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European Left Party (ELP) founded - Between neoliberal left and anti-capitalist left

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Fifteen parties from the Communist tradition from eleven different countries held a congress in Rome, on May 8-9, 2004, to found the European Left Party or ELP.

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The Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC, also known as Rifondazione), which had organized the event, laid on a beautiful production which was intended to symbolize hope and harmony. An attempt to incorporate the parties of the radical left failed. Around 20 Communist and progressive parties from outside the ELP or the European Union (EU) were invited as guests to give an internationalist touch and emphasize the international links of the new European political formation. Overall, however, the profile of the ELP remains that of the Communist world and its multiple differentiations.

The Congress realized its three objectives, adopting statutes (with three abstentions and eleven votes against), a Manifesto (unanimous except for four abstentions) and an initial list of parties which will officially constitute the ELP, sufficient to obtain its recognition by the EU. [[1](#)]

After that, the ELP found itself facing the reality of the new formation, its contradictions, orientations, alliances, and organizational coherence. As PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti, freshly elected as president of the ELP, put it, "It's a difficult undertaking, but useful and necessary..."

What is the meaning of the ELP for the political landscape of the left?

A laborious birth

Two founding documents were adopted, the Statutes, whose preamble is important because it indicates the political nature of the party and the Manifesto, which - being longer and more concrete - develops explicitly the ELP's politics and tactics.

There are noticeable differences between the two, the Statutes being clearly more moderate than

the Manifesto. One of the reasons for this is certainly linked to their different destination - the Statutes are to be submitted to the presidency of the European Parliament so that the party can be recognized as "European party", whereas the Manifesto is addressed to activists and to the public. It is undoubtedly not by chance that the German PDS took responsibility for editing the Statutes, while Rifondazione produced the Manifesto. The PRC has left its mark on the tone and content of the Manifesto with more radical political formulae. In some of its formulations this text is reminiscent of the declarations of the European Anti-Capitalist Left (EACL). [2]

It should not be forgotten that the two founding texts of the ELP represent the lowest common denominator between parties. Each of the member parties has its own analyses and orientations which form the true basis of their politics. In their long post-Stalinist crisis, these parties have not ceased to diversify ideologically - between each other, and inside themselves. The texts adopted are not obligatory "resolutions". [3]

The interest of the documents adopted is not the extent to which they display the internal contradictions of the ELP but rather how the latter, having adopted these documents, will operate as a "European party".

Between neoliberal left and anti-capitalist left

Through these texts, the ELP situates itself to the left of neoliberal social democracy (and certainly the German Green Party). But it also distinguishes itself clearly from the anti-capitalist left. With this latter, the ELP has convergences - at least with certain member parties - on the analysis of contemporary capitalism, the updating of the analyses and language in relation to society, the taking into account of new oppositions and movements, and a vast terrain of serious demands allowing united action and collaboration on the national and European levels. These agreements reveal themselves in a very unequal manner. There are also significant disagreements, particularly on the governmental question and that of the bourgeois state. The Stalinist tradition introduced - in the 1930s, during the "popular fronts" - the "exceptional" possibility of governmental collaboration with social democracy and the parties of big capital. Then Eurocommunism banalized this idea, from the early 1970s onwards. No principle prevents the CPs, above all the most open and de-Stalinized, from continuing along this road; even in relation to what is now a neoliberal social democracy. It is symptomatic that in the two texts there is only a single and utterly bizarre reference to the Second International: "The social democratic concept of the Third way in Europe has failed, because it did not resist this development [neoliberalism and war - ed.] and did not have any alternative, thus promoting it". That's all, whereas in the past 20 years we have seen the biggest programmatic, social and organizational changes in social-democracy since 1914, with multiple consequences - a social democracy which has insulted its own social base, its affiliated organizations and its activists, and which is not ready to abandon the neoliberal system.

Anti-capitalist?

The texts of the Rome Congress should be read reasonably, that is to say without ascribing to them the ideological constraint of the Marxist-Communist tradition of the past century. These documents carry a solid dose of pragmatism. They have been put together to win over or exclude parties. This is the compromise which marks the beginning of the process of the ELP, rather than principles, openly discussed.

That doesn't mean they weren't fiercely negotiated - while the assembly of the Congress heard a

juxtaposed series of declamations from the big names of the parties, in the cellars of the same building two “working groups” were meeting and this is where the real debate took place.

We should not then under-estimate the first phrase of the Preamble: “We unite democratic parties of the alternative and progressive Left on the European continent that strive for the consistent transformation of today’s social relationships into a peaceful and socially just society on the basis of the diversity of our situations, our histories and our common values”.

This paragraph seems to be written for a party which is preparing to plunge itself into clandestinity! Nobody likes wooden language, but there is something pathetic in this desire to hide and dilute concepts and theoretical formulae. And that has consequences for the content of analyses, more in the Statutes than in the Manifesto. Mention of “capitalism” or the “capitalist system” is scrupulously avoided, as is reference to socialism or any other expression which would indicate a post-capitalist society. When the text speaks of “internationalization and globalization” they are characterized as “liberal” and “the result of political developments and decisions”. It is “forgotten” that globalization results above all from the intrinsic logic of capitalism today, the extraordinary expansion of the world market in trade and investment and thus the preponderant role of the big multinationals. The text wants a “world that is not a commodity” but one is dumbfounded by its concrete definition as “a new world of peace, democracy, sustainability and solidarity”.

The “social question” is absent from the Statutes. This is not true of the Manifesto which broadly develops social and societal demands (ecology, health, patriarchy, education, sexual orientation and so on) relating to all the conditions of life and work. It insists, moreover, on social mobilizations and movements. But neither the Statutes nor the Manifesto draw the strategic consequences of imposing these demands and bringing about a “consistent transformation”.

First the ELP ignores the existence of social classes, except for one, the “financial hegemonic groups”. It avoids “naming” the exploited class, (whether one calls it the “working/labouring/wage-earning” class or the “exploited world of labour”), that is the majority social force, which by its place in society, its self-activity and self-organization can change the relations of force, intervene in the political process and impose another politics, indeed another society.

So the ELP approaches neither the social and political crisis, nor the rupture involved in “transformation” - all is gradual, amorphous, “from above”, and parliamentary.

Yet reversing the dominant neoliberalism and cancelling out the enormous social regression of the last 20 years will meet fierce resistance from the employers and the governments, backed up by the state and the EU. Applying the social demands contained in the Manifesto is impossible without a revision of tax and economic policy, without the redistribution of wealth and a massive renewal of public services, in short without radical incursions on private property. Not to mention a “consistent transformation” which will generate upheavals leading to a change of society.

We do not doubt that the ELP wants “another world”, but we have to note that it does not have an anti-capitalist strategy.

“Taking responsibility”...

Nonetheless, the ELP does approach “politics”, albeit indirectly, in a very summary fashion and from a very specific angle: “The Left is willing to take on responsibility in Europe and the world for the shaping of our societies, to work out political alternatives, to promote them among the public and to win the required majorities”. [\[4\]](#)

This formula - "take on responsibility" - is not anodyne in such a text. Not only does it confirm the preponderance of parliamentarism; it also puts "the Party" in the position of command! It is the Party which "shapes", "works out", "promotes" and "wins" majorities. An extraordinary return of the party which leads the movement and the "public".

This phrase figures above all as a safeguard against the eventual abandonment of governmental participation, which can only amount to collaboration with a social democracy (and its assimilated parties) which remains neoliberal. Indeed, the minimum programme - if one does not wish to compromise oneself - is a commitment to implement a vast programme of social recuperation at the service of the working population, which will require a break with neoliberal policies and the main bodies of the EU.

With the EU/Europe (see below), we touch on one of the two central political questions which will weigh heavily on the trajectories of the parties of the ELP.

...with neoliberal social-democracy

None of the texts deal with this problem. It was also absent from the speeches of the participants in the Rome congress. Bertinotti (PRC) and Buffet (PCF) fiercely criticized social liberal policies. That does not rule out a governmental agreement. Bertinotti has worked for a year for a new centre-left government, led by Prodi, the symbol of the neoliberal EU. Buffet keeps quite on this subject, before a Party which is deeply divided, attacking the PS. The PDS has its eyes fixed on a left coalition with the SPD (and the Greens), meanwhile, "proving" itself at the head of the Land of Berlin, through a ferocious austerity policy. In Spain, the United Left (IU) has (legitimately) used its parliamentary votes to kick out the right and allow the creation of a minority PSOE government. The IU has not entered the government, but that is undoubtedly more to do with Zapatero's wishes than theirs.

The left certainly faces a big tactical problem in relation to the Socialist Parties. By replacing its neo-Keynesian programme with neoliberalism, European social democracy has broken its links with the popular layers, lost its soul and disillusioned its activists. But, in the absence of a genuine and credible left political force, it has succeeded in bouncing back as electoral apparatus, supported by the media. The mass of people votes "socialist" very pragmatically to keep out the right. That does not mean that they support social-neoliberal policies.

This mechanism of recovery only works for social democracy; not at all or to a very limited extent for the CPs and Greens who have participated in such governments. As minority and subaltern parties, they pay much more dearly for their co-responsibility for social regression. The phenomena of disappointment, disarray and rejection are much more violent in the case of the electorate of the "left". That is linked to the somewhat different nature of the social democrats. The CPs (and the Greens) divide and split. The result is that their survival depends more and more on the good will of the social democrats. The latter get stronger electorally, while emptying themselves increasingly ideologically, politically, and organizationally. Then the bourgeois state comes to their aid (money, media, regulations) to rebuild political life on a neoliberal "left-right" bipolarization. The CPs and Greens (not to mention the revolutionary anti-capitalist left) do not enjoy these favours.

So long as the relationship of forces within society remains unfavourable and disarray dominates among the broad popular masses, neoliberal governments of left and right will succeed each other mechanically.

The task of the "left of the left" is precisely to work towards a new broad political force on the left, radical and unitary, pluralist and European, capable of breaking this socially devastating dynamic.

The EU

The Communist and Green left's access to the governments of the social-liberal centre-left is conditioned by an acceptance of the EU (and its refounding text, the Constitution) and the neoliberal policies of social democracy.

The ELP has a big problem in clearly opposing the draft Constitution of the EU. It recoils before the necessity of presenting publicly a real analysis of the EU as a socio-political formation (which exists in all the member parties of the ELP). Without that, there is no strategy and no alternative. Thus, the protagonists of the ELP, officially against the Constitution, do not mention the fact, neither in the Statutes nor in the Manifesto. The EU increasingly dominates economic life, the living and working conditions of millions of people, the political regime, the question of nationalities, democratic liberties, supranationality and so on. It is a key tool at the service of the European bourgeoisies against the working population and the exploited and oppressed in Europe and the world.

In the Statutes, the term "EU" is not even mentioned. For a "European party" this is indeed bizarre. [5]

The parties forming the ELP admit in the Statutes that they are "not a force free of contradictions, having differing views on many issues". But this sincerity does not resolve this enormous political question. The Manifesto of the ELP raises the ambiguity between "Europe" and the "EU". It develops criticisms and proposes a series of demands and proposals which can be found in the Manifestos of the EACL. [6]

There is a strong and broad convergence with the European anti-capitalist left, including the comprehension of the new cycle of mobilizations which also means the beginning of the reconstruction of a movement of emancipation. It is a possible terrain for advance in struggles and debates.

But the Manifesto stops short of an analysis of the European institutions of the EU state.

The message seems promising: "Finally, what is at the heart of the crisis of the European Union is Democracy". The Manifesto says it very well, in a strong and short phrase. An excellent point of departure to open an analysis and draw from it the political and practical conclusions.

But instead of explaining the semi-despotic character (for example the preponderant role of the Council as executive and legislative body; a Parliament under the thumb of the Executive, an opaque and uncontrollable European Central Bank) necessary to impose an anti-social EU, the Manifesto chickens out. The "crisis of democracy" is reduced to the following: "For decades the European Union has been constructed from above, with disregard for its great diversity of cultures and languages - without its people and often against them".

The ELP does not dare to challenge the construction and the institutions of the current EU. That does not mean that certain member parties do not do so: the PCF in a very emphatic manner; the PRC, which prefers not to demand a referendum so as to avoid campaigning on the Constitution; the PDS which is "for" the Constitution, but tries to skirt round the problem (see its electoral Programme); the IU, divided and hesitant, has plumped for a "no".

The important question of "self-determination of peoples" is reduced to "cultural and linguistic diversity". Then, measures of democratization appear in the text: "We want to act so that the elected institutions, the European Parliament and the national parliaments as well as the representative committees (the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions) have more

powers of action and control. Today, whatever may be our overall opinion of the "Constitutional Treaty" being discussed, we are opposed to a Directorate of Great Powers." And then a sort of more general perspective: "In the EU various interests are in conflict with each other [which? FV]. For us this creates a new political space for class struggle and for the defence of the interests of workers and democracy, of the European society with its organizations and institutions and, among them, the European Parliament".

The same prudence that the ELP has shown in relation to strategic questions (neoliberal policies, collaboration with social liberalism), recurs in relation to the EU. The EU is the main political project of the (big) imperialist countries of Europe. You cannot avoid the fact; anyone who opposes this project risks being excluded from a return to government!

The ELP at work...

At least among the most politically aware and organized part of the population there is a growing interest "in Europe". The EU gives considerable financial support to the establishment of "European parties".

The ELP will probably succeed as a first step towards such a "party", beside the Greens, the Socialist Parties, and the bourgeois parties (which fight each other over the carve-up of their electorates).

The first practical test is the European elections. This will have greater political significance than in the past, despite the abstentions and the lack of interest among broad sectors of the population. But the simultaneous and broad nature of these elections in the 25 member countries of the EU - even if half the 338 million potential voters go fishing or to the cinema - make it an altogether more meaningful popular consultation than the opinion polls. Will the ELP be in a situation to form a parliamentary group, like the GUE/NGL? [\[7\]](#) Will it be recognized by the European Parliament and then subsidized? That would give it a very important financial base to act publicly from the Atlantic to Russia.

Another question - can the ELP really function as a party - with campaigns, regular public positions, interventions and simultaneous mobilizations, a genuinely European internal functioning? The "party" is not really a party, as one usually understands it. This is not a federation or even a confederation. A strong odour of national autonomy floated in the room of Congress. And the Statutes consecrate this spirit by demanding unanimity.

That raises two big questions. First, there is the relationship between the (ex-) CPs of the countries of Eastern Europe and the brother parties of the West, which since the fall of the Berlin wall, have evolved in increasingly different contexts, despite the unifying factor of the EU. Some have painfully separated themselves from Stalinism and adapted to the restoration of a miserable capitalism, while others are under the contradictory pressure of social democracy, the movement for global justice and the anti-capitalist left.

The other difficulty relates to coherence at the level of the ELP's leadership.

At first sight, there are many differences between the PCF, the PRC and the PDS in the search for a new programme. The decomposition of Stalinism has been a slow and tortuous process, but above all very unequal in each country. In setting up the ELP, as a new functional framework on the European level, some transversal inter-personal links (leaders and activists) have been reactivated. Not to mention old rivalries between the CPs which resurge around the leadership of the ELP. To give only

one example: when the PRC tried to push aside the most Stalinist parties (Portuguese and Greek CPs), the PCF came to the aid of the PCP. Without itself entering the ELP, the PCP was able to prevent Bertinotti recognizing the Left Bloc (a Portuguese participant in the EACL) as an observer at the ELP meeting.

Moreover, ancestral rivalries subsist between the PCF and the PRC, whose political profiles have not ceased to diverge for the last five years. It is significant that it is the PDS (notoriously the most moderate party, although it has Stalinist hangovers) which pushed Bertinotti (and thus the PRC) into the presidency of the ELP.

Where is the ELP going?

The multiple contradictions which run through the ELP will not necessarily paralyze it because there is another political dynamic at work, namely convergence between the main parties towards a new experience of the “plural” or “centre-left” left.

The PCF, traumatized and divided by its recent governmental participation, has not made a balance sheet of it, and probably a majority current is ready to re-offend. The PDS has already taken its first steps in the government of the Land of Berlin (imposing hair shirt austerity), envisaging a return to government by the SPD (very much weakened) and the Greens. The PRC hopes to contribute to kicking out Berlusconi and participate in a Prodi government. Izquierda Unida has not entered the PSOE government, but Zapatero took the decision behind its back. For Synaspismos the problem is not posed after the recent victory of the right in Greece. Over the next two or three years (which is a short time), a “centre-left” cycle could reopen.

It is not ritualistic to say that much will depend on the political and social situation in Europe and in the member countries.

Through their anti-social and reactionary brutality, the current right wing governments revalorize indirectly the idea of the “lesser evil”, in the absence of a strong radical alternative. Social democracy will appear again as the only useful instrument to beat the right in the elections.

That will also pose a challenge to the anti-capitalist left. The latter will be involved in the mobilizations and the struggles, in unity of action with all the forces of the social, political, and citizens’ left for our demands and against the government of the employers. It will not escape the constraint (because of the increasingly anti-democratic electoral laws) of being as effective at the ballot box as in the streets. The pressure will mount on the anti-capitalist left - to the extent where it has social and political weight - to join a “left government”. [8]

That would be a serious error to give in to, unless it was a government which broke effectively and radically with neoliberal policies. That could not take place only in the case of very big social mobilizations would shake up the relationship of forces between the classes, but also inside the trade union and social organizations.

The ELP is not our party. Its centre of gravity, such as it is, is more to the right than one would have predicted 18 months ago when the problem of the “European party” was on the agenda.

The PRC has changed strategy on the basis of a disappointment; enormous social radicalism has not been extended to the political terrain (at the electoral and party levels). From June 2003, the PRC has leant towards an alliance, including a governmental alliance, with the centre-left led by Prodi. It is a serious error, and a factor of great confusion, in Europe as well as Italy. The PRC had attracted,

educated and motivated hundreds of political cadres in the other CPs. It has played a pilot role in a modern radicalism, in political and intellectual renewal, the idea of a radical “extra-parliamentary” party, and has been very close to the European anti-capitalist left. It remains marked by social radicalism (unlike other CPs in the ELP), but it has changed political perspective. The ELP situates itself between the social liberal left and the anti-capitalist left.

If the ELP (or its main member parties) participate in a government with social democracy on a neoliberal programme, it will create a new situation inside the left and a different relationship with the anti-capitalist left.

We will be found in the struggles and in the mobilizations, we will be ready for unity in action for concrete demands and objectives. Debates and political struggles will take another turn, because of the policies of such a government.

From now until then, the debate continues, based on cumulative socio-political experiences around fundamental questions of living and working conditions. The activist and organizational contact between this Communist/alternative left and the anti-capitalist left is a favourable condition for this process of clarification.

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P.S.

* “European Left Party founded”. From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] The parties are: Italy Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC, Italy); PRC (San Marino); PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, Germany); PCF (Parti Communiste Français, France); Synaspismos (Coalition of Left, of Movements and Ecology, Greece); IU (United Left, Spain) as well as EUiA (United and Alternative Left, Catalonia) and the PCE (Spanish Communist Party, Spain) who are part of IU; KPÖ (Communist Party of Austria); SDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, Czech Republic); ESDTP (Estonian Social Democratic Labour Party); Munkaspart (Hungarian Workers’ Party); SAP (Socialist Alliance Party); KSS (Slovak Communist Party). Offended by the strong denunciation of Stalinism, the KSCM (Communist Party of Bohemia-Moravia) left the meeting and provisionally (?) the ELP. The ELP also has three “observer” parties: AKEL (Cyprus), PdCI (Party of Italian Communists) and La Gauche (Dei Lénke, Luxemburg). One of the main criteria that the EU (the European Parliament) imposes for official recognition and subsidies is the presence of at least one member of parliament (European, national, regional) in at least seven member countries of the EU.

[2] See as example the [Manifesto of the 8th Conference of the European Anti-Capitalist Left](#) (EACL), IV 359, May-June 2004.

[3] The only “debate” at the general assembly of the Rome Congress was a violent and insistent denunciation of Stalinism, which the eastern European post-Stalinists swallowed with difficulty.

[4] The Manifesto is more to the left, but it stops short where one expects a programmatic and strategic content: “We see the necessity for a deep-rooted social and democratic transformation of Europe. Yes, the time has come to intensify struggles that challenge the dogma of the sacrosanct “market economy where competition is free”, the power of the financial markets and multinationals, and, instead, to make our citizens active agents of the policies carried out in their name”.

[5] Exceptionally, the ELP speaks of it thus (in the Statutes): “Europe as a new space for the integration of more and more countries in East and West, in North and South is both an opportunity and a challenge to regain the political initiative for Left forces”. All in all, the EU is not so bad!

[6] We can thus read in the Manifesto: “We want to build a project for another Europe and to give another content to the EU: autonomous from US hegemony, open to the south of the world, alternative to capitalism in its social and political model, active against the growing militarisation and war, in favour of the protection of the environment and the respect of human rights, including the social and economic ones. We stand for the right of citizenship for all those living in Europe.... We want a Europe free from the antidemocratic and neoliberal policies of WTO and IMF, refusing NATO, foreign military bases and any model of a European army leading to increasing military competition and arms race in the world. We want a Europe of peace and solidarity, free from nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, a Europe that rejects war as an instrument to settle international conflicts.”

[7] See Patrick Auzende, “La LCR et le groupe de la GUE/NGL”, “Rouge” number 2064, May 13, 2004.

[8] This is reminiscent of the Bertinotti’s efforts, several months before the Rome meeting, to recruit some parties from the anti-capitalist left to the ELP. Several speakers at the Rome Congress continued to insist on the “completely open” character of the ELP, even though the French LCR, initially invited as observer, was finally excluded from the meeting!