

# **Parliamentary action and social struggles - The experience of the Portuguese Left Bloc**

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**The Left Bloc was formed about twenty years ago in Portugal, by the fusion of forces from the anti-capitalist left and the social movement. Today, together with the Communist Party, it is the main formation of the combative left in the country. Based on the Bloc's experience, Francisco Louçã gives an overview of the still problematic relationship between parliamentary opposition work and investment in social movements and mobilizations.**



*Bloco. Demonstration, Lisboa, September 15, 2012.*

**1.** The institutional presence and reference has been the strongest point of the intervention of the Left Bloc. This was not always the case: the party was born out of the efforts of political currents that united because the social movement was defeated in the 1998 abortion referendum (and with that, they understood the limits of their fragmented and non-electoral extension action) and in the context of the anti-globalization movement and solidarity with the Timor independence struggles. Thus, the pressure of the social movement was decisive. That was the starting point. But the Bloc's success came from moving beyond a militant tradition without national expression, which had little impact on public debates, to create a political balance of power. It is because it has elected members of Parliament that the Bloc has taken a leap forward, becoming a reference party for the popular struggle. If it had not succeeded in the first legislative elections, it is unlikely that the Bloc would exist today. [1]

**2.** Institutional and electoral representation is the normal form of political action in the eyes of the majority of the population. Some social sectors participate in another form by joining associations or unions and popular sectors are part of both, the political left and trade unions and social organizations.. But, although they refer to the majority of the population, the associative sectors are in the minority and very often of small size: trade unions, the main and most stable of the Portuguese social movements, now represent only 15% of workers, with large differences according to sectors (in the public, in the majority) and companies (30% unionisation in a small number of companies with more than 500 workers, and only 1% in companies with five or fewer workers, which are by far the greatest number). There are no broad associations or other social movements organized with large grassroots networks in Portugal. For this reason, there are few channels today for the action in which social activism is created.

**3.** The experience of fighting the troika (European Commission, ECB and IMF) summarises these

contradictions. The social struggle has reached impressive levels: demonstrations on March 12, 2011 and "Que se Lixe a Troika"! " (Screw the Troika!) (2012-2013) in some cases with a million or more people, in a country of ten million. The only precedents were the massive demonstrations in the first days after the fall of the dictatorship in April 1974. It expressed social discontent over important issues, the rejection of precarity and the government's manoeuvre of lowering the employers' social tax (TSU). But it did not give itself any organization and continuity. There was not and could not be any organized form in this process, given its nature and form. Alongside these demonstrations and outside them, the trade unions have been stronger in organising demonstrations than in trade union practice and grass-roots organisations. The trade union organisation of the Troika resistance was more political than trade unionist.

**4.** In all of this, the Bloc's strength has been an advantage. It represented an important part of anti-troika outrage and the search for political solutions, precisely because it could unbalance national politics, and it was recognized by hundreds of thousands of people as the appropriate and necessary instrument - in elections.

**5.** A popular party must seek electoral representation. It is not successful if it does not succeed in creating a political balance of power and if it does not express it through confrontations that lead to results. An alternative strategy of social struggle without representation would be little more than a justification for isolation. A socialist left-wing party fights for the majority and does not allow itself to be won over by the minority complex or by the anarchist or autonomist vision of a presumed social world outside the electoral confrontation, within which one would have to go into exile. The idea that the bourgeois state would collapse if many people abstained is inoperative and does the bourgeoisie a favour. The Bloc has had its share of failures and victories, but it has made its way.

**6.** Institutional representation and presence created a reality for which the founding members of the Bloc were ill-prepared at the beginning. It was necessary to select candidates who responded to this level of representation, which involved decisions, but also some conflicts. It was necessary to develop technical skills and professional teams to accompany and support our national, European and autonomous regions parliamentary work, which has since been extended to local authorities. Such skills are essential to prepare proposals, take initiatives and defend them, but this has a significant cost: a significant part of our most experienced activists are taken up in institutional involvement.

**7.** These institutional machines therefore absorb much of our activist capacity. It is never clear in advance whether or not this will lead to adaptation to the system, but this institutional standardization generates pressure in this direction. These possible forms of adaptation may be varied: resignation to very limited measures in the name of maintaining the positions acquired; refusal to criticise the institutions or their management in the name of possible future agreements; the idea that politics advances in small steps; fear of public opinion which leads to not presenting a socialist alternative which leads to other institutional forms; desire to avoid the risk of conflict for fear of losing. All these forms of adaptation distort a left-wing policy based on popular representation.

**8.** Political zapping is another form of adaptation and not the least important. Getting used to a mode of political expression that depends on the circumstances and opportunities, or even on the agenda of the institutional protagonists or the press of the day, carries a risk, because it can dissolve the strategy in the agenda of the day. If the movement were everything and the programme was nothing, there would be no socialist policy to organize the workers' and people's movement.

**9.** Institutionalism is also very strong within social movements, and not only in left-wing parties. Let us look at the social movements around the Bloc, which we know and respect, and ask ourselves how

many of them have had the same leaders for 30, or even, for some, 40 years. In trade unions, the contradiction is even stronger: many trade unions are statutorily organised so that party control by the CP can never be questioned, and the largest trade union confederation has given substance to this strategy.

**10.** The Bloc has made little progress on social representation, which cannot be confused with electoral representation. We must ask ourselves, in relation to the strength we had at the time of our foundation, almost 20 years ago, whether we now have more or less organized forces in the union world, in workplaces, among union delegates, workers' commissions or other forms of representation. And from the answer to this question must flow some conclusions. We must ask ourselves the same question about young people: how can students and other young people get closer to our party? How can they join us and find ways of training and political action? It is in these responses that the solution to the tensions we feel in the institutions resides.

**11.** Capitalism is a mode of production, of reproduction of the conditions of production and of representation of the conditions of production and reproduction. This definition underlines the essential point: there is no capitalist production without the system reproducing itself and for this reason it mobilizes its representation, which is based on the alienation of work, social relations, life, relations with nature, but also in the alienation of electoral representation and voting. The separation of the worker from the product of their work, from the control of their life, from their social and even electoral power is the foundation of the conformism on which bourgeois hegemony is based. That is why left-wing politics is a social movement and aims to strengthen itself in the perspective that its ideas and proposals also have an impact on elections; that is why it does not give any ground in the dispute over hegemony; that is precisely why the socialist strategy can only triumph in the social struggle.

**12.** The Bloc's strength has been its political expression, and therefore its participation in the elections. Alternative strategies, such as giving up competing for representation, and therefore abandoning politics as the people understand it, have failed and will always fail. But the success of this electoral option does not demonstrate that representation is a sufficient condition for socialist politics. Designed as an instrument to accumulate forces, it is useful. Conceived as a form of conditioning and loss of critical sense and social alternative, it fails. The left only exists through social protagonism, through conflict or strategic intervention in class struggle. In other words, it needs to be part of the class movement. This is how it always measures its strengths.

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**P.S.**

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**Footnotes**

[1] In the 1999 parliamentary elections the Left Bloc won 2.4 per cent of the vote and two seats. Under the Portuguese constitution this gave it the right to a parliamentary group and to speak in every debate.