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Interview

Portugal Left Bloc: “Somehow, we filled a space that did not exist, a political space that had not yet been recognized”

Monday 27 September 2010, by [LOUÇA Francisco](#), [ROMERO BAEZA Miguel](#) (Date first published: April 2010).

For some years, the political space to the left of “social democracy” has been shifting in Europe. Not always in the right direction: the crisis of Rifondazione in Italy or the Scottish Socialist Party or Respect platform in Britain are clear signs that the road is still steep and it is easy to stumble. But there are also stimulating experiences that appear to open breaches in a very prolonged phase of disorientation and political deadlock: the NPA in France, Die Linke in Germany and the Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal are those that have achieved the widest audience and, accordingly, are reference points for other ongoing projects.

Viento Sur [1] plans to give an account of these experiences through conversations with political leaders who are open to reflection on the practice of their organizations. We are not interested in ideological issues; we want to know the ways these organizations practice politics, their problems and their results.

What most attracts us about these experiences is their diversity, the different or even contradictory options that arise. We believe that every reader will find in them aspects that match and aspects that diverge. This is a good vaccine against “models”. There are no infallible guide-parties. We need instead a practical internationalism that seeks to know about other experiences of anti-capitalist politics and understand them so as to learn from them.

We do not have a timetable for the publication of interviews. We will try to not delay too much. We began the series talking with Francisco Louçã [2] about the Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, the least known organization of the new anti-capitalist left in Europe, perhaps because it is the most “unorthodox”. Which is in itself a good reason to take an interest in it.

Miguel Romero, editor of *Viento Sur*.

Miguel Romero: Let’s start with the origins of the Bloco.

Francisco Louçã : There was a social process of defeat of the left in the referendum on abortion in

1998. It was a situation in which the whole left was present with an expectation of winning which ended in a defeat, a tangential defeat, but an unexpected defeat with a great moral impact. It is true that this led the leadership of the UDP [Unión Democrática Popular, a group of Maoist origin] - who at that time already had less electoral presence though more of a militant base than the PSR [the Fourth international organisation] - to think about making a proposal to the PSR to create a new political force that completely reconfigured the field of the socialist left. And it presented this proposal. When it did so, there was not a tradition of strong unitary relationship of militant perspective; there had been an electoral convergence in 1983, six years before, which had failed, and the results were not significant.

M.R.: Was there a unitary campaign for the right to abortion?

F.L.: Not only between the UDP and the PSR. Within the framework of the campaign all currents were involved, people from the Communist or Socialist Parties or Catholics or even right wing people who did not accept that women were criminally punished for having an abortion. In the tactical options of the campaign there was some relationship between the PSR and UDP, but also with many others. There was a relationship of social movements with political parties, the expression of a movement in a unitary framework, but finally, nothing that created a political culture of relationship to a new party. You are right: the proposed establishment of the Bloco was the decision of a political leadership. When I met Luis Fazenda [leader of the UDP], after a few early meetings between representatives of both parties, we knew very little. We knew each other from afar, we had met once or twice at some meeting, but we had never had a conversation in depth. In this approach an important role of linking up was played by some people: for example, Fernando Rosas, a well-known political figure of the Portuguese left intelligentsia from the generation prior to ours, who came from the Communist Party and afterwards the extreme Marxist-Leninist left, and had already for many years worked with the PSR.

There was a general perception that an era was over. The moral effect of defeat in the abortion campaign was a sense of failure and the end of the period of April 25. The traditions of each party were such that most of the activists admitted that they needed something new; it was accepted, in the PSR, the UDP and PXXI [Política XXI, an organisation originating from a split in the PCP] which was another current associated with the process, but in principle it was thought that a coalition would suffice. Then came a precise proposal, a daring proposal: not a coalition, but a new political movement. There were no conditions for a unification of the parties which would require a convergence at the ideological level; this road lacked interest but what was possible, and much more important, was to create a political organization, whose strength and whose unity was established beyond ideology. To have a solid and stable political agreement we do not need to agree on the interpretation of the 1917 Revolution or the Chinese revolution in 1949. We had to concentrate on the definition of the political tasks and the formation of the political culture of the new movement, from the base. This proposal initially encountered difficulties within the UDP and inside of the PSR. But after initial resistance it was affirmed. I think that it was crucial to raise that option, although it was the most difficult.

M.R.: All this reminds me the situation here after the defeat in the NATO referendum. You were more intelligent than us, more "political" in the best sense of the word. You understood you had an opportunity to convert a defeat into a step forward for the anti-capitalist left and not to let it escape. Here in 1996 we didn't see that, and when we believed we saw it a few years later it was an illusion.

F.L.: The risk is that when in a phase of retreat, building a new organization is something dangerous. We had a political proposal which attracted many people who were not from the PSR, the UDP or of PXXI. Attracting many independent leftists was a very important aspect. In a few months

the Bloco became an organization of 1,200 or 1,300 members, most of whom were not members of the founding organizations. But above all, the Bloco was a political force with a capacity to act. In politics opportunities arise that are taken or not taken; these opportunities are built or they disappear. We faced significant challenges quickly: e.g. the movement for independence in Timor in 1999 after the foundering of the occupation by Indonesia, which had great force in Portugal. Also the mobilizations in response to the wars in the Balkans. That same year there were European parliamentary elections. The Bloco was present for the first time; we didn't get anybody elected.

M.R.: But the results were better than those previously obtained by the PSR and the UDP?

F.L.: We got more votes than the sum of those obtained previously by the organizations. Enough to understand that this vote in Lisbon would elect a deputy in national parliamentary elections. As it was shortly before the parliamentary elections, that created a capital of positive hope and expectation which was what upset the electoral balance. So we got two members in Lisbon which in successive elections became 3, 8 and 16. These successive electoral victories had an immediate impact on public and social intervention and all this in a very short time. It was possible to quickly see that the project to create a political force had strong ideas: the fight against globalisation - then was the period of the great rise of this movement - against war, against capitalism.

We provided immediate answers and that allowed us to do something that had never happened in Portuguese politics. Portuguese institutional politics consisted of two left wing parties and two right wing parties with few oscillations; there were internal changes but without structural changes in these parties. The UDP had a single deputy in 1976. There were splits in the Socialist Party re-absorbed later; the Communist Party had as many as 45 deputies at one stage (now 13). Nobody had outstripped the Communist Party in electoral terms. The emergence of a fifth national party is a unique case in a very stable structure. And we are talking about 25 years after April 25.

M.R.: I understand that you had sidelined ideological issues, but how were the political bases for agreement formalized? I imagine that there would be a common reference document.

F.L.: The Bloco began with a political text entitled *Começar de novo* (Starting Anew), a brief reference text that we later transformed into another more programmatic document, once we had verified the strength of political agreement on the attitude to society. The text was a natural result of the evolution of organizations, currents and independent persons, who had an important role in our leadership. It included our responses to actually existing capitalism, financialization, globalization, unequal exchange, mechanisms of exploitation and their social extension, the institutional question of the European Union... and other issues that had to be dealt with: social delinquency as exploitation, the vision of war... Political development was very much consolidated around these questions.

Somehow, we filled a space that did not exist, a political space that had not yet been recognized. This was possible thanks to the decisive role of the leadership, because any organization with institutional influence is under great pressure, any political organization that starts from a small group of hundreds of people is subject to enormous tensions of differentiation. Either a leadership is capable of managing this process, absorbing, creating public authority... or the process fails. Authority is very important, mass political authority, let's call it. The consolidated organization should see that its leadership represents an alternative to the existing parties and is working to create such an alternative in the social struggle of the masses.

For many years comrades had known that a party only has political influence when it is a compulsory reference point in all national debates; in any important matter that is being discussed,

it must be a compulsory reference. I firmly believe in this. On issues such as the Treaty of Lisbon, the stability programmes, the fundamental choices of economic policy... debate is intensive and this is where the ability to influence, create polarization comes into play.

M.R.: There is one aspect of your experience that I find particularly interesting. I assume that prior to the creation of the Bloco, there was a basically stable political map in Portugal as in most European countries. The appearance of the Bloco unbalanced, destabilized the map, because a political force appeared that was present in the institutions, but was not subject to the rules of “governability”.

F.L.: Yes, certainly. When we elected two deputies, it appeared as an electoral surprise. It was clearly a strong electoral base which reflected, to some extent, “abrilismo” [“Aprilism”], the political resistance of April 25. But it later responded to a left, socialist, radical, culture which struck a chord with militants of other parties.

The basic idea was to reject the idea that the Bloco was a mere “updating” of the far left and, on the contrary, place it as a force that competed for the leadership of the left. This was the case from the beginning, but it was gaining strength, because objectives must be based on what you can do. We knew that the key to our intervention was not to dispute a similar ground to that of the Communist Party. We could only gain strength in comparison to the Communist Party if our goal was far beyond that, pursuing a comprehensive recomposition of the left. This led us from the beginning to have a very unitary position towards the CP, which initially attempted, as you would expect, to belittle and ignore the existence of the Bloco, to then have a relationship with two aspects: a parliamentary relationship which was very unitary, negotiated, and intense, and at the same time, much dispute in terms of social viewpoint and political reference. The more aggressive the CP was from the political point of view, the more it lost. This allowed us to attract sectors coming from the history of the CP and win a huge confidence from the popular base which identified with the CP, in the fight against the austerity or for a combative trades unionism.

However, the key was the way in which we could respond to the challenge posed by the Socialist Party, as the ruling party and the regime of “alternation”. We were able to have a very strong political momentum when the Socialist Party lost the elections to the right in 2002; then the Bloco could have a very active policy in the alternative and in confrontation with the government and have a very unitary policy with the CP and the Socialists, something that the CP did not do. It always argued that there was a symmetry between the Socialists and the right. One government is the same as another. It is true that the policies that are applied may be even worse under a Socialist government as we see today, with the labour legislation of the Socrates government, but from the social point of view there are different bases. Therefore we developed a very active role in dialogue with the Socialist social base, which is an important part of the population, while presenting our criticisms and alternatives: this was our true dispute for hegemony and that is what we did. At that time there was in the leadership of the Socialist Party Ferro Rodrigues who was a leader of the Movement of the Socialist left (MES) at the time of the April 25; I have known him since I was 14 years old. We could do many things with them, in spite of major differences in economic policies, but in the fight against poverty and for social security we took valuable initiatives. This leadership was decapitated by a judicial proceeding, a legal frame-up. Afterwards came José Socrates, who is a liberal technocrat.

What became clear at the time was that the Bloco de Esquerda should have two concerns: one, to build a movement with mass influence to represent an important social force with an anti-capitalist consciousness, a socialist politics, there can be no doubt about that. But at the same time, we had to develop a centre of tactical intervention, a capacity for tactical relations that could be very effective in confrontation with neoliberal policies. I think that this is the main difference between the Bloco de

Esquerda and many other European revolutionary organizations that we know of. Tactical intervention is very important to us. There is an “identity-based” space of affirmation of a political culture, an ideology, but the political action of the organization is not the affirmation of identity, but the relationship with other sectors to create convergence, because if there is an attack on social security, or concerning the retirement age, an attack on wages, that requires a left organization with mass influence, which is important in the fight to stop this attack. This is a way of practicing politics to win: we must be strong where Governments are weak; we need to create convergence where there is more support for socialist policies.

M.R.: is this a criterion of the leadership or a party culture among the activists? Some time you hear it said in educational sessions that a revolutionary policy “being correct” does not have much value: what matters is to intervene to change reality. But to change reality it seems the initiative of the party is not enough; there is a need for a close relationship with the social movements and that may give rise to conflicts between the “political” and the “social”.

F.L.: These conflicts exist. In general, social movements in Portugal are very little organized. The strongest and more structured is the trade union movement which has a rate of unionization of only 15 or 18%, and is very limited in its capacity of organization, of social intervention, although capable of promoting some big political actions with a strong impact, demonstrations of 100,000 or 200,000 people on issues like education, health, unemployment, or “austerity”.

But there is no structured feminist movement, the environmental or counter-cultural movements are weak, although there is a significant internationalist movement. We are developing pioneering work with our members, and this sometimes influences our relations with civil society. Already some years ago, about four years ago, we decided to involve ourselves in the work of the social organisation of young people in precarious work, collaborating with some trade union organisations, but also meeting some hostility from other unions, and with non trade union organisations. We developed our own policy initiatives: mobilizations, legislative initiatives, create associative networks and so on. But it is political initiative which creates these movements and our activists try to occupy the greatest possible political space.

M.R.: I understand, but I think that this situation must create tension, or at least risks of tensions between the “political” militants of the Bloco and the “social” activists of the movement...

F.L.: But this is something inevitable, natural in a mass movement. And on the other hand, it must be considered that the Bloco has the characteristics of a “political movement”; we have some 8,000 adherents with very uneven levels of militancy. What fundamentally defines our political identity is public dispute, a very strong confrontation with the government in Parliament, which is the centre of political debate in Portugal. There are very tough debates with the Prime Minister every fortnight, in which we present alternatives, with important consequences including for the governing party, every fifteen days. In the previous parliament, in which the Socialist Party had an absolute majority, our policy of alliances with critical Socialist sectors led several times to the government’s parliamentary defeat: in two cases, the government won by two votes, because several members of the Socialist Party voted against their government on important topics: privatisation, health education, and above all labour legislation. This represents a serious break from the political viewpoint in Portugal; hence came our relations with Manuel Alegre, who led this process of political and parliamentary insubordination and who will be a major left candidate in the upcoming presidential elections. We have a very broad convergence with many sectors that can defend the public sector against privatisation or against greater flexibility and new labour legislation. This improves our ability for expression in the mass movement, hinders the government offensive and

could politically unbalance this conflict.

We create social space for political struggle, thus increasing the chances of convergences. Our line is this: the centre of activity for the Bloco de Esquerda is the defence of public services, our main battle is fighting liberalization and privatization, the defence of public services of education and health, the protection of economic democracy against inequality. We want people to understand that we are useful, that we can decide and from that point of view serve to change their lives. And we want this impact in the dispute with the government and the Socialist Party

M.R.: It seems that this policy depends a lot on immediate results, let us say obtaining “successes”, not simply electoral, but at least partially attaining the objectives proposed. But in the situation in which we live is very difficult to obtain those “successes”. Sustaining the long-term construction of an anti-capitalist organization on tactics and their short-term results seem very problematic.

F.L.: A pressure for “results” exists, but I think that it is not the decisive aspect. Faced with social despair what we have is a reform without reforms, a social democracy without compensation. This leads to a social tensions with consequent fear of unemployment, insecurity, isolation of wage-earners and so on. The perception of injustice is accentuated by our ability to act. This is in itself a result: people know that there is someone who fights for them, who is prepared to expose this insane, economic system, to explain, to show what injustice is in itself something mobilizing and organizing.

For example, something we often do is have a very direct response to the financial scandals, the functioning of the banking system. This is something which has also led to many judicial processes on the part of managers, entrepreneurs, many attacks from them. The best-known employer in the country Belmiro de Azevedo, recently made a violent attack against me. This strengthens us much... And these employers know why we threaten their power: there was a case of collapse of a bank in a crisis of 2008, several banks had problems, but one of them went under; a parliamentary committee of inquiry on this bank was created, where we were present and we denounced all the details of offshore trading, commissions... We held public meetings explaining how these processes worked; this created an anti-capitalist education, a concrete perception of what the economy is, a very strong perception from the point of view of the indignation, the politicization, the mobilization of people and their response.

M.R.: How do these public meetings work?

F.L.: We hold them regularly all around the country to give an account of our parliamentary work and discuss with people. In addition, two years ago, we started to organize in August a series of street meetings, in public squares in the open air, for people passing by, which year attracted more than 20,000 people. Always on these specific issues, where there is a great social concern. The audience is very interesting: pensioners, Socialist Party voters, teachers, some young voters. We have a reverse of the Communist Party age pyramid: the CP has few young voters and many elderly, while in our case it is the other way round. Now we start to recompose that relationship. It's about having a strong political impact while simultaneously perceiving the need for specific, practical changes and also their difficulty. Not to create illusions about what can happen, not promise people a pay rise, but show how wages could rise if there were measures of economic justice. This gives anti-capitalism a much greater force than any anti-capitalist, propaganda proposal because it allows a specific expression of what injustice is, why some companies do not pay taxes, why in one hour commissions of 30 million Euros are paid to a banker, why a manager can earn seven times the salary paid to an employee, and so on.

M.R.: The Bloco has been a highly pluralistic organisation since its foundation. How do you work in such conditions? A system of seeking consensus? How do you manage disagreements?

F.L.: At the last Congress, last year, there were three lists: the majority which won 81% more or less, a minority motion with 11% and the other which was 8%. So on a directly proportional basis we elected 80 members to the National Committee which is the governing body: therefore, there are 16 or 17 members of minorities, who present their viewpoints. There is a minority that is part of the Trotskyist current known as "Morenistas" and maintains a systematic opposition, do a kind of "entry" work, which is not very relevant; they have some people, some young people, but are not important in promoting the political thinking of the Bloco. There are other currents in the second minority who collaborate and have partial agreements with the majority. The majority itself is very diversified, also because we have regional organizations that are already strong enough in themselves. The differentiation of the country is extensive, so that in each region different perceptions are posed, a different work from the point of view of political synthesis. This is expressed in congresses, meetings, regional and sectoral conferences (trade union, ecology, youth, mayors and councillors, who are about 350, most participating in municipalities without direct responsibilities; only in rare cases we are part of a governing majority). We have little implantation in local institutions; in proportion, far less than at the national level.

M.R.: Sorry to insist on this, but democratic management of differences arising out of its own practice in a large party seems very complex. There is a culture that comes from the social forums, and that has permeated many organizations, establishing consensus as the sole criterion. But it tends to convert disagreement into a disease, rather than something normal in a free and healthy collective.

F.L.: In a structure such as the social forums consensus is possible because it works with common minimum denominators and freedom of action: outside of the consensus everyone does what they want. In a party that cannot be true: a party has to work with the maximum possible agreement and not the minimum possible agreement. What is decisive in politics in the long term is the strategic coherence of a leadership, which knows where to go how to act.

M.R.: Yes sure, but these are objectives that are extremely difficult to achieve and they cannot be achieved without debate.

F.L.: All the elements are important: but having a leadership with a very clear consciousness and rejecting leadership methods which create division is key. A party like the Bloco simultaneously has a strong public presence, an important institutional presence and a great social diversity. The leadership must be very capable of interpreting all the signals and making decisions that strengthen the Bloco. The level at which decisions are taken in a leadership of this type is an everyday, permanent level. But they are important decisions. We now have, for example, a confrontation with the government on a regional finance law, a confrontation, very sharp moreover, with public implications, threats of resignation from the government, and so on. We have a conflict on labour legislation, a major problem concerning a large multinational factory which is going to close, lay off workers... The ability to act is highly dependent on very precise, very tactical decisions.

As we live in a universe where politics is communication, "tactical and precise" also refers to the choice of words: the form of conducting politics is largely around image, through the proposal made, the conflict of ideas, the presentation of alternatives, the social organization that is recognized and creates impact. This involves choosing very precisely: a leadership does not speak with many voices, speaks in highly concentrated terms, which involves having a very high level of confidence and a high degree of consultation. When I need to make immediate decisions, I consult the key persons on

the subject concerned, the other parliamentarians, people with more experience and knowledge in this field; and at the same time if I know that someone is to make a speech that can politically affect the image of the Bloco, we jointly discuss the exact manner in which that should be done. It is not just about politics in general, but matters of detail, knowing exactly how each view is expressed. For example: the Prime Minister gives an interview on the political situation on Monday. All broadcasters transmit the live response of the various parties. Therefore it is very important that our response is extremely accurate, not what a leader thinks at that time. Before responding, we take a few minutes to consult. Because the political conception of an organization relies heavily on communication.

M.R.: Let's see, develop this a little more.

F.L.: This is one of the major changes made by the Bloco, and not only derives from this institutional presence that we won, but cannot lose. This is a strategic choice that we have made in the past five years: transforming our model of communication regarding left traditions left as we know them.

M.R.: This is an important issue. Can you explain what your system of press is? In particular, to consider one of the oldest traditions of left communication: what role does the newspaper of the organization play?

F.L.: Ever smaller. We have a monthly newspaper that is sent to the members of the Bloco and distributed on newsstands. But perhaps in the future it will no longer exist, because the centre of our communication is the internet. We have a web portal where a professional team works that is already very large, about ten people, working in radio, television, and media consulting. We also intervene in social networks. It is a highly developed information system with an ambitious goal. We would be happy if we had about 100,000 people, 1% of the population following the information we produce daily.

M.R.: You are very far from that?

F.L.: We are already close to 40 or 50,000 people counting all forms of communication we use: social networks, internet access, broadcasting on Youtube and similar things. We also have several people working as press consultants with the leadership with the Bloco. The relationship with the press is a difficult one.

M.R.: It sounds weird that you have "media advisors" in a militant organization...

F.L.: These people are great professionals in communication, and are also among the best political cadres that we have. We need skilled people, with a capacity of communication with the directors of newspapers, the television editors, with those responsible for news, to respond appropriately.

We are in a world in which we focus on communication. The dominant communication is a world of manufacture of rumours as a political weapon, of communication agencies formed by "spin doctors". We have to overcome them. There is an intensive debate about that, and we have to be the most capable in this debate, creating ideas that mobilize and inform social mobilization. So we had to decide on a major change in our system of communication, which will be increasingly important in our policy.

M.R.: OK, let's move on to another topic. Suppose that you consider that an objective is correct but have no capacity for mobilization in the short term, because it is too radical: for example, the prohibition of layoffs. If so, do you discard it?

F.L.: We are introducing a programme that is consistent from the point of view of a socialist idea.

We are not interested in the paralysing distinction between maximum and minimum programme. When we introduce a proposal for action, of response, immediate intervention on the situation, we try to be understood by people, and we can therefore expand our ability to influence in this area, starting from this response.

For example, turning to your question on the prohibition of layoffs, which as you know, is a subject of discussion with comrades from other European countries. We advocate an idea that seems to me just, difficult and provocative: prohibition of layoffs in companies that make or have made profits. If you have made a profit in past years, the idea is that it is returned to society, maintaining employment. People understand that it is a strong position but not part of the tradition of the labour movement on this issue. I think it is an understandable and correct position. On the other hand, the general idea of banning layoff, outside of this context, would I think be empty. It would mean automatic nationalization of all companies in bankruptcy by a neoliberal government, which has no sense or credibility. It does not correspond to the level of overall perception of the working population or the capacity to implement a socialist model. A left government with a socialist culture cannot emerge immediately and therefore this cannot be regarded by the generality of workers as a concrete answer to unemployment. It is mere political poetry: it doesn't help, or mobilize, or give rise to an important battle for the consciousness of people. I understand that it is among alternatives arising in the political and social struggle. But we cannot choose the proposals that are the most radical, but those that respond best to the question that arises and, therefore, achieve a greater impact.

M.R.: I have the perhaps mistaken notion that the more success a party obtains the more it is “nationalized”. On the other hand it seems clear that the conditions to take forward anti-capitalist politics are increasingly international. To go to specific issues: frankly, I do not see in the Bloco much interest in issues outside of Portugal.

F.L.: No comment [in English in the original].

M.R.: I was afraid of that...

F.L.: Now to be serious. Today a socialist programme would undoubtedly be strangled by the European Union. Any active socialist policy has to deal with the EU institutions to transform the conditions of European politics. It is obvious. We, however, still have no chance of victory in this area. We are still in a context of initial political construction of a European intervention. On the other hand, the stronger a party or movement is in a country, the more it depends on national politics, the more absorbed it is in national politics. Even a global or European coordination of the left must be based on strong national parties rather than minority organizations which are coordinated for ideological reasons. We need to attempt a relationship of very diverse currents, a little as Trotsky did in the 1930s with the British ILP, Dutch SAP, the POUM,... a relationship of different currents with much more variety than what we can imagine today.

We must do this with great naturalness. There is a certain nationalization of politics when this is decisive, that is true. A political organization with mass influence is the subject of claims which do not arise in other circumstances and this is why it has these priorities. It is also true that a form of international coordination is lacking, we are in a phase of reconstruction of the left and there will be here and there successes and failures. It is also true that Portugal is not, for example, France: France is the most politicized country in Europe and is a central European country. Perception of political relations is very different in France than it is in Portugal. It is perfectly understandable that is so, because France has another place in European construction, as do Germany and Italy, even Spain. Portugal is a country which is very peripheral from this point of view.

M.R.: Let me ask you a question on a topic which will probably be controversial on the European left. At the presidential elections to be held in January the Bloco will support the candidacy of Manuel Alegre, a prominent member of the Socialist Party left. Can you explain the reasons for this decision?

F.L.: Manuel Alegre was a presidential candidate five years ago. The PS ran Mario Soares and he was presented as an alternative candidate. He launched a movement which surprised us, because he had many more votes than Soares. He swept the Socialist electorate and added many independent leftists who were critical of the then Socialist Government: it was the first indication we had that it was possible to have a dialogue with a distinct sector of the Socialist electorate. From there our tactical vision became more precise and we had a direct goal, namely to establish a permanent dialogue with this sector.

Dialogue was launched, particularly with Alegre, who moreover radicalized his differentiation from the Socialist Party, for which he was a deputy as well as being Vice-President of the Assembly of the Republic. Alegre voted against the government on important economic issues, often agreeing with us; this led to a major crisis in the PS.

Dialogue and convergence established this political base allowing the holding of two major forums, one on democracy and left politics and one on public services. Actions were carried out in Lisbon and had a strong political impact because never had a leader of the Socialist Party supported a meeting convened by very different forces, involving also trade unionists, leaders of the CGTP and others from the social left. This was seen as an act of transformation of Portuguese left politics.

Alegre then decided not to be a candidate for Parliament for the PS because of disagreement with the reform of the labour code, but he remains a member and has participated in initiatives of his party. Now he has decided to be a candidate for the Presidency.

This candidacy has created a huge division in the Socialist Party. So far the government has said nothing. The problem currently is that no Socialist leader wants to put themselves forward because they would get fewer votes than Manuel Alegre. A significant part of the centre and right Socialist sectors have spoken out against Alegre, accusing him of being a person very close to the Bloco. The CP has already announced it will present a candidate and has also criticized Manuel Alegre for his relationship with us, but announcing that their votes would go towards the election of a candidate from the left.

M.R.: Have you have considered the possibility of taking a similar position: your own candidate with the destination of their vote announced from the beginning?

F.L.: In these elections a candidate of the Bloco would have no meaning; they are elections that will be decided in the first round. The right is unified around President Cavaco Silva, so either he wins in the first round or a left candidate does. No President has ever lost in a bid for re-election, but a President running for their last term of office has never had a strong challenge. This means that the electoral polarization will be total.

If we had a candidate, it would be insignificant from the electoral viewpoint and sectarian from a political viewpoint. But that is not the reason why we will not be present. Our choice is part of the policy we want: i.e. to develop to the maximum a current that can raise inside the broad electoral space of the Socialist Party the contradiction of a strategic discussion on neoliberalism or public politics, neoliberalism or socialism. And this is what Alegre represents. His discourse has been very strong on insecurity, unemployment, the labour code and he clearly belongs to a sector to the left of the Socialist Party. Recently, his speech against the stability and growth programme presented by

the Socrates government and condemning privatization, wage policy and the degradation of the public services, was one of the positions with major impact on society and the political debate, and led to responses from the Government. Incidentally, the Bloco was the only party that presented an alternate text to the programme, which was voted on in Parliament, with alternatives to the wage freeze, privatization, tax policy, showing how public services and social security should be funded.

Creating a majority party requires the development of these differentiations over time and the political change that they represent. On the other hand, we have a government with a relative majority; the government wants to bring the elections forward. It has constitutional difficulties around this, but wants to overcome them as soon as possible to try to regain an absolute majority, taking advantage of the fact that the drama of the budgetary adjustment has not yet taken place in 2010; they know the social problems which will accompany such a reduction of public spending and wages and pensions.

The Socialist Party lost the absolute majority because of the increase in the vote for the Bloco de Esquerda. And this rise in the vote of the Bloco is explained, largely, because of our relationship with critical Socialist Party voters. Disgruntled Socialist voters felt that there could be an alternative and that bridges of dialogue on the left existed. That changed the perception of hundreds of thousands of people. And the government knows. If it calls early elections, it will seek to fight the Bloco in order to regain the absolute majority.

The only left party that is in dispute with the Socialists is the Bloco, because what is decided here is whether there is an absolute majority. A policy of isolation in the presidential election was the worst mistake that we could commit. What interests us specifically is situating the contradiction and the difficulties on the side of the Socialist Party and we have the strength of a policy of convergence. Therefore for the decisive dispute which is that of the government, the more able we are to have convergence, dialogue and broadening, the stronger we are and we will deprive the Socialists of an instrument of isolation as that it could benefit from in that context.

M.R.: Well, we are already finished. In his last article, Daniel [Bensaid] proposed recuperating the “Communist” idea as that which best corresponds with what we want to do, even recognizing that it is contaminated by Stalinism. We should not lose sleep over names, but I think it is true that we have no words to satisfactorily explain who we are and the society that we are fighting for. What do you think about this topic?

F.L.: It is true that more and more activists are recuperating the word communism – since the tragedy of the Soviet Union or China- in the sense of common property, a society transformed radically, but this process unfolds strictly in terms of ideas: it is a militant reference point for some very politicized layers. As a form of social identification that produces sympathy for our project, I do not think that we succeed in overcoming in the short term the brand that marked the Soviet tragedy. It is true that the Soviet century ended with the fall of the wall and that ended the centrality of the history of the Soviet Union for all formations on the left. We have to face this history in the 21st century, as also in China which will be still more important for the future, very differently to how we did in the 20th century, in that there are now other emancipatory movements which can make important contributions. I think we need to have a very open mind on this question.

However, in social intervention, defining ourselves as “socialist left” feels better and more straightforward in the struggle for hegemony with people who call themselves socialist and whose policies are often the most aggressive against the working population.

M.R.: Finally, I think that the greatest achievement of the Bloco in recent years is its reliability, the political-moral link it has established a significant part of the “people of the

left", beyond even of their own constituents. Have you sought specifically to strengthen this relationship or is it a consequence derived from political intervention?

F.L.: What we want is to be as independent as possible to have direct relations with a portion of the population, but it is clear that the decisive aspect of communication is the way in which we construct a discourse with impact on millions of people and that is part of the creation of a social movement of struggle. The kernel of this is being highly politicized, very prepared and attentive to detail. The detail must always be rigorous. It must always be to the millimetre in terms of what is being done and what is said. Modern communication is a regime of clips: political discourse is 25 seconds. It therefore has to be very direct and mobilizing against the "pacifying" and alienating discourses.

How to construct credibility in the context of this relationship? Especially with policy coherence. For example on fiscal matters, a matter on which we have worked for ten years, we work on tax inequality, combating evasion, the protection of the financial system... we are trying to build a public perception about this. In a situation of injustice, it is important that people know how injustice works, how they are robbed.

On the other hand, is the ability to accumulate trust. People follow our interventions in discussions with the Government. The Prime Minister is a very aggressive man, particularly with the Bloco because he feels that our policy is inconsistent with his. This is a huge advantage for us. Firstly because the media focus on conflict and not consensus. The first news is that of confrontation between the Government and us. This builds over the years the idea of a left that disputes, which is not afraid, that teaches things as they are. We have already brought about the fall of a member of the Council of State, a banker who was a trusted aid of Cavaco Silva. We showed his responsibility in the failure of a bank. We managed to force the resignation of a director of the main Portuguese private bank for fraudulent handling of offshore accounts. We managed to defeat them.

There is a strong class hatred transmitted also on the other side: action creates reaction and there is class hatred from our social adversaries and the government class also, who are aware that we are at a turning point for the country's political future. This creates credibility, creates strength. It largely explains why we have more votes than the CP, despite the fact that this party has an intense history in the anti-fascist struggle, a continuity of activists over several generations and still has a social base, strong, organized, still with more social intervention than us. We have a lot to do, but this is what explains this difference.

M.R.: One more. A few months ago, in a statement to the newspaper "Diagonal", Jorge Costa, a leader of the Bloco with whom I have the impression that you bet on quite well, said: "the struggle of the Bloco is for the destruction of the traditional political map of the country ". It is a strong formula which leads directly to the question of government. But what can it mean to govern from the left in the world we inhabit in Western Europe?

F.L.: We used the expression "destruction of the traditional political map" in the most precise meaning of the terms, namely that the existence of the Bloco de Esquerda will transform Portuguese politics and, in particular initiate a battle for hegemony so there is a dominant force in the Portuguese left able to opt for socialism. This is exactly our challenge to the Socialist Party. The Socialists have 40%, the CP 10%. Our problem is the 40% of the Socialist Party. While alternation is situated between the Socialist and the right with essentially continuous politics, the social organization of the workers is overdue. The Bloco is not intended to be a marginal party for government alliances, coalitions or support as others might think, but a party whose objective is to fight for hegemony, to be dominant, because it is a dominant force. This means also raising the question of government.

This party wants to govern and that is what people understand. People are not currently waiting for an organization that raises the strategic conditions of socialism as an immediate solution, but a government that can immediately respond to economic disaster. That is why the question of neoliberalism is so important from a tactical point of view. We have to hegemonize the fight against neoliberalism. If confused Keynesians and similar people have intellectual hegemony among politically active people conscious of what neoliberalism means, we are lost. The same is true with human rights: if the left is not able to raise the banner of human rights, it is not a political reference point.

To win, the left must be capable of hegemonizing and leading the fight against neoliberalism, because that is the actually existing capitalism. We do not accept a distinction between capitalism and neoliberalism: neoliberalism is the form of capitalism, the effective form of its updating and the transfer of income inside modern societies. It is here where the relations with other sectors arise, so as to hegemonize a governmental alternative regarding this policy. Our goal is not resistance; our goal is to win, to be a strong majority, to have the majority, to determine policy. The process of political recomposition or reconstitution of class representation is a condition to make this possible. This will not happen without having achieved hegemony, without have attracted a large part of the national intelligencia. We must be able to manage national projects, direct the financial system, to carry out a decisive project of a decisive socialist rupture. It will take a long time yet to get there; time for implantation and class organization, the structuring of a popular and workers' movement, which is the only possible axis for a combat for socialism.

The enunciation of this policy objective must be our starting point. At each decision which is practical, immediate, for us to show what a socialist government would do as opposed to a neoliberal government. We must ensure that people feel that difference. Today it is only a minority: it is necessary to broaden the number of people with this perception.

P.S.

* From Vientpo Sur April 2010. Translation International Viewpoint published in English in IV # 428 - September 2010.

* Miguel Romero is the editor of the Madrid-based journal 'Viento Sur'.

Francisco Louçã is an economist and a Left Bloc member of the Portuguese parliament. He was the candidate of the Left Bloc in the presidential election of January 2005 (where he won 5.3% of the votes).

Footnotes

[1] a journal sharing the general stance of Izquierda Anti-capitalista, section of the Fourth International in the Spanish state.

[2] Françisco Louçã is a member of parliament and coordinador of the political committee of the BE.