

Portugal - People's lives as a compass. Echoes of the Bloco de Esquerda congress

Wednesday 21 June 2023, by [BARATA Vasco](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2023).

The Bloco de Esquerda [Portuguese Left Bloc/ BE] held its 13th Congress after two years of intense challenges that tested the coherence of its political project.

Internally, the defence of a free and public National Health Service, the defence of the end of the labour laws of the Troika and the fight against real estate speculation led the Bloco de Esquerda to vote against a State Budget without a trace of left influence.

That vote was used by the Partido Socialista [Socialist Party (PS)] in collusion with a right-wing president of the Republic, to bring forward the election of 2022 and obtain an absolute majority. The electoral campaign was marked by inaccurate polls that predicted a majority for the right Partido Social Democrata (Social Democratic Party) and Iniciativa Liberal (Liberal Initiative) with the extreme right (Chega). Fear of this played a role and gave the PS an absolute majority.

At the January 30, 2022 election, the Bloco de Esquerda went from 19 to 5 deputies, defeated, but not irrelevant, as it remained firm and in a position to fight. A year later, the "political stability" promised by the PS has resulted in a succession of dismissals as well as small, medium and large scandals in the government, putting on the agenda the possibility of the dissolution of parliament, something unthinkable just a year ago. Instability is also the outlook for people in a country going through a multiform crisis, with speculative attacks on housing, generalised impoverishment due to inflation and a bankrupt National Health System. The battle fought, and lost, in the 2021 budget negotiations is now revealing itself as a possibility for the future. In Portugal there is a left alternative that does not abdicate its obligations.

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 also tested the left. Today it might seem that solidarity with the Ukrainian people should have been an obvious policy. It was not. Much of the international left remained ambiguous or even aligned with Moscow's "special operation". We are told - and rightly so - that this war is complex. NATO has been putting pressure on Russia for many years and the excesses committed by Kyiv are well known. But you cannot deal with complexity by forgetting what is simple: it is not because it is hostile to the United States that a regime like Putin's ceases to be imperialist or becomes anti-imperialist; respecting the right to self-determination means denouncing the invader and supporting the invaded, whether in the Sahara, Timor, Gaza or Ukraine. The BE's position followed the anti-imperialist tradition of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg: the right to self-determination belongs to the people, no matter how reactionary their leaders and their alliances may be. By taking a clear position of solidarity with the Ukrainian people from the very beginning, the Bloc emerged with its credibility bolstered.

These were the decisions that allowed the BE to have a political debate at the congress on the essentials of people's lives and without existential dramas. Catarina Martins leaves the position of party coordinator with her authority intact, proof of which is the emotional reception she received to her final speech as coordinator, and is replaced by Mariana Mortágua, who, dubbed by the press as

a "more radical" figure, takes over position. The economic elite has never forgiven Mariana for her role in denouncing the system in parliamentary interventions, nor for the "Mortágua tax" on luxury real estate (the only anti-speculation measure approved by the PS during the *geringonça*.) [1]

More than in the polls (which indicate a constant rise in support for Bloc), it is the streets that show that only the left has an answer for the country. Recent times have been marked by important demonstrations: from the struggle of teachers, who fight for the recognition of their professional career to the largest demonstration for the right to housing, to extremely significant demonstrations in defence of the National Health Service or relevant sectoral struggles, the left appears in the streets, unlike an extreme right that, promising to occupy these same streets, can't manage to leave the walls of parliament.

In this cycle of mobilisations, the Bloc made a difference last January, when it was the only parliamentary party present in the first of the great teachers' mobilisations, called by a minority union after a long period of apathy from the unions under the hegemony of the Communist Party. We are not the only party that defends the demands of the teachers, but the moment was defining because it became clear that the Bloc is the only party that proposes resistance to the government with a strategy of unity in the fight. This also occurred in the various initiatives against inflation, in the movement for the right to housing, in the collaborative efforts in defence of the National Health Service and in the union struggles in which we have responsibilities.

Now is the time to unite these struggles and build an alternative. We are aware of the intention of the right and extreme right to unite to achieve power and of the need to combat this danger, just as we know that it is the absence of response from the absolute majority of the Socialist Party that feeds the right's dream of power. Our path is different. It is that of hope based on proposals for a good life for people. A life that guarantees that the basics: housing, salaries, pensions, access to health and education are not a luxury.

8 June 2023

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P.S.

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• Original translation from Portuguese to Spanish for *Viento Sur* by Manuel Fortes. Translation to English by David Fagan for *International Viewpoint*.

Footnotes

[1] *Geringonça*, or "contraption" in Portuguese was the name given to the six year period of agreement between the BE, the Portuguese Communist Party and the ruling Socialist Party which ended in 2021.