

Lessons and not myths about the Portuguese non-model - On the policy of the Left Bloc: an answer to Catarina Príncipe's article on the Jacobin website

Friday 29 June 2018, by [CAMPOS Adriano](#), [COSTA Jorge Duarte](#), [ROLA Maria Manuel](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2018).

***Jacobin* published on June 9th an essay by Catarina Príncipe under the title "The Portuguese Myth". [1] We've deeply appreciated the considerations on the political changes in the country since 2015, furthermore considering it was written by a spokesperson for a minority current inside the Left Bloc, a status Príncipe failed to mention. This should have been stated, for transparency's sake, since Príncipe led an alternative political resolution and list for the leadership of the Party in 2016 which were defeated.**

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Considering this, there's extra reason for noting her fair treatment of the difficult decisions the Portuguese left had to make during the last three years. Indeed, Príncipe has repeatedly stated agreement with the choices made by the Left Bloc. It is proof of wisdom to consider the challenging situation Portugal went through in the troika period and at the 2015 elections, and to support the political action of the left since then. In fact, Príncipe accepted and promoted the agreement between the Left Bloc and the PS (Socialist Party) and emphatically opposed any notion of breaking it [2].

And this is the reason why we were surprised by the startling conclusion: "The truth is that the Left Bloc is today hostage to the PS. It has been weakened at many levels, from its membership numbers to its level of activity and program. And despite the difficulty of the present situation, the party is skeptical of serious strategic debate or internal divergence of any kind". This "truth" is false on facts and on conclusions. But, furthermore, Príncipe is faced with a contradiction: if the political choices were correct and she supported them all along, how is it possible that the conclusion is that the party is "hostage to the PS" and a "radical rethinking" is required, to the point of suggesting the creation of a new political formation? In our opinion, this contradiction may only be explained as an expression of sectarianism, a tradition deeply rooted in the culture of the left and which claims another victim in this case.

Still more relevant to the reader, we will discuss the conditions for the Portuguese “non-model”, since the circumstances were so peculiar that no generalization is possible, and explore the experience of the Left Bloc, taking as a pretext the curious contradiction brought by the above-mentioned text.

1. A difficult decision in October-November 2015

After four years of austerity and social destruction, under the right-wing government and the troika, the Portuguese 2015 elections imposed a setback to the government parties (the coalition of PSD and CDS, the two bourgeois parties, lost almost one million votes and got 38%) and a modest recovery for the Socialist Party (thereafter PS, 32%). As the two left parties, the Left Bloc (10,2%) and the Communist Party (therefore PCP, 8,6%), got almost one in five votes, the parliament was faced with two alternatives: a minority government of the right wing with no allies, except if the PS chose to help it; or a minority government of the PS, with a possible alliance with the two left parties. To make a long story short, the then President of the Republic empowered the previous Prime Minister, Passos Coelho, to form a new right-wing government, which was defeated in Parliament and, instead, a new PS government (prime minister António Costa) with a formal pact with the Bloc and the PCP replaced it. So, for the first time ever, the PS was forced to establish an alliance with the left, and the left accepted this alliance, also for the first time. (You may find the text of the agreement in the final Annex).

At the eve of the parliamentary vote defining this change, Príncipe was interviewed by Telesur [3] and explained the success of the Left Bloc: the “best result ever” of the party was obtained thanks to a “very good campaign”, in which “Catarina [Martins, the spokesperson of the Left Bloc] won all the debates [on TV, with all the other party leaders] as she was very well prepared and was able to communicate very complex ideas in a simple language everyone could understand”. Moreover, as Tariq Ali, who was interviewing her, asked about the risks of an agreement with the PS, Príncipe was adamant: “We are doing what we must do”. She explained: “We need to do this agreement. It was our proposal so we need to go on with it. And we need to answer to the feeling that people have, a lot of people in this country, we need to get rid of the right and we need to give people some time and space to breath, which is a very important feeling”.

Príncipe was right. The popular perception was that a new right-wing government was too dangerous and that the center (PS) and the left (Bloc and CP) should establish a platform to avoid the continuation of the policy the ex-prime minister aptly called “impoverishment”. She was also right on the courage and path-breaking orientation followed by the Left Bloc in that campaign, since Catarina Martins at a TV debate challenged Antonio Costa, the leader of the PS, to drop three essential points of his program (freezing the pensions, creating a new form of easy firing, and reducing the firms’ contribution to social security) [4]. Her clear conditions for a dialogue on the future government became a decisive question in the national debate. This was not an electoral trick but a clear answer to the needs of the people. That is how a left party should act to lead a political change, and Left Bloc acted as such [5].

2. After two years, the same conclusion: the agreement was necessary and correct

Recently Príncipe maintained the same conclusion [6]: “this was a smart tactic” and the “Left Bloc’s outstanding result, and the active role it had taken in offering the PS baseline terms for an agreement, pushed it into the center of these negotiations.” [7]

Let's go on reading Príncipe. In the end of 2017, after two years of PS government, even after proposing a defeated list and resolution to the congress of the party, Príncipe once again writes that the Left Bloc was right: "But the position of the radical Left is as difficult as it is new. Being called upon to take responsibility and keep the Right out of power put the Left in a position of not really being able to say no - especially when Left Bloc had been the first party to even mention a government solution with the support of the Left. Navigating this hard situation demands a good deal of prudence from the Left, as well as plenty of internal debate". Again, very wise. It was a difficult choice, but it was imposed both by the political choice of the party and by the popular pressure. "We are doing what we must do", she stated [8].

But, still, could it or should it be different? Should the Portuguese left reject the agreement with the PS or force new elections, even after some time? Was it wrong to pursue the measures of the agreement and vote the state budgets accordingly? Just when the third state budget of the new government had been voted in parliament, Príncipe answers those questions with a categorical no: "As choices have to be made, we need first to consider the alternative positions towards the government. At this moment, the country is experiencing a decompression period following a time of extreme austerity. The government and the coalition agreement are popular and the signed pact has been partially fulfilled. Given this, and irrespective of the criticism that can be leveled at the agreement process in the first place, *it would be counter-productive and unsustainable to defend a toppling of the government*" (our emphasis). This was just six months ago [9].

3. A "smart" turn for argument sake

Six months passed, and Príncipe presents her new version in Jacobin. Was it a "smart" move by the Left Bloc to propose this agreement? Yes, but that was last year. Now, for the Jacobin piece, everyone was "smart": the left, for signing the agreement, and the PS, for signing the agreement. A win-win.

As Príncipe states in her *Jacobin* essay, "The three main conditions the Left Bloc placed on the PS, in exchange for supporting a minority government, were: 1) an end to the pensions freeze, 2) no further lowering of the Single Social Tax employers pay into social security, and 3) an end to the liberalization of the labor market. Accepting these three points would force the PS to change its political and economic platform. This was a smart tactic: it forced the PS to define itself politically and to clarify its loyalties". But then she immediately adds, distributing the same label to the PS: "In hindsight, this was a smart tactical move [by the PS]: in a climate of slow but steady economic recovery at the European and national level, it allowed the PS to use the breathing space to its own advantage, with the introduction of austerity-lite policies. At the same time, it was the perfect moment to co-opt the Left into a very difficult situation of supporting a government that would never be meaningfully anti-austerity or adopt the Left's own demands" (our emphasis).

So, everyone was "smart", but finally the PS imposed a government that "would never be meaningfully anti-austerity". Does this torture of the words mean that the PS government is pro-austerity? Príncipe had just written that it would be "counter-productive and unsustainable to defend a toppling of the government". But six months after, is she suggesting in Jacobin that we should?

Again, it is not clear and this conclusion is never brought to an end. Rather, the text proceeds with a fair description of the political evolution: "this agreement has put a stop to the process of mass impoverishment (which was the government's real aim, rather than overcoming austerity as such)". She even adds that Portugal "liberated" itself from austerity: "far from being a solution, austerity aggravates the problem, creating a vicious cycle of lower wages, lower consumption, tax hikes, and

rising public debt. But Portugal has in fact gained some breathing space, liberating it from this process". To be more concrete, she defends the vote for the state budgets that represent the fulfillment of the agreement signed in 2015: "This government's three state budgets thus far have not aimed to reverse austerity, but to limit it: hence the shift toward talking about stopping 'impoverishment'. The fact that austerity is no longer so harsh has allowed for a very small income rebound (mainly for public sector workers and pensioners), which has slowly started to rebuild a dismantled middle class."

So, despite thinking that the PS was "smart" to "co-opt the left" and the left was "smart" to promote the agreement, Príncipe finds the fundamental reason for the change: impoverishment was stopped. What a difference that makes for people, right? "A very small income rebound", mainly for public sector workers and pensioners, and for the "dismantled middle class", not a bad result to begin with these days.

Curiously, although arguing that the government "would never be meaningfully anti-austerity or adopt the Left's own demands", Príncipe shows an electrifying confidence in the possibility of a left leanings of the PS, that "could therefore be forced [in the negotiations] into accepting bolder proposals that were not only about stopping the impoverishment process, but could also reverse austerity in the mid-term – placing the renegotiation of public debt at the core of the discussion". So, after all, the government that would "never accept the Left's own demands", and instead "co-opted" the left, could eventually be moved to "accept bolder proposals" and be "co-opted" by the left. It would have been nice, but is clearly fiction, as stated throughout the text.

We believe this is an overstatement and an illusion about the possibilities of the agreement. The PS could not be forced to move from its nature, a center party rooted in the European Union orthodoxy, towards a left strategy of rupture with the debt and the euro. What was at stake, as Príncipe by the way clearly noted, was to stop impoverishment and to pave the way for workers, pensionists and youth to recover from the attacks of austerity. This is why, despite thinking that a bold left program could be possible with the PS and, at the same time, that its government would reject any such left program, Príncipe repeatedly opposed any action in order to topple the government. Not a single member of the leadership of the Left Bloc, which is proportionally constituted by all the lists voted at the Convention, therefore including the minority views, ever proposed to vote against a budget or to act in order to topple the government and call for earlier elections. Príncipe, as a part of this favorable attitude, knows that "we are doing what we must do".

This convergence on the most crucial choice of the Portuguese left is the result of militant experience and of understanding both the social conditions and the popular mood. We praise Príncipe's careful description of the difficulties and openings of the Portuguese political situation. We value this convergence. This is how a party and a leadership are built, on experience and reflection, eventually with people who shared different views but converge on essential choices. Unless sectarianism gets in the way.

4. Sectarianism in the making

We obviously agree that each political decision of these last years is subject to debate. Even considering that there was no disagreement in the Portuguese left about the need to negotiate and sign the agreements with the PS government, it is possible to have different views on what should be the priorities and how should the left parties act [10]. Furthermore, political experience in these conditions is much richer than simply indicating some crucial votes orientation. It also involves institutional representation (the Left Bloc is the third party in parliament), presentation of detailed

proposals and negotiation with ministries and agencies, action at different levels of political contradictions, mobilization of social forces and militancy, construction of alternative movements, promotion of demonstrations, political education, dialogue with parties, involvement of trade unions and other actors, and in general a high level of public initiative and social strategy. In this, the Left Bloc is today one of the more consistent left parties in Europe and its experience, although it is not a “model” as previously stated, is relevant for overcoming the past and present defeats.

This is why we cannot accept the conclusion that, having done “what we must do”, the Left Bloc is today “hostage to the PS”, as Príncipe passes judgement as a conclusion of her *Jacobin* piece. This comes to us as pure sectarianism. We know so well in the history of the left how it is used: an attitude of breaking away from those with whom you most agree, in order to justify a prearranged conclusion. In this case, it is even more surprising since the conclusion is unsubstantiated by facts and contradictory with the support to the political choices made so far.

The only reason presented by Príncipe as an argument for her daring conclusion is the threat of danger: “the Left Bloc is the party that has more to lose in the current situation. Not only does it bear direct responsibility for the agreement’s key points [once again that she supported]; the party also lacks a large core constituency and the capacity for continuous political mobilization. The Socialists can always walk out on the agreement under one pretext or another (such as international pressure), and the Communist Party maintains its firm voting base”. The problem is that this is a fable: the PS does not “walk out” because politics is not wandering, and the PCP’s “firm voting basis” is a fiction. Indeed, in all the elections since 2015 the Left Bloc progressed and the PCP lost some ground (at the presidential elections, the Bloc’s candidate got 10,12% and the PCP’s an abyssal result of 3,95%; in the regional elections in Azores, the Bloc came 40% above the CP, traditionally stronger in that region; in the municipal elections, in which the PCP is much stronger, it lost 10 municipalities and, in Lisbon, the Left Bloc was the party registering a larger increase).

Political analysis must rest on facts and not cede to phantasy. So, let’s look at facts, at what happened in the class struggle in Portugal since 2015 and, in the way, check if the Left Bloc is “hostage to the PS”.

5. The results of the agreement and conflicts with the PS government

As Príncipe already mentioned some of the economic results with the anti-“impoverishment” measures, no more detailed account is necessary. For the sake of systematization, we will nevertheless summarize the main achievements and conflicts with the government under three groups of questions: the democratization measures, the economic and social implications of the agreement, and the conflicts on financial issues and the labor laws.

A. Stepping forward in civil liberties

During the almost three years of the minority PS government, different laws were passed in order to abolish fees on abortion (the legalization of abortion was approved through a referendum but the previous right-wing majority imposed some fees in order to deter its use), to enlarge the rights of gay couples including adoption, to generalize medically assisted procreation to single women and lesbians, to rule the conditions for maternity of substitution, to establish a full gender parity political representation, and the medical use of cannabis. In some cases, the Left Bloc and the PS formed a majority for such laws since the PCP voted with the right-wing parties lesbian rights, gender parity, maternity of substitution, and cannabis. More recently, both the Left Bloc and the PS proposed laws in order to legalize euthanasia. In this case, such initiatives were defeated by only 5 votes, the PCP again voting with the conservative parties.

The relevance of this agenda is obvious since it pursues a process of democratization and effectively challenges different forms of oppression. In different countries, the social movements will be able to value these achievements.

B. Social and economic effects

The following measures of the agreement were applied throughout this period, among others:

- The privatizations or concessions established by the right-wing government in public transportation (national airline and public transportation of the two largest cities) were reversed;
- New privatizations were explicitly forbidden;
- The minimum wage is raised by 20% until the 1st January 2019;
- Four holidays were reestablished after being cut during the previous government;
- The pensions were unfreezed (at the rate of inflation) and the smaller ones were augmented every year by 3 to 4%;
- The program for displacement of public servants against their will was finished;
- The collective bargaining process of public servants was reestablished;
- The tax on consumption in restaurants decreased from 23 to 13%;
- All children will have a nursery by 2019;
- Books are offered to all students until they are 17 years old, in successive steps;
- The extraordinary tax imposed on wages and pensions during the troika period was abolished;
- The taxes on labor income were reduced and the tax on large firms increased;
- A new tax on luxury real estate was created;
- Foreclosures are suspended for old or disabled people leaving in the same place for 15 years, and the rent law is being revised to protect the tenants.
- New rules were applied for self-employed that provide services to different firms assuring them social security protection.

The global effect of these measures in 2016 and 2017, in a favorable context with lower oil prices and better export prospects given the mild recovery in Europe, was a combination of small growth of GDP (plus 4,3% in real terms, after falling 7,9% during the recession and austerity period), strong creation of employment (the reduction of official figures of unemployment from 17,5% in 2013 to 7,4% now) and a reduction of the public deficit (from -3,1% in 2015 to 0,9% in 2017 and to a prospective virtually zero in 2018), in this case thanks to the effects of the recovery and also to the freeze of public investment. In any case, aggregate demand expanded as the joint result of more confidence and more pensions and wages. Fighting impoverishment had a real social impact. It is a fact that no other European country pursued this sort of policies.

Although major challenges are still unmet, such as reducing external and public debt, the fact that the Left Bloc was able not only to study and to present concrete alternatives on such topics but also

to force a dialogue on them shows the way forward: indeed, a report presenting a concrete proposal of mutualization of 52 billion euros was approved by the Left Bloc and the PS [11], with the participation of members of the government, stating that the current European Union budgetary rules are “unfair and unsustainable” (although the government does not intend to act on it). This clarification strengthens the fight against the debt.

Let’s keep looking at difficulties and challenges, and again whether the left is “hostage to the PS” or if it fights and exposes the contradictions. As the budgets were being applied, many conflicts have emerged between the left parties and the government, and frequently with the European authorities, some came to be solved and others not. With no exception, the Left Bloc put forward its views, knowing that building a political relationship of forces requires detailed and convincing alternatives and strong will.

Certainly, we know that the reader has no means to directly check the different appreciations of this effort and its consequences. But the reader cannot be fooled on the centrality and clarity of such conflicts and on how the left acts. This is why some examples of our argument are shown here, with the help of front pages from the major daily papers in Portugal, below.

The first refers to the critique of the daily choices by the finance minister, the most powerful in the government. As you may see, Catarina discusses in different moments detailed alternatives on banks, on the euro and its damaging effect, on the status of the scientific researchers and on the management of public services expenses.

Photo 1

Alternatives to austerity



*Legend: Catarina challenges austerity and the action of the Finance Minister. "Captivations can not do away to meet Brussels and fail with partners";
"Austerity has not ended. The conditions for that have not been met yet."*

Look now at the second example. Mariana Mortágua, an MP and spokesperson for the Left Bloc for finance and banking, challenges the priorities and the low level of public spending, as further incentives are required for the creation of jobs. That's what she is arguing in the newspaper.

Photo 2

Budget at the center stage of the debate



Legend: Mariana Mortágua, MP, criticizes how the government is managing the expenses and investment.

"A government managed by the Finance Minister is an error"

Left politics is not a gala dinner, so alternatives must be created and presented, they must attract, convince and mobilize the working people. If we look at some other conflicts, the differences between Bloco and the PS and its government become even more obvious, as they have become for the working people in our country throughout the processes.

C. Conflicts on finance and banking, and labor laws

The two most important areas which were not covered by the written agreement are the regulation and management of the financial system and the labor laws. In some cases, themes that were not ruled by the agreement were included in posterior negotiations and a consensus was eventually established (that was the case of the new tax on luxury property or of many instances of other budget rules). But that was not possible, given divergent strategies, in major cases in finance and labor regulation.

As a consequence, the left parties opposed the sale of Banif, a small regional bank, to Santander, and that of Novo Banco, which used to be the first largest private commercial bank, to Lone Star, a US real estate firm. In other cases, the left opposed arrangements to ease the future taxes or to concede special benefits to the banking industry. These conflicts proved why the left parties were right not to consider the participation in power, since there is a huge divergence between a center government and the left on finance and other questions.

The case of the divergence between the government and the left on the labor laws is even more consequential, since a social dispute is going on (the enclosed photo 1 refers to a large trade union demonstration this June against the government proposed law).

Photo 3



Legend: 9th June 2018, trade union demonstration with tens of thousands against the labor laws proposed by the government. The leaders of the PCP and Left Bloc were welcome at that demonstration.

The divergence on the labor laws is a fundamental one since, for two years, the Left Bloc prepared with the PS a package of measures to address precarious labor contracts. A part of those measures was approved after long discussions: it changed the way the precarious independent workers pay their dues to the social security, and how much the firms contracting their services should contribute. It was a major victory, not only for the left parties, but also to the social movement built by precarious young workers, which has been the most militant for the last decade.

Again and again, the social contract came to the front line of the national debate. In one occasion, early 2017, the PS government proposed a reduction of the payment by the firms to the social security, the bosses applauded. It was the first case of a direct violation of the written agreement with the Left Bloc. The party reacted and rejected the proposal, since it would damage the receipts of the public pension system, fought it and finally defeated it, as witnessed by the report by Expresso, a weekly paper, printed below.

Photo 4

Left Bloc defeats an agreement between the govt and firms



Legend: The Left Bloc rejects a proposal by the government for a reduction of the firms' payments for social security and imposes its defeat. The government was defeated.

The most important victory for the workers movement and for the Left Bloc was forcing the government to accept to include the precarious workers in public services (schools, hospitals, etc.) as permanent public servants. This possibility is extended to more than 30 thousand which applied for this process.

Precarios Inflexíveis, the most important social movement of precarious workers, of which left militants are a relevant part, promoted both a new law, which was approved by parliament, and the organization of the workers themselves, in order to fight against the enormous resistance moved against the new rule by the intermediate levels of bureaucracy in public services, such as

universities and hospitals, and even by the government as such. The process is still going on. This is a strategic movement for the Left Bloc, both as a militant force for self-organization and as a political actor able to impose the new rule.

Photo 5

Defending precarious workers



Legend: Catarina Martins presents alternatives for the permanent contract for precarious workers.

After being defeated on the social security payments by firms and accepting to implement important changes in favor of the precarious workers, the government proposed by March and April 2018 new changes in the labor laws. Some were convenient for workers, such as reducing the number of years (3 to 2) of successive term contracts, or limiting the number of contracts established as temporary work (very short term contracts). But some represent the worst-case scenario: augmenting the experimental period (no rights, no compensation if fired) or establishing the possibility of verbal contracts up to 35 days (mostly for touristic services but now extended to the whole economy). The trade unions and the left parties are mobilizing against these proposals.

Our final example of a conflict with the government is the energy issue. The Left Bloc, following its agreement with the PS government, was able to deliver very quickly an important change to poor families: the access to the social tariff on energy, substantially lowering its price, was enlarged from some 50 to 700 thousand families (one in eight families), simplifying the procedure to verify the income tax declarations and avoiding any bureaucratic obstacle. But the big conflict on the energy question would occur by the end of 2017, when the parliament approved a new tax on the energy rents, worth some hundreds of million euros, after a negotiation between the Left Bloc and the ministries of finance and economy. Yet, the government came under pressure by the Chinese government (public Chinese firms own, through privatization in 2012, the largest Portuguese energy firms) and imposed, with the help of the right-wing parties, a new parliamentary vote reversing the previous decision. This major political tempest proved how difficult it is to challenge the international capitalistic interests, how vulnerable the PS is to their power, and also how the Left Bloc should pursue its fight for the benefit of the people.

Photo 6

The case of the tax on energy rents



Legend:

Two daily papers describing how the government accepted, voted in parliament and then rejected a new tax on energy rents, negotiated with the Left Bloc, and commenting on the crisis thus generated.

6. Social action not just for representation, but for presentation

You know by now what we are living through: there is fight everywhere and every day. It is a clear confrontation for social and economic alternatives. Read the papers, as those we pictured as examples, follow the blogs, learn about the social movements, and talk to the militants and the working class. You will listen that the left grows and is able to mobilize if it is up to the task of presenting not only ideas or slogans but solutions, objectives, measures, accountability and motivation for change, and is prepared to fight for it. You will listen to some reactionary commentators that the left is “hostage”, but not from the leaders of the right-wing parties and the big bosses, who say the opposite - that the left has too much power nowadays. They are wrong on effective power, but that is their perception of the strength of the movement lead by the left.

The construction of social action is therefore a defining role for the left. Three contemporary examples to conclude our argument. The first one is the teachers’ strikes and protests for wages, leading to a recent large demonstration. Whoever argued that the agreement between the left parties and the PS prevented the social movement or imposed restricted forms of protest, is wrong. Precisely the opposite: as many workers know that the government is more vulnerable to social pressure and that the left parties are their allies, more mobilization is indeed possible. The fact is there, teachers demonstrate and prepare a long period of fight with strikes for September and October if necessary.

Photo 7
Teacher's demonstration



Legend: Teacher's demonstration, 19th May 2018. Fifty thousand teachers marched in Lisbon.

Our second example is the organization of different collectives and organizations against oil prospection and, in general, for a radical change in climate change policies. They are particularly strong at the local level, and converge in some initiatives, such as the Portuguese-Spanish demonstrations against the Almaraz nuclear facility or the Retortillo Uranium Mine, which was recently closed by a parliamentary decision in Spain. Mobilizations against other mines, the pollution of rivers or intensive agriculture companies and the defense of animal welfare against agrobusiness, for example through internationally articulated demonstrations against live cattle transport, gained momentum in the last couple of years.

Photo 8
Against nuclear power



Legend: The Left Bloc in the Iberian demonstration in Almaraz against a nuclear facility and a demonstration in Lisbon against oil prospection.

Finally, a third social movement that proved to be resourceful and growing is the feminist movement, in particular rejecting insulting Portuguese court decisions considering violence against women and feminicide judgments, street harassment and denouncing rape culture. But as well as through inserting a women's working class agenda articulating gender inequality with productive and reproductive work, as well as income and rights inequality as a result of the capitalist patriarchal society. The feminist movement has delivered some minor local demonstrations, but also big national demonstrations taking place simultaneously on various Portuguese cities, whether they are marches against Trump and misogyny, or demonstrations on the 8th of March. They are now preparing the 8th March 2019 Women's strike.

Photo 9:
Demonstration for the 8th March



Legend: Demonstrations were called in different cities the 8th March and the preparation of the 2019 Women Strike is under way.

The same could be said of other movements, such as of tenants against expulsion from their homes and against gentrification of the cities or the informal caretakers associations that now arise. In all this, the Left Bloc is part of the movements. They all represent the social struggle as it is: moving, sometimes slowly, sometimes effervescent, joining forces, contradictory and motivating. Nonetheless, bigger and more organized than it was when there were no alternatives. Representing this strength as “hostages” to the PS is not only a mischaracterization, it is sheer insult.

As we repeatedly state in this text, we do not present the Left Bloc or the Portuguese experience as a model. When mass politics is at stake, there are no models: only a well rooted capacity of learning and fighting along its own people prepares a party for its strategic choices. Furthermore, we are aware the Left Bloc has still immense progress to make. It must change and be more open to represent the social left. It must fight the tendencies to adaptation to institutions and routine. It must organize the education of rank and file members and their involvement in social organizations. It must help creating new expressions of the workers and the popular movement. It must fight sectarian views inside and outside the party. Still, the Left Bloc is the most important experience and transformation of the Portuguese left for the four decades of democracy. It is still not prepared to lead a majority of the people and much is still to be done in that direction.

7. An agenda for social justice

During the less than three years of the PS government, these movement inspired political debate and generated new ideas. They also influenced the political framework. This is why, according to Príncipe, “the most interesting ideological debate in Portugal is taking place within the Socialist Party leadership: one wing is pushing for the continuation and deepening of social policies, while the other pushes for a Third Way, Blairite style of party and political program”. Again we want to express our agreement and to use this example as proof of some success of the Left Bloc.

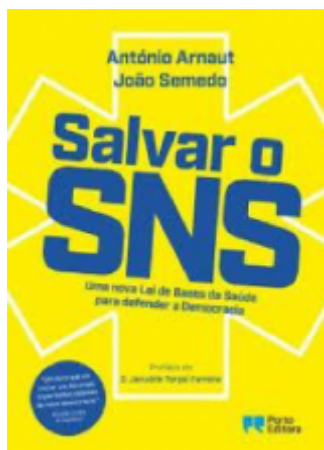
Even if “the most interesting ideological debate” is somewhat excessive, she is right on the opposition between two views, and the very contradiction inside the PS proves that there is a political implication for it, given the agreement established with the Bloc and CP. Feeling threatened by many socialist voters who favor the alliance with the left, and some of them to the point of considering the advantage of having their own party constrained by the left parties, some members of the leadership of the PS decided to challenge the pact with the left at the recent congress of the PS (June 2018). Some of them actually invoked the example of the neoliberal Third Way, while others stated that the PS should never abandon the pacts with the left. This is indeed a relevant debate on ideas, but we prefer to think of it in terms of political action since it is the consequence of the initiative of the left toppling the right-wing government. The fact that to be or not to be allied to the left becomes a major dividing topic for the PS congress is proof of some success of the left parties. This also shows precisely why they are not “hostages” to the PS. The neoliberals in the PS and the European Union mongers fear the influence of the left and they are right on that – better than anyone, they know that the left is not their puppets or hostages.

As far as the Left Bloc goes, it signed an agreement with the PS in 2015. This imposed a new cadre to its activity but did not change the party's aims: to create a large class movement for socialism. Steps in that direction are made at different levels, such as favoring the recovery of the standard of living of workers and pensionists, creating better conditions for trade union collective bargaining, promoting self-organization of precarious workers, taking the fight to the core of the economic and social system. In this sense, the debate on the future of the National Health Service is nowadays the most heated, since it is at the center of the offensive of financiers against welfare, and it involves crucial decisions on budgeting.

This is the case in which the impact of the Blairite Third Way is pretty obvious, as it asks for a combination of privatization of services and extraction of rents to be paid by the public to the private sector. The Left Bloc responded to neoliberalism proposing a deep restructuring of the health system and did so in the most effective way, in coalition with no less than António Arnaut, the honorary president of the PS and founder (as he was the minister of health in the late 1970s) of the modern health system as it emerged from the April 1974 revolution. Arnaut prepared a new law together with João Semedo, an ex-MP for the Bloc, once its coordinator and the most distinguished spokesperson of the party for health. They published it in a book (December 2017, the cover is below) with huge impact. This is an expression of a political initiative looking for convergences in order to change the landscape of the discussions and choices.

Photo 8

A book and a law defending the national health service



Legend: “To protect the National Health Service”, a book by Antonio Arnaut (honorary president of the PS) and João Semedo (ex-coordinator of the Left Bloc, was an MP), proposes a new law for the organization of the health system, opposing the neoliberal solutions. It is currently being presented by the Left Bloc in parliament and, while many PS members support it, the government opposes it.

In this case as in others, the Left Bloc challenges and confronts the politics of the center. In fact, our views on the national health service have currently no majority in parliament but we are not defeated. We persist and insist. And this is how left politics will win: talking to people that share the same ideas, including in other parties, a social movement that is created, standing for concrete proposals and becoming able to deliver an alternative and not just a protest.

We fight for the majority in every map. We are no “hostages” except for our determination as militants for socialism.

Maria Manuel Rola, Adriano Campos, Jorge Costa

Annex: The Socialist Party and Left Bloc's joint position for a political solution **November 2015**

The Socialist Party (PS) and Left Bloc (BE) undertake the following agreement on a political solution within the framework of the new institutional reality of the XIII parliamentary term that resulted from the elections of 4 October.

1. The results of the national election of 4 October 2015 meant a clear defeat of the strategy of impoverishment and austerity conducted by the right-wing coalition (PSD-CDS) during the last four years. Taking into consideration the profound difficulties that Portugal is experiencing in the wake of a long social and economic crisis, and an external context of high uncertainty, and in the light of the new parliamentary composition that came out of the most recent electoral process, the PS, the Left Bloc and the CDU [electoral coalition between the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Greens (Verdes)] have announced a process of convergence founded on the patriotic necessity of translating into a political solution the will expressed in the ballot boxes. In this sense, these parties have assumed the responsibility of negotiating an agreement with the ultimate goal of constructing a stable, durable, and credible majority in parliament which sustains the formation and action of a government founded on the will of change expressed in the ballot box.

2. It is within this framework that both the PS and BE have established a joint position to identify matters, measures, and solutions that can implement the necessary changes. This is a serious position, which recognizes the distinct programs of both parties and the varying viewpoints from which they observe and frame structural aspects of the country's situation. This is also an evaluative process which acknowledges a series of measures that will respond quickly to the legitimate aspirations of the Portuguese people, namely the recovery of their lost income, the restoration of their rights, and the securing of better life conditions. These were the points of convergence, not of divergence, that both parties chose to value.

3. Among others, the PS and BE identify the following issues where convergence is possible, despite the different reach of each party's program, and solutions for immediate policies that are in view: Unfreezing of pensions; restitution of public holidays cancelled by the previous government; a decisive struggle against precarity, including false self-employment, the abusive use of internships and mandatory "social" work for the unemployed; revision of social security contributions for the self-employed; an end to the "special mobility" program for public sector workers; the right to collective bargaining in the public sector; reinstatement of all complementary pension plans for workers in state-owned enterprises; reduction of VAT to 13 % for restaurants; real-estate protection of the most vulnerable; protection of homes against foreclosure; tax incentives for SMEs; a reappraisal of all exemptions from social security contributions; a revival of the public national health system through an injection of sufficient resources, personnel and adequate technical and financial means, including the objective of guaranteeing to all services users access to a general practitioner and nurse; a repeal of the recent change to the law concerning the voluntary termination of pregnancy; guaranteed access to nursery school for all children from three years of age until 2019; increased social support for vulnerable students; permanent contracts for all education-sector workers; the reduction in the number of pupils per classroom; school textbooks to be made progressively free of charge for compulsory education years; permanent contracts for all PhD researchers working in public research centers and other public entities; repeal of all

privatization and concessions in the public transport sector; no new processes of privatization.

With the aim of including these measures in the government's program, the basis of the future cooperation between both parliamentary groups, the PS and BE have listed some of these and other points in the appendix attached to this declaration.

4. The PS and BE recognize the largest demands of political identification that a government and a government program would imply. The PS and BE also recognize that, within the framework of convergences that it was possible to achieve, the conditions are created to:

i) end the cycle of economic and social degradation that a PSD/CDS government would prolong. For this reason, both parties will reject any governmental solution that proposes a PSD/CDS government, and will, as well, try to defeat any initiative that tries to stop this alternative governmental solution;

ii) ensure the existence of an adequate institutional basis that can allow the PS to form a government, present its governmental program, assume functions, and adopt policies that ensure a long-lasting perspective for this legislative term;

iii) on the basis of the new institutional correlation present in parliament, adopt measures that respond to the aspirations and rights of the Portuguese people.

In this sense, the PS and BE affirm their reciprocal willingness to:

i) start a joint investigation into how the identified issues of convergence can be translated into the state budgets, with the objective of not missing the opportunity that these instruments enable: the indispensable restitution of salaries, pensions and rights; the indispensable reversal of the degradation of the life conditions of the Portuguese people; a commitment to the social services that must be provided by the state, to their accessibility to all citizens and to quality of service provided;

ii) examine the measures and solutions that, outside the sphere of the state budget, can be achieved more immediately;

iii) examine in bilateral meetings (on an as-needed basis) other measures whose complexity so requires, or that are related to:

a) legislation with a budgetary impact;

b) motions of no confidence;

c) legislative initiatives coming from other parliamentary groups;

d) legislative initiatives that although without implications for the budget constitute fundamental aspects of the governmental program and the functioning of Parliament.

This position does not limit other solutions that both the PS or BE decide to establish with the PCP or The Greens.

5. With full respect for the political independence of both parties, and fully open to the Portuguese people about the differences between the structural aspects of the political vision of each party's program, the undersigning parties of this text confirm with enough clarity their willingness and determination to prevent the pursuit of a political course by the PSD and CDS that the country has now expressly condemned, and to embark upon a new path for the country that guarantees:

- a) a reversal of the policies that have implemented the strategy of impoverishment carried out by the PSD and CDS;
- b) to defend the social functions of the state and public services, social security, education and health, and to promote a serious fight against poverty and economical and social inequalities;
- c) a new economic strategy that sustains growth and employment, an increase in family income, and the creation of conditions for public and private investment;
- d) to promote a new model of progress and development in Portugal that hinges on the valuation of salaries and the fight against precarity, returns to public investment in education, culture and science, and restores trust and hope in the future for Portuguese society.
- e) value citizens' participation, political decentralization, and autonomy of the insular territories.

Lisbon, 10 November 2015

Appendix to the joint political position

1. In order to prepare common initiatives on fundamental matters, a series of working groups will be created prior to the beginning of the legislative term. These groups will be composed of the undersigning parties, that is, by the member of government responsible for that particular area, and will present biannual reports:

- Working group to establish a National Plan against Precarity, to be presented to the “Conselho Económico e Social” [body where the government, the unions, and bosses meet to discuss labor laws];
- Working group on social protection and the fight against poverty;
- Working group on external debt sustainability;
- Working group to evaluate energy costs with a focus upon families and proposals for their reduction;
- Working group on housing policies, mortgage debt, and real estate taxation

2. The “regime conciliatório” [a form of labor market liberalization] will not be included in the government's program.

3. There will be no reduction of the Single Social Tax for employers included in the government's program.

4. On 1 January 2016, the norm established by Law no. 53-B/2006 of 29 December will be reinstated. This norm concerns the amendments to pension rates, with the guarantee there will be no nominal cut to pensions.

5. The need to diversify social security funding sources should be discussed through social dialogue institutions (“Conselho Económico e Social”). The signing parties commit to working together on a proposal to be presented to the “Conselho Económico e Social”.

6. In order to increase household income there will be a reduction of 4 percentage points on the

social security contributions paid by workers earning less than 600 euros a month. Such a reduction will not have any impact on final pensions; the loss of revenue is to be covered by fiscal transfers.

7. The National Minimum Wage will hit the 600 euros benchmark during the on-going legislative term through an annual raise of 5 % in the first two years;

8. Conferral of new powers to the Authority for the Labor Conditions for its fight against falsely reported self-employment and other illegal employment contracts that should be immediately converted into regular employment contracts.

9. The gradual restitution of public sector wages will begin in January 2016 (25 % in the first trimester; 50 % in the second; 75 % in the third; 100 % in the fourth);

10. The four holidays that were eliminated by the previous government will be reinstated.

11. Tax policy:

a) Move to progressive income tax through the introduction of new income brackets;

b) Withdrawal of the category “household coefficient” for tax purposes, which has a regressive impact, and its replacement by “each child” deductions with no regressive character;

c) Introduction of a limited annual increase of 75 euros for real-estate tax when it concerns permanent homes with a low market value;

d) Outlawing of any home foreclosures related to tax payments in arrears when the latter is a lower amount than the debt;

e) Revision of fines and interest charged in tax arrears;

f) To facilitate debt payment, plans for tax and social contributions arrears;

g) Reduction of VAT to 13 % for restaurants;

h) Reversal of the capital income tax code regarding “participation exemption” and the period given for the report of tax “losses”;

i) Tax incentives for firms located along the border, through capital income tax deductions

12. On the costs for families with electric energy and gas:

a) Redesign the Social Energy Tariff, making it automatic in its application to low-income families and beneficiaries of social support whose access is subject to conditions. In the case of consumers who are not beneficiaries of social support and are in a vulnerable financial situation, the income note issued by the Portuguese Tax Authority will allow compliance with the requirements for the application of the social tariff; consumers who, due to their level of income, are exempt from filing income declarations, must do so in order to obtain the income note from the Portuguese Tax Authority and thus access the social tariff; access to the social tariff gives automatic access to the Extraordinary Social Support for the Energy Consumer (ASECE);

b) Withdraw the audio-visual contribution fee from electricity bills and incorporate it into the realm of communications without loss of revenue for RTP (Radio and Television of Portugal)

13. Privatizations and Concessions:

a) Cessation of the on going processes of concessions and privatization of the public transport

systems of Porto and Lisbon;

b) Reversal of the mergers of water companies that might have been imposed on some municipalities;

c) Reversal of the process of privatization of EGF [company that builds and administers river dams], due to its illegality;

d) No new concession or privatization.

P.S.

* Maria Manuel and Jorge are members of Parliament; the three are members of the leadership of the Left Bloc, elected for the majority list.

* Notes: translation by the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation; the political joint position is the same text as that established between the PS and the CP, the appendix was signed only by the PS and the Left Bloc.

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 44751), [The Portuguese Myth and the Resurgence of Portuguese Social Liberalism](#).

[2] Catarina's list for the leadership obtained 11,4% of the votes of the members of the Left Bloc at the last Convention.

Maria Manuel and Jorge are members of Parliament; the three are members of the leadership of the Left Bloc, elected for the majority list, which obtained 79,7% of the votes of the members at the last Convention (2016)

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2edcLoyJSQ>

[4] <http://www.tvi24.iol.pt/politica/debate-costa-catarina-martins/catarina-martins-rejeita-acordo-com-costa-sobre-tsu>

[5] Príncipe's support for that decision was formally endorsed by her current inside the Left Bloc, which proposed a resolution to the leadership body with the following argument: "The mandate of the PS government led by Antonio Costa, made possible through the agreement celebrated with the parties to its left, created a new situation that defeated the right and put it out of power, and defined as the first objectives of the new government to recover labor income, to end privatizations and to rebuild the social functions of the State, in particular in relation to the urgent support to those sectors of the population that suffered more under the crisis. The popular vote of the 4th October elections that attributed to the anti-austerity left the required institutional weight to decisively contribute to the government solution formed by the PS, will be the assurance that such support does not mean accepting the PS program or its practice. (...) Without forgetting what brought us here, the Left Bloc will respect each point of the agreement with the Socialist Party. It will contribute at each moment so that the parliamentary majority that supports

the PS government will be able to find ways allowing for governing with justice and defending the social functions of the State, it will be a clear and constructive opposition respecting the popular will that imposed the conditions for the defeat of the right and made possible the agreement of the left. Not being part of the government, the Left Bloc will not be responsible for the government and will oppose many of its measures. It will be responsible for all the measures defined by the agreement and by all other measures that it will be able to construct with the PS in parliament and in the working groups defined by the agreement. It will also be responsible for the permanent verification of the conditions defined in the agreement it signed with the PS" (6 December 2015, proposed resolution). We fully endorse these considerations.

[6] Príncipe, Catarina (2017), Anti-Austerity and the Politics of Toleration in Portugal - A way for the Radical Left to develop a transformative project?, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, Berlin, December 2017:
https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/sonst_publicationen/Politics_of_Toleration_Portugal.pdf

[7] Príncipe explains the three conditions as follows: "The three main points that Left Bloc proposed to the PS as conditions of the party's support in a minority government were: 1) the unfreezing of pensions, 2) no further lowering of the Single Social Tax for workers and employers, and 3) an end to the labor market liberalization process. Accepting these three points would require the PS to make changes to its political and economic platform. This was a smart tactic: it forced the PS to define itself politically and to clarify its loyalties. But it was based on three premises that later proved incorrect: 1) that the PS would win the elections, 2) that Left Bloc would receive a low percentage of the vote, and 3) that the PS would refuse to negotiate with the Left. The elections delivered no absolute majority to any of the major parties in the new parliament, forcing coalition negotiations. Left Bloc's outstanding result, and the active role it had taken in offering the PS baseline terms for an agreement, pushed it into the center of these negotiations. The PS leadership clearly understood that they could not enter into negotiations with the right-wing parties". The description is right but the implicit assumptions assigned to Left Bloc are wrong. Indeed, the mentioned assumptions (the PS will reject the offer) were her own and not those of the leadership of the Bloc, which knew better, first that if a political proposition is made, it is to win and not to lose, second that the PS could not do otherwise.

[8] Furthermore, the agreement did not mean to be part of the government and supposed independence in every matter not covered by the pact: "This allowed the parties to declare that this was not their government and it would not solve the country's fundamental problems, but it would still try to address the public's immediate priority of ending the most damaging austerity measures. Moreover, it allowed the parties to vote against some governmental measures", as Príncipe rightly describes.

[9] To be rigorous, Príncipe's current took a different position, but that was just for the sake of the internal fight. On 26 November 2016, they have proposed a text stating, "This Budget [for 2017] does not meet the minimum conditions to be favorably voted by the Left Bloc". Yet the same resolution emphasized: "The agreement for the parliamentary support to the government was understood by the population as a very positive decision since it revoked some of the more aggressive measures of the troika government". On 27 November 2017, a new resolution was proposed to the Left Bloc stating that "The Budget for 2018 does not meet the necessary requirements to be favorably voted by the Left Bloc", a position that was rejected. It is noticeable that none of the texts proposed to vote against the budget, they simply stated, with a foggy wording, that a favorable vote was not advisable. These are clearly statements delivered for taking a stance in the internal conflict. At the same time, in public, Príncipe strongly opposed the

orientation for rejecting the Budget, provoking a political crisis and new elections, since “it would be counter-productive and unsustainable to defend a toppling of the government”.

[10] This is how Príncipe puts it, again emphasizing that the agreement ought to be established: “It would have been difficult for the Left Bloc to refuse to aid the formation of the Socialist-led government. But the Socialist Party’s survival needs also offered the Left Bloc more room to negotiate than it ultimately exploited. Entering this agreement demanded a strong strategy to face up to what was a very dangerous situation. This strategy should have accentuated the contradictions of the Socialist Party government, through an inside-outside strategy focused on pushing essential demands for an actual overthrow of austerity and building on the accumulation of discontent. In this, it was necessary to leave open the possibility of ultimately breaking the agreement, even at the cost of temporary electoral setbacks”. The last part is a misrepresentation, since “pushing essential demands for an actual overthrow of austerity and building on the accumulation of discontent” and “leaving open the possibility of ultimately breaking the agreement” was precisely what the Left Bloc did.

[11] <https://www.esquerda.net/sites/default/files/gtdivida.pdf>