is no longer the fascist organisation of the 1980s, but this evolution has not involved a rupture with the neo-fascist origins and matrix, which means that on the one hand the FN is “de-demonised”, but on the other includes openly fascist currents inside it or at its margins. The FN’s rise provokes a double phenomenon: a pressure on the traditional right and space for extra-parliamentary fascist groups who attack the activists of all left forces.

We should also group in this category of “populists” the so-called “Europhobe” formations like UKIP in Britain, the German AfD, or the “Law and Justice” party in Poland. Across this nationalist and populist spectrum, there are sectors, fascist segments which in certain circumstances of sharpening of social and political conflict can go on the offensive against immigrants and democratic organisations. The situation in Greece, with the development of Golden Dawn illustrates well the role of these gangs against the left and immigrants.

In another register, because the 5-Star Movement does not originate from the far right, Beppe Grillo obtained, as a formation openly identifying with populism, nearly 25.5%, which expresses the continuation of Italy’s political and institutional crisis. He beat the right wing party Forza Italia, but first place was taken by the Italian Democratic Party. The eclecticism of its positions – the rejection of EU austerity policies, but also anti-immigrant positions – like its functioning shows that it cannot constitute the elements of a political alternative, while contributing to the Italian crisis.

The political result is that, whereas the dominant classes need in power parties or coalitions of stable parties seeking integration in the world economy – the parties of the parliamentary traditional right or social democracy – they have to deal with a profound political destabilization marked by the upsurge of nationalist, populist or neo-fascist parties. What would, for example, be the consequences of the rise of the UKIP in Britain if the referendum on European membership led the UK to exit the EU? What would the EU be without the UK? Would this not be the beginning of a dissolution?

The “well understood” interests of the bourgeoisie do not incline to fascism, but the multiple crises with which it is confronted lead it to orient increasingly towards authoritarian solutions. The dominant classes have other possible options than fascism to “regiment” the wage earners, youths and popular classes. The European institutions are anti-democratic; those of parliamentary democracy at the national level are emptied of their substance. The various interventions of the Troika in the south of Europe have shown how the national parliaments have been sidelined. These authoritarian solutions can lead to coalitions of the right and extreme right.

This long phase of economic, social and political decomposition of European societies, the historic crisis of representation and political leadership, the worrying weakening of the workers’ movement,

the specific crisis of Europe, can now lead to unforeseen situations, sharp turns, accidents which propel the extreme right to the portals of power.

3. The traditional right

It suffered a reverse, but it has confirmed its majority in the European Parliament with 213 deputies against 190 for the European Socialist Party. In alliance with liberal and centrist forces, it will control the next Parliament.

German Christian Democracy continues to hold the political leadership of the European right. It inspires the policies and governments of national unity with the social liberal left in several countries. In numerous countries there are now coalitions between the right, centre and neoliberal left: Germany, Holland, Austria, Ireland, Greece, Italy, Belgium and Finland. It remains the axis of domination of the dominant classes in many countries.

But beyond these results, the traditional parliamentary right is weakened and fragmented. First on the question of Europe itself, between the forces who wish for optimum integration in the EU and the so-called "Eurosceptic" forces. In a number of countries it is under pressure from the extreme right.

The Christian Democratic, popular right, various centrist parties often top the polls, but the crisis saps the social, political and electoral bases of the traditional parties. These parties are no longer anything more than electoral machines. Faced with the pressure of the extreme right and nationalism, the right radicalizes and fragments: it radicalizes under the influence of the far right parties, notably on questions of immigration, which leads to internal differentiations; it fragments between a "hard right" and sectors which seek to ally with the centre, attracted by social democracy. Finally in France again the UMP leadership is tormented by corruption scandals which could lastingly weaken it, to the benefit once again of the Front national.

4. Social democracy

It has fallen back. It will not have the majority in the European Parliament. It took a walloping in France. Rarely in history has a French president had such narrow electoral support: less than 15%. It suffers defeat after defeat in all electoral consultations. It holds on only thanks to the presidentialist institutions of the Fifth Republic.

But more substantially, these elections illustrate the structural changes of social democracy in Europe. The current crisis has accelerated its adhesion to neo-liberal policies and the electoral campaign of Martin Schultz, supposedly "against austerity", has not camouflaged this reality. In a situation of domination of finance capital, social democracy, still concerned to respect capitalist equilibriums, has had to reject classic Keynesian recipes. The convergence of the policies of governments of the right and neoliberal left is manifest in the eyes of millions of workers.

In France the Bonapartist institutions of the Fifth Republic prevent the constitution of a government of national unity between right and left. But it is by an agreement between the government and the French employers, through a "pact of responsibility", that an ersatz policy of national unity is practiced. Faced with the crisis the essence of the forces of the right and social democracy converge to manage the crisis, in the context of the EU, respecting the interests of the financial markets and multinationals.

But beyond this sequence of crisis, the bases of social democracy are challenged. If the PS still

maintains historic and politic links with the social democracy of other times, their social liberal mutation is on the verge of completion. The PS becomes the equivalent of the US Democratic Party, an instrument of bourgeois alternation. In this process, what remains of “social democratic origins” is en route to disappearance. Certainly the pillar of European social democracy, the German SPD, maintains its position, but it is subordinated to the CDU in the Grand coalition. Far from resulting from the choice of grand coalition alone, the SPD maintains its positions through the economic situation of Germany and its leadership in Europe. Where the parties have directly administered austerity policies they have experienced a process of collapse, like Pasok in Greece.

In France, the PS, led by Hollande and Valls, has suffered a crushing blow and there is a cumulative dynamic of defeats which can lead to a crash in the coming months or during the next presidential election in 2017. In Italy, to general surprise Renzi and his Democratic Party obtained more than 40% of votes cast. It has contained the rise of the 5 Star Movement of Beppe Grillo. Can these results be attributed to the capacities of initiative of the Italian Prime Minister and certain measures like tax cuts? It's too soon to say, but these European elections have strengthened a Democratic Party which no longer has anything to do with Communism or socialism in the social democratic sense, but is a bourgeois party like the others.

In Spain the PSOE fell back overall, its vote falling from 6 million in 2009 to 3.5 million. In Portugal, after years of exercise of power and a net decline, being in opposition has restored the PS electoral health, but in limited proportions.

This crisis of social democracy has produced internal differentiations, but few fractures or ruptures. In recent years, only the currents around Oskar Lafontaine in Germany or Mélenchon in France have taken the step of forming their own party. In general, the pressure is such that voices are raised here and there against this or that measure of socialist governments which practice austerity. There can even be changes in the leadership personnel, but no more than that. All tendencies assume the social liberal adaptation. At this stage, unlike other historic situations, the crisis has not crystallised genuine left currents inside the PS. On the other hand if there has been the collapse of Pasok, the other socialist parties decline but do not collapse. They can even bounce back in opposition against a discredited right. It will be necessary to follow what happens in the coming months in the PS in France, because the pursuit of austerity policies could take it into freefall.

5. The Greens

They confirm the reality of political ecology in Europe. They elected fifty deputies and scored around 10% in a series of countries like France, Austria or Germany. The systemic dimensions of the current crisis, the ecological crisis, the danger of nuclear power strengthen the Green currents politically. The Greens rely on an impressive network of associations and an ever greater integration in the institutional game which has led them to participation or support for coalitions dominated by social democracy. Among certain sectors of youth, the higher layers of wage earners or the petty bourgeoisie, the Green parties remain among “the most European parties” which gives them a social and electoral base. We should however note the volatile character of this electorate: in France, the Greens have lost more than 6% since 2009, after the withdrawal of Daniel Cohn-Bendit from the European electoral scene.

6. The radical left

It maintained its positions, with confirmations and breakthroughs in Greece, Spain and Belgium.

Syriza scored more than 26%. It is confirmed as an alternative government to the coalition of New Democracy and Pasok. Resting on mobilisations and networks of social solidarity throughout the country, it appears as the main political force of the country. Beyond certain declarations of its leaders which seek the way to agreement with the EU, it remains the radical anti-austerity force of the country. It is demanding early elections. Syriza is now faced with a choice, either it defends a consistent anti-austerity policy with cancellation of the debt and the rejection of all memorandums, or it cedes to the pressures of the Greek bourgeoisie and the European Union. In this battle, the left of Syriza which proposes a government of the left with the KKE and Antarsya will play a decisive role.

These results show that in the countries of southern Europe where massive struggles against austerity have developed, there is a form of political reflection with significant results to the left of the social liberals. In Spain, Podemos obtained 7.9% and 5 deputies. This breakthrough cannot be understood without taking into account the days of national mobilization, the white and green marches and the emergence of the movement of the Indignant. To this is added a political and institutional crisis of the political model put in place after the post Francoist transition of 1978. In Spain, the two party system has also been punctured by the scores of IU and Podemos. Together they scored more than 18%. Their results pose the question of their unitary relations. The strength of Podemos lies in its references to the processes of struggle and self-organization in recent months in Spain. This movement can play a key role in the reconstruction of a unitary social and political perspective which weighs on the whole Spanish left. It is a challenge for revolutionaries who are an integral part of this process. Let's add the good results of the PTB-Gauche d'ouverture which made a real breakthrough with 5.48% in Francophone Belgium. In these countries, the rejection of austerity policies is crystallized around anti-capitalist or anti-neoliberal forces.

The Front de gauche in France achieved the same score as in 2009, but this was well below what they had hoped for, inasmuch as Mélenchon had even envisaged that his formation would beat the PS at these elections. Die linke obtained 7.5%. The Communist Parties maintained their positions, indeed improved them as in Portugal – the PCP won 12% of the vote, while the Left Bloc only scored a little over 4 % – but fell back in Greece to the benefit of Syriza and did not obtain the results hoped for in Spain where Podemos competed on equal terms with the United Left.

The revolutionary left suffered some setbacks, notably in France where the NPA – deprived of electoral propaganda for financial reasons and present in only 5 constituencies out of 8 – scored less than 1%, Lutte ouvrière obtaining 1.4%. The NPA participates in the global decline of all left lists including in relation to the last electoral consultations. After a significant role in the unitary demonstration against austerity of April 12 and despite a good campaign, it was unable to achieve a result corresponding to its role in the class struggle.

7. Whither Europe?

That is the question posed today. We are in a phase of weak growth or long term recession. If the governments and the ECB are given instruments to ward off a new banking crisis, nobody knows if one or several of the big banks could fail. How far will the demands for repayment of the debt bleed the economies of a series of countries of the South and intermediary countries like Italy or France?

At the political level, the crisis of leadership is total. Certainly, Europe remains the richest continent, but its weight in the world declines. The austerity policies, like the different trajectories of the European economies, aggravated by the crisis, tend to explode the European framework. Again, nobody knows, after the results for UKIP in Britain, what the consequences would be of an exit of

this country from the EU. For sure, the power of the economic interests of the European dominant classes, the margins of manoeuvre that the government and the directorates of the big banks and multinationals have, and the solidity of the institutions of the European states contain the crisis. But the current type of construction of the EU, without real democracy, without social, fiscal, budgetary policy, without governmental cohesion apart from unending austerity policies, empties the European projects of their content.

It is to a great extent the weakening of the workers' movement which gives these margins of manoeuvre to the European dominant classes. Here again there is a contradiction between the choices of capitalist globalization of the key sectors of the European bourgeoisie and the rise of the reactionary nationalism incarnated by the neo-fascist and populist parties, but unhappily irrigating many other political formations of right and left. The formulas and proposals by Sarkozy to withdraw from Schengen express this nationalist turn. The proposals of economic patriotism or withdrawal from the "German Europe" also reflect the nationalist pressure.

Faced with the rise of reactionary nationalism, it is necessary, once more in history, to rally all the currents, associations, activist parties who oppose the populist or neo-fascist danger. The question of unity of action and organization in struggle as in the construction of a unitary anti-austerity opposition is central. It is also necessary to distinguish necessary unitary mass mobilization on the one hand and political or programmatic agreements which self-limit the anti-capitalist struggle on the other.

In this situation, it is necessary to redouble our efforts, to oppose social and democratic urgency to the austerity policies of the employers and governments, redouble the struggle against the right and far right, maintain independence in relation to social liberalism - no governmental or parliamentary alliance with the PS - and maintain an internationalist politics, breaking with the current EU, but defending a Europe of cooperation and solidarity of peoples and workers.

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