

Portugal: At its convention, the Left Bloc gears up for year of crucial fights

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With a high degree of unity, the Left Bloc is well placed to face its challenges in 2019.

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In 2019, European and legislative elections will take place in Portugal in a national political context different from anywhere else in the European Union (EU), where austerity policies still reign and the racist and xenophobic right is rising, writes Dick Nichols from Lisbon.

Over the past three years in Portugal, the minority Socialist Party (PS) government has been supported from outside by the Left Bloc, the Communist Party of Portugal (PCP) and the Ecologist Party-The Greens (PEV).

During that time wages and welfare payments have risen, privatisations have stopped, unemployment has halved to 6.3%, casual workers in the public sector have been made permanent, and the electricity and public transport bills of about 700,000 poor families have been cut.

In the 2019 budget, the maximum level of university fees will be cut by 20% and text books will become free for the period of compulsory education.

After years of quiescence, trade union struggles have also been on the rise: this year workers in health, education, transport and other sectors have been fighting to recover what they lost under the EU-driven austerity that was applied between 2011 and 2015 by the right-wing administration of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the People's Party (CDS-PP).

There is also no sign of any resurgence of the far right in Portugal: its marginalisation contrasts with neighbouring Spain, where the xenophobic, anti-feminist and ultra-centralist force Vox has recently begun to register in opinion polls.

PS pressured

The PCP and Left Bloc, which held its 11th National Convention in Lisbon on November 9-11, can take a lot of the credit for these and other advances.

Over three years their pressure, reflecting social movement demands, has pushed the government of Prime Minister António Costa into implementing progressive measures that it was reluctant to adopt

or wasn't even contemplating.

Left Bloc national coordinator Catarina Martins said in her convention opening address: "If the PS had had its way, pensioners would have lost two months' worth of their pension. If the PS had had an absolute majority and imposed these outcomes, pensioners and workers would be worse off.

"What a relief the left had the strength to frustrate the proposals in the PS's program!"

Popular support for the gains won since 2015 shows in opinion polls. At the 2015 elections the total broad left vote, including the animal rights party People-Animals-Nature (PAN), was 52.2%: as of October it was averaging 57.1%.

Over the same time, the combined support for the PSD and CDS-PP fell from 38.6% to 34.3%.

The decline in support for these parties led Martins to tell the convention that tactical voting for the PS to keep the right out of government had become a thing of the past: "That vote of fear of the right, the vote that preferred a bad outcome to a very bad outcome, that vote is dead. May it rest in peace."

Nonetheless, the advances wrung from the Costa government by PCP and Left Bloc efforts have not been reflected in increased support for these parties. The winner in polling has been the PS itself: the PS vote in the 2015 elections was 32.8%, but its support peaked at 44% last year and now stands at 40%.

This gain has led some PS leader to fantasise about achieving an absolute majority at the 2019 national election. If that proves impossible, their Plan B could be to make a governing alliance with the PCP, leaving the more troublesome Left Bloc out in the cold.

At the same time, the PSD has made clear that it would be prepared to join with the PS in building a "government of the centre" to marginalise the Left Bloc and the PCP.

Majority motion

Inevitably, tactics towards the PS in an election year dominated the Left Bloc's pre-convention discussion, which revolved around three motions proposing different orientations towards Portugal's main social democratic party.

Motion A ("A Stronger Bloc to Change the Country") won 83.7% support in branch delegate voting. It won backing from three of the organisation's internal groupings — Alternative Left (its only formal tendency), the platform New Course and the Anti-Capitalist Network.

The motion vindicated the Left Bloc's position of critical support to the PS government as an alternative to the right, marking the gains achieved. However, it also pointed out how much else could have been won if the Costa government had not obeyed EU directives on public sector deficit and debt reduction.

The PS's acceptance of these constraints meant that, while there was space to reverse austerity in an economic upturn, the structural weaknesses of the Portuguese economy persisted beneath the surface. The banking system remained vulnerable, public investment still lagged, public debt restructuring was still pressing and Portuguese assets were still easy targets for speculative foreign investment.

Most importantly, the labour market “reform” of the previous conservative government was still in place. The next economic downturn would make this failure to tackle radical change clear.

In presenting Motion A, the Left Bloc’s European MP Marisa Matias outlined five fronts of social and electoral struggle: recovery of labour rights; revival of public services, especially the National Health Service; a strategy to de-carbonise the economy; increased public investment and securing food sovereignty. Public control of strategic economic sectors would be needed to guarantee advance on most of these fronts.

Such proposals were the minimum needed to lock in the gains of the past three years and continue the attack on poverty and environmental degradation. They would be incompatible with the EU budget treaties, but indispensable in building an alternative to the racist and xenophobic programs of the right across Europe.

They would also be the basis of Left Bloc’s proposal for a left government in Portugal qualitatively different from the popularly dubbed “contraption” of the past three years.

Minority motions

For Motion C (“More Democracy, More Organisation”), the Left Bloc’s performance since its last convention in 2016 was “positive on the whole, though it is possible it could have gone further”.

As for the eternal problem of getting the balance right between building the social movements and working in the institutions, “we are no longer completely focused on parliamentary work, but this is a path along which we have only taken the first steps”.

The main concern of Motion C, which won 1.9% in the convention delegate elections, was the Left Bloc’s organisation and internal life, allegedly marked by top-down decision-making, lack of attention to local organisation (it had managed to stand in only 170 out of 308 municipalities in the 2017 local government elections), domination by its internal groupings and the beginnings of careerism.

The proposed treatments for these ills were: obligatory subjection of leadership proposals to preliminary scrutiny by local groups; empowerment of local structures; and avoiding any single tendency from getting control — arguing that “if that were to occur, it would be the end of the Left Bloc and we would return to the days of completely irrelevant”.

Motion C also laid down tactical responses to the various scenarios following the 2019 national elections: in the case of a PS absolute majority, opposition; in the case of a PS relative majority dependent on Left Bloc support, continue the tactic of the last three years, but “in no circumstance agree to enter a PS ministry”.

This was in contrast with Motion A, which did not enter into specific options about the conditions under which it would consider entering government.

Motion M (“A Bloc That Doesn’t Lean Backwards”) described the line adopted by the leadership as helping the PS implement “austerity-lite”. For Motion M, “emigration patterns have not been reversed, unemployment is still high and jobs were created through casualisation, mainly by applying the minimum wage.”

According to Motion M, which won 7.5% support in the convention delegate elections, the Bloc’s

support for the government meant a “deepening of the processes of media politics, parliamentarism and short-termism ...

“The image of a Bloc comfortably integrated into a political system that it supposedly wants to change can only be an obstacle to building an alternative political project to the present state of affairs.”

In presenting Motion M, Inês Ribeiro Santos said that “the building of an anti-capitalist party that represents a change to the status quo and not its preservation means affirming oneself as an alternative to neoliberal policies and not being seen as a ghost party that stands neither in government nor in opposition.”

In contrast with Motion A’s five priorities with which to struggle against the PS and the parties of the right, Motion M presented a list of 29 demands as a “minimum program for a dignified life”.

Debate

The convention discussion mixed set-piece exchanges between speakers from the three tendencies with more interesting “battlefront reports” from many of the 625 conference delegates. They were often from the more distant regions, including the Azores and Madeira, and spoke to the complex issues they confront in building social resistance and the Left Bloc in their remoter communities.

Such contributions reflected the written pre-convention discussion, which covered more than 60 topics, including “new” issues such as the fight against racism in a society that prides itself on its lack of racial discrimination and the recent resurgence of feminism.

These combined with the longer-standing challenges for the Left Bloc. These include its weaker implantation in the countryside and the urgent need for it to develop its program and support base around such issues as agriculture, forestry management and fishing.

The other main thread through the debate was criticism of the PS, especially its refusal to countenance a change to the labour law inherited from the conservatives. For MP José Soeiro this was “a stab aimed at the chest of the workers”.

The voting on the motions brought no surprises. Motion A won more than 80% support and 70 of the 80 positions on the Left Bloc’s National Board. The other 10 positions went to Motion C as Motion M supporters were unable to present a united ticket.

With this degree of unity, the Left Bloc is well placed to face its first challenge in 2019 — to win more seats in the May European parliamentary elections and participate actively in the “And Now, The People” coalition of radical left parties from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, France and Spain in the vital joint struggle to build an alternative to rising racism and xenophobia in Europe.

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P.S.

- Green Left, Issue 1204:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/its-convention-portugals-left-bloc-gears-year-crucial-fights>

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