

Portugal: Left blocked

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An interview with Portugese Left Bloc activist Ricardo Sá Ferreira

What will the 'bailout' mean for ordinary people in Portugal?

The 'bailout' is not financial help, it is extortion - it is going to give them a €520 million profit after they intervene in the Portuguese economy. The Portuguese people know this, but the hegemonic discourse dictates that it is 'inevitable' and without this package, the economy will go under. However, people know that the 'bailout' also means more austerity, compression of the workers' wages, less public services, more VAT and the progressive destruction of the welfare state.

How has the Left Bloc responded to the financial crisis, and to the austerity that has already been imposed?

We have responded through social mobilisation and by presenting concrete legislative proposals that would be able to cut superfluous spending, while at the same time raise enough revenue for the state to pay off the deficit, without sacrificing the economy and the workers. This could be done by taxing fortunes and financial transactions to off-shore banks, the implementation of a new tax bracket where the rich are taxed more, and renegotiating the public debt in order for the economy to breathe. However, the real response must come from the streets.

Is there any kind of debt default movement in Portugal yet, inspired by what's going on in Greece? Does the left have a common position on how to deal with the debt crisis?

There are a couple of small debt default groups, but nothing compared to the movement in Greece. Both the Left Bloc and the Communist Party have a common position on how to deal with the debt crisis and the first step is to renegotiate and restructure the public debt.

Why? Defaulting the payment of the debt will automatically exclude Portugal from the euro, meaning that we would have to go back to our old currency, the escudo, which in turn would be devalued as inflation would destroy the purchasing power of the Portuguese. With the renegotiation of the debt, we can withdraw pressure from the economy, alleviate the austerity and create a decent economy. Only with the creation of employment can we then start thinking about paying the public debt, though not the private debt or the extortionate interest rates.

This spring saw Portugal Uncut groups springing up around the country, inspired by UK Uncut protests. What kind of actions has Portugal Uncut been organising?

Portugal Uncut has been organising a series of debates, talks and actions. Its main intervention has been in the area of information, diffusing what UK Uncut and US Uncut have done, and through their example carrying out similar actions in Portugal. Their actions have been more directed at banks - how they only pay 5 per cent tax instead of 25 per cent like any other Portuguese company or shop - as well as millionaire bonuses and tax evasion schemes.

In the elections on 5 June, the Social Democratic Party [Portugal's centre-right party] won the greatest number of seats. What will this mean for Portugal?

More austerity. The victory of the Portuguese right will bring more austerity for workers, instilling further precariousness and 'flexibility' of the work contract, as well as the dismantling of the welfare state. The Social Democratic Party, in coalition with the Popular Party [a smaller party to the right of the Social Democrats], has already stated that it will have to make profound changes in order to kick-start the economy and pay our creditors, and that can only be done with changes in the Portuguese constitution.

In order for this to happen, the Socialist Party will need to vote alongside the Portuguese right, which is quite possible since it was these three parties that struck a deal with the Troika [the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF].

The austerity measures mean that workers pay 80 per cent of the bill, whereas the banks pay the remaining 20 per cent. In economic terms this is disastrous because it will reduce consumption, which will then drive down the production levels, leading to unemployment. In the end, this means less taxation and revenue for the state to channel into social spending.

The Socialist Party lost seats at the election, but so did the Left Bloc. Was this a general shift to the right in Portugal? Why did the Left Bloc lose out, while the CDU [the Communist/Green electoral coalition] vote remained stable?

It was a major defeat for the left. Everyone recognised this except the CDU, though their total number of votes dropped too. A lot of people wanted to punish the Socialist Party, especially general secretary José Sócrates, and voted Social Democrat instead.

As far as the Left Bloc goes, we suffered a general boycott in the media, whereas the CDU did not; and in any case the CDU voter base is more rigid, whereas ours is more volatile as we compete with the Socialist Party for votes. This means we always have the possibility to grow again, as 2009 demonstrated, while the CDU stagnates at the same percentage.

However, we had other problems. The fact that the bailout deal was signed determined the direction of the vote, simply because whoever won the elections had to apply what is on that memorandum. People felt a vote for left-wing parties would not make any difference.

Also, we made some tactical errors, including not meeting with the Troika. People wanted to see the Left Bloc as a responsible party that would not auto-exclude itself from power. We could have done this without entering into the deal, using the occasion to make our proposals and denounce the Troika's proposals. This is what the two largest trade unions did.

Before the election you had 16 members of parliament (out of 230) and 9.8 per cent of the vote, which is pretty impressive for an anti-capitalist party in normal times. What did you manage to achieve with that number of MPs?

This was important for the Left Bloc because we look at parliamentary work as something that must always be articulated alongside social movements and extra-parliamentary political activism. Our parliamentary work sought to bring to parliament the problems that the country felt, the urgent debates of our lives. The Left Bloc brought forward the bill to legalise same-sex marriage (we also proposed same-sex adoption but this was not passed because the Socialist Party rejected it).

We also made proposals for transsexuals to be able to change sex, to criminalise illicit enrichment, and for the taxation of financial transactions and bank profits.

The Left Bloc is relatively new. Where did it come from and who now makes up its voting base? How would you define its politics?

The Left Bloc is only 12 years old and it's the convergence of three far-left parties, União Democrática Popular (UDP), Política Socialista Revolucionária (PSR) and Política XXI (PXXI). All of these parties have different backgrounds and historical movements. UDP come from a Maoist tradition, PSR are Trotskyist and PXXI are social democrats. The Left Bloc was a compromise between these three small parties to leave aside some of the more theoretical divergences while bringing to the fore what united them.

The Left Bloc's membership is now largely made up of people who are not in one of the original far-left groups. These groups still exist in the Left Bloc, as political associations that offer an ideological and theoretical platform for debate.

When it comes to the voting base, it is very diversified. Initially, the Left Bloc got most of its votes from urban intellectuals and was concentrated in two main cities: Porto and Lisbon. Since then we have been able to spread our voting throughout the whole country, ranging from university teachers to steelworkers.

The Left Bloc's politics is based on a combative left alternative that responds for the people, and never loses sight of the fact that it stands for socialism.

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