

Portugal's Left Bloc: 'We provide a solid political reference point to the workers and social movements' (Parts 1 and 2)

Saturday 26 August 2023, by [COSTA Jorge Duarte](#), [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2023).

A leader of Portugal's Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda) since its formation in 1999, Jorge Costa launched into political activism in 1991 at the age of 15, taking part in the protest movement against the first Gulf War. Subsequently elected as an MP for the Left Bloc between 2009-2011 and 2015-19, Costa is today a member of the party's permanent leadership.

In this wide-ranging interview, Costa covers developments in Portuguese politics since the Socialist Party (PS) was returned to government in 2015, the Left Bloc's changing relation to it, the rise of the far right in the form of Chega! (Enough!), the Bloc's relations with the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), and the challenges facing the party as it returns to growth with an influx of a generation of younger activists.

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The interview was conducted after the Left Bloc's Thirteenth National Convention, held in Lisbon from May 26-28. To determine the work of the Bloc over the next two years, the 658 convention delegates (representing just under 10,000 members) had to choose between two different political perspectives, presented as Motion A and Motion E. Motion A, which Costa backed, won the support of 83% of the convention delegates, while Motion E attracted 15% support and 2% abstained.



In the vote for the 80-member National Board — the Bloc leadership between conventions — supporters of Motion A won 67 seats and supporters of Motion E 13 seats. The National Board

elected the Bloc's 21-member Political Commission, on which supporters of Motion A (including Costa) have 17 seats, and supporters of Motion E have 4. A major feature of the convention was the election of Mariana Mortagua as new coordinator of the Bloc, replacing Catarina Martins, who stepped down after 11 years of leading the organisation.

Full coverage of the convention can be found (in Portuguese) on the [Left Bloc web site](#).

Jorge Costa was interviewed by Dick Nichols for *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*.

The Left Bloc and the Socialist Party government of prime minister António Costa

Dick Nichols - The Left Bloc has lost half its electoral support since 2017, beginning with the loss of its two representatives in the regional assembly of the island of Madeira that year. In the 2019 legislative election it held on to its 19 seats in the national parliament but with a reduced vote, then lost 65% of its vote in the 2021 presidential elections and two-thirds of its 12 local councillors in the local government elections of the same year, to be followed by losing 14 of its 19 parliamentary seats in the January 2022 early general election. How much of this slump was due to factors beyond its control and how much to the Left Bloc's own shortcomings?

Jorge Costa - The agreement between the Socialist Party (PS) and the Left Bloc that formed the basis for the Left Bloc supporting a PS government was signed in 2015. Back then, the PS came second in the general elections and the issue was to prevent the right wing from continuing to govern and go on ravaging with its unprecedented austerity measures. In [the 2019 elections](#), at the end of the socialists' four-year term, and when the agreement had been fulfilled, the Left Bloc won 10% of the vote (half a million votes), which was almost the same result as four years previously (our best result ever). So, the explanation of our [January 2022 result](#) is not to be found in some continuum of gradually increasing bad election results. Rather, we fell abruptly, to only half the vote and a quarter of the members of parliament compared to October 2019.

The reason was our refusal, taken after the negotiations, to vote for the PS government's budget. In those negotiations we fully respected our mandate, which was to use our influence to achieve important gains for the working class and the majority of the population: firstly, with regard to labour legislation — in particular ending [the labour laws of the Troika period](#) — and, secondly, with regard to investment in the National Health Service (SNS). However, we were not able to reach an agreement with the PS that would achieve these goals.

So, we did not have grounds for voting for the national budget. That decision, a decision for strategic independence from the PS, was not followed by a large section of Left Bloc voters. But we did not use their criteria to decide our vote: we used strategic criteria — those of our independent political project.

In the days just before the election, a second factor emerged that also contributed greatly to the Left Bloc's bad results: national polling showed that the parties of the right, taken together, were equalling the PS vote. This polling, which also pointed to a victory for the right when taken together with the far right vote, created a wave of fear that mobilised some left people towards the PS.

In the end, the feared right victory did not happen and the PS ended up with an absolute majority in parliament. So, the polls were either wrong or they contributed directly in the last days to a shift in voting intentions. In either case, those final polls were also very important in mobilising left voters

towards the PS. These two factors are what explain our bad results in 2022.

So, did the Left Bloc's (and PCP's) poor result show that SNS underfunding was not — at that moment — the most important issue for a sizable part of the “people of the left”. Did the Left Bloc misread the popular mood?

As I said, we used our mandate to exert pressure around strategic issues for the working class, like labour legislation, SNS funding and the struggle against casualisation. We will always refuse to be an appendix to the PS, to be a fifth wheel on the wagon of government. And so, in the circumstances of that time, we had a choice to make: for autonomy or subordination to the PS. We chose autonomy and we shrank after the national election results came in. That is true. We lost a lot of weight, but we kept our backbone intact and we are now able to strike back, which is what we are doing.

We face the PS's absolute majority with a parliamentary caucus that is much smaller than before, but one with a straight and coherent relationship with the popular movements that are emerging against the arrogance of the socialists and their incapacity to answer the big questions that need answering in Portugal today.

Unlike the 2015-2019 *geringonça* (“contraption”) — the PS government supported from without by the Left Bloc, PCP and others on the basis of a set of specific undertakings — the current PS majority government has drawn its stability from pacts with Portuguese big capital combined with, at best, last minute band-aid treatments for the multiple social crises the country is suffering. It now seems to be paying a big price for this, averaging 29% [in recent polling](#) — equal to the opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD) — and well down from its 41.4% result in the January 2022 poll. Recent polling also shows the Left Bloc recovering support to 8-10% levels. What explains these shifts?

There are many different polls nowadays and different electoral attitudes are being reflected in them. It is also true that some are pointing to the Left Bloc recovering at the next elections or getting much better results if the elections were today.

The policy of the PS absolute majority is marked not only by great arrogance — refusing to answer opposition parties, refusing to come to parliament to be held to account for their mistakes — but also by the government's coming apart at the seams, with many members of government (13 to date) falling because of scandals, large and small, of conflicts of interest, of promiscuousness between business and the public sphere.

But it is mainly because of a lack of perspective, of answers to the social crisis and to the inflation cycle. People are under the pressure of wage stagnation as a result of the government-bosses pact and of the combined effect of inflation and rises in interest rates commanded by the European Central Bank (ECB). Portugal has a massive housing crisis, with lots of people unable to pay for a home and endlessly searching for accommodation. We are also facing huge difficulties in the normal functioning of public services, mainly education and health: throughout 2022 we had the biggest ever strike wave in education and very significant strikes in the public health services, because the government went on refusing the minimal demands of doctors, nurses and teachers.

Portugal also has a development model based on massive and unsustainable tourism. This is one of the main explanations why Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth does not produce a corresponding increase in living standards. Instead, people are getting poorer, they are losing out, because the share of wages in the distribution of the country's wealth is shrinking. But the socialists are too disconnected from the people and think that people who are getting poorer will be happy seeing big GDP growth numbers.

This growth in GDP goes to the protected economic and financial sectors that benefit from the Portuguese development model and from the European Union rules, which forbid public investment and pro-worker policies at the same time as facilitating speculative financial operations. That is why, according to statistics of the ECB and the International Monetary Fund, half the inflation rate is to be explained by profit growth.

In a May 26 interview in *Diário de Notícias*, former Left Bloc coordinator Francisco Louçã said the socialist government had “given up on the SNS”. He also described its planned privatisation of the state-owned airline TAP-Air Portugal as “senseless from the point of the view of the country’s economic strategy”. Why is the PS government, unlike the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government in Spain, pursuing this approach? Isn’t it undermining the PS’s own base of support?

Portugal and Spain operate under the same power structure, that of the European institutions, the European Commission, the ECB, the European Council and the Eurogroup [of Eurozone finance ministers]. So, the main characteristics of both governments — despite the participation, in the case of Spain, of left-wing parties with ministries — is not so different: they both accept the European rules.

It is true that, as a smaller country, Portugal has less bargaining power in European conclaves. We also have stricter and more toxic forms of subordination and ways of applying the European rules and euro monetary policies, which are one of the main causes of our stagnation.

But when we see a visit to Lisbon of ECB president Christine Lagarde, we understand the enormous arrogance of this power, which goes on raising interest rates on housing mortgages. She comes to a country like Portugal, where a large part of the population has housing mortgages at variable interest rates and faces an enormous increase in its mortgage repayments, and says, “that’s life, you just have to put up with it. We at the ECB will go on increasing interest rates” — as if inflation was caused because working people are consuming too much.

This is not true. This is a false narrative. It is a class war on workers and the poor, and Lagarde and the European institutions are taking sides in this war and organising for it to be won by the bourgeoisies in the European countries.

In a June 14 interview with *Jornal de Notícias*, newly elected Left Bloc coordinator Mariana Mortagua described the present-day Portuguese political situation as a “quagmire” and said: “In 2019, the PS, by rejecting the second *geringonça*, a second written agreement and the possibility of opening up new policies to the Left, told the country that there were to be no Left policies... The choice from then on was between the bad — the PS governing with its absolute majority — and the worse — a right-wing government.” How stable is the PS government? With more than two years to go until the next election, can the Left Bloc — in combination with the other forces to the left of the PS — force a change in Costa’s line? Or is it simply too late for a *geringonça 2.0*?

The socialists have an absolute majority: they do not need any more votes to change policies. We understand that to achieve any changes, we have to come out onto the streets. So, the Left Bloc is very much engaged in organising, and giving a solid political reference point to, the social movements and the workers.

As I said, over the last years we have seen very significant protest movements. For example, the biggest ever demonstrations of public-school teachers, repeated strikes of doctors and nurses, and public transport strikes that have been going on for a long time.

There is a continuous, across-the-board refusal from the government to answer to the workers in general and especially to the workers in public services that are getting increasingly old and run-down, with problems in finding substitute staff because conditions are so poor that young workers are refusing to make a career for themselves in these areas.

We also see the politicisation of the LGBTIQ+ and feminist movements and their resistance to the conservatising pressures accompanying the rise of the far right. These movements and their politicisation have had a very important role to play in the last period, with enormous demonstrations of young people. They are a crucial part of the landscape of social resistance.

So, the role of the Left Bloc right now is to be a left-wing reference point, to offer left-wing politics to these movements and the mass sectors they represent. That is what we are doing to confront the government and extract political change from it.

What, if any, truth was there in the minority Motion E's diagnosis of the Left Bloc's problems (its alleged "loss of coherence and dilution as a political project") as due to "the almost exclusive parliamentary emphasis as the centre of political initiative, the sidelining of popular struggles and even the distancing of labour struggles subject to strong attack by the government"?

Anyone who was present and followed the activities of our National Convention can testify to the enormous participation of Left Bloc activists, to the big responsibilities they are taking on in dynamising the social movements in Portugal.

We are a plural party, we are open to the free expression of every opinion. Our conventions are open to the media, our opposition has the statutory guarantee of freedom of expression and freedom of organisation in the party.

But it must be said that the type of critique contained in Motion E has less expression nowadays than it had in the last convention. So, it is a particular point of view, respectable and legitimate, but representing a small minority within the Left Bloc.

Looked at since 1999, the Left Bloc vote has been among the most volatile of Portuguese parties. Is there anything the Left Bloc can do to moderate the roller coaster ride in its support? Can left voters be brought to understand that they don't have to vote PS to stop the right, that what counts is that the overall left vote exceeds that of the right?

We do not get nervous about that roller coaster ride! Elections are a distorted mirror of the country's social environment and of the balance of forces in the class struggle. So, anyone who hopes for steady electoral growth as a strategy for social change will be disappointed. And I think this is true everywhere. We should just look at France and the recent political developments there, positive developments in the streets, but also at the ballot box with the rise of the [France Insoumise](#) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. So, to survive in the long run, the left must also be ready for quick political change and be ready to intervene and take initiatives in volatile political contexts.

We must be consistent and independent of the social liberal camp, such as the labour parties or socialist parties like we have here in Portugal; parties that have abandoned a left perspective on the economy. Working people do not need the left if all it does is explain that they have to get poorer. In elections there will be good and bad moments, ups and downs, and often election results, good or bad, do not reveal the quality of strategic choices.

The important thing is to keep on the side of the exploited people and always act accordingly, in the

street struggle and in parliament.

The next election in Portugal is for the Madeira regional assembly. What opportunities does the Left Bloc have of rewinning a presence in its regional assembly?

We lost representation in 2017 by just a couple of votes. Madeira is a two-island archipelago with 150,000 voters in total. It is a region with an autonomous government. The polls are now indicating that we have a big chance of getting back into the parliament and that is what we are fighting for right now in Madeira.

The emergence of Chega

Chega (Enough) is a late arrival in the wave of far-right reaction in Europe and turned up just as some of us were saying that, unlike Spain, there is no far right in Portugal because of the April 25, 1974 Carnation Revolution! What feature does it share with other far-right forces in Europe? What is specifically Portuguese about it? Why did it emerge so belatedly? Does it have the degree of support in the state apparatus, judiciary, armed forces and police that, say, Vox has in the Spanish state?

For many years there was a party, the [Party of the Social and Democratic Centre \(CDS-PP\)](#), which was kind of a gathering together of the remnants of the dictatorship, political personnel from its last years, with close connections with the church and sections of the bourgeoisie, sections of the employers' confederation, etc. At its electoral peak, CDS-PP got the same score that Chega gets today, around 12%. CDS-PP disappeared from the political landscape and its cadres are now orphans. They are not in Chega — they did not become politicians for the far right. But the far right absorbed the popular vote this party had, so you can see this as a kind of *aggiornamento* [updating] from the grassroots of the right wing, from its voting base.

When you note the political personnel of these new ultra-right political parties — not only Chega but also Iniciativa Liberal (IL, Liberal Initiative) — they come from the middle cadres of the traditional right-wing parties. So, rather than Nazi and fascist groups getting parliamentary representation and growing, we have sectors from the previously existing right-wing formations fragmenting and reorganising, adopting elements of the radicalised right — of Trump and Orban, and also of the ultra-liberal right from all over Europe.

In the case of Chega, we should also note its organic fragility. For example, one-third of its elected members on local council executives resigned from the party last year. Not for any specific political difference, but because of clashing personalities and personal ambitions. Also, the last congresses of the party were ruled to be irregular by the Constitutional Court.

So, this is an organisation that is still very weak, which still gets its representatives and candidates from people with very loose connections with the party itself, and that reflects its lack of real social presence. Yes, Chega is very visible in parliament. It has a very charismatic leader, [André Ventura](#) (who came from the PSD), but it is a very loose organisation with very little capacity for street mobilisation.

The only sector with real far-right influence in its organised ranks is the police. In no other sector, in no other expression of protest, does Chega have anything comparable, not even in massively mobilised sectors, like teachers and nurses. Nowhere else does the far right have any capacity for mobilisation.

Nonetheless, the far right still connects with the traditional themes of the Portuguese right: anti-Roma racism, colonial nostalgia and [Salazarism](#), the normalisation of the fascist dictatorship and [the Colonial War](#) viewed as an heroic epic. All that goes with macho nostalgia and a very strong rejection of feminism. These are the main features of the Portuguese far right narrative, as represented by Chega.

Then there is IL, another radicalised party of the right, but which is very different. IL is an ultra-liberal party, inspired by [Hayekism](#), one of many European parties of this type. An extremist liberal party, anti-Marxist but not ultra-conservative, with an agenda focused on economic issues like lowering tax rates.

IL has a high-income support base and is much more concentrated in wealthy inner-city milieux. Its typical voter is younger and more educated. It does not express xenophobic and racist ideas openly and refuses to make them part of its agenda.

Like the PSOE government in relation to Vox, Costa sees continuing political gain in presenting the PS as Portuguese democracy's best anti-Chega bulwark and highlighting the complicity of the PSD with the far right. The tactic is to build the PS vote by splitting the right and frightening left voters into seeking shelter with it. How does the Left Bloc counter this gambit, which pretends that the PS is the only real anti-fascist force?

The main way that the Left Bloc deals with this is by explaining that Chega is a “federation of discontent” — discontent with neoliberal policy and its results in wages, health, education etc. All this despite the lack of policies to answer these needs, or even a more radical version of neoliberal policies.

This is the direct result of the bad politics of the socialist government, which refuses left policies. So, we answer the far right by finding the largest unity in the movements that resist fascism, racism, misogyny, homophobia or transphobia, but also by underlining our opposition to PS neoliberalism and by responding on the terrain of alternative economic and social policy.

This orientation coincides with how protest has developed in the first year and a half of the PS's absolute majority. Every demonstration that has emerged comes with left-wing demands: those of the teachers, of the health workers, of the workers in the legal system; the demands of the feminists, the demands of LGBTIQ+ movement, the demands of young people who are fighting for housing.

They all connect with the left and with our left demands. They have no connection with, and there is no presence of, the far right in these demonstrations. This is very, very important because the opposition in the streets to the Costa government is not a far-right opposition at all. It is mainly led by social movements and trade unions, which connect directly with the left-wing parties and the left-wing opposition, either with the PCP or the Left Bloc.

Look at France, which is a country where you have a ruling centre which is very close to the Portuguese PS, that of Emmanuel Macron. And there you have a strong far right on one side and a strong left on the other, led by France Insoumise. It is true that the far right is rising in Italy, Greece and Spain, and that it is very strong also in France, but the performance of the French left shows — its electoral results show — that there is room for another kind of left opposition, so long as it is coherent and independent.

That is the way we can create a left-wing pole of attraction that can win over those social sectors in the working class who are in shock because of the neoliberal policies of the PS and could be more vulnerable to far-right demagoguery.

In the Spanish state, part of the vote for Vox, which mainly comes from the rich and very rich suburbs, is also concentrated among the poorest regions along the Mediterranean coast, where there are many North African and sub-Saharan workers. Here, Vox racism and Islamophobia finds support in the most abandoned Spanish-speaking *barrios*. Is the Portuguese situation similar? If so, what does the Left Bloc propose to counter the influence of Chega?

The characteristics of immigration in Portugal are quite different from Spain. Here, Chega is closely connected to the interests, to the bosses, of our intensive monoculture in agriculture, which is very much dependent on immigrant labour. So, Chega has shifted its message more to themes like Romaphobia, corruption in politics, ultra-conservatism around LGBTIQ+ and feminist concerns, and opposition to euthanasia and abortion. These are the main issues, the lines along which the far right tries to build its identity, more than with a straightforward racist and anti-immigrant stance. That would, at a certain point, clash with the interests of some of its own supporters and financiers, the bosses from the intensive agriculture in the South.

Also, Chega voters are different from their Vox counterparts. The typical Chega voter is male, middle-aged to elderly, and from the popular classes. As I said, the more highly educated, urban right-wing voter who might vote Vox in Spain tends to vote IL in Portugal.

Strengthening social justice, social resistance and alternative policy

Motion A, now Left Bloc policy, expresses the aspiration that drives the Left Bloc as “A Good Life for All Persons” and summarises this as “a comfortable home, work with rights, quality public services, time to enjoy life on a habitable planet, access to culture, individual and collective wellbeing. Living well requires the material conditions for a dignified existence, but it is more than that: it is self-determination about what we want to be, it is freedom and respect for our choices. It is care and interdependence. It is the security of the future, of a salary and of pensions. It is the peace of a place in the world that does not depend on competition against others or the tyranny of the market. It is the sharing of the common goods and democracy that decides; the essence of socialism.” Why was this reformulation necessary?

This was no theoretical innovation. We were trying to give a simple definition to a very simple idea. Access to essential goods and services is being denied to increasingly large sectors of society, as inequalities grow, and neoliberal policies take their toll. So, when we talk about the fight for a good life, we are talking about the set of demands that everybody finds fair and regards as comprising essential rights — housing, a fair wage, education, health care, culture — but that are only achievable in today’s context through socialist policies of the kind that the Left Bloc proposes. So, I guess that everywhere the left should do its homework and try to find efficient ways and words with which to convey its ecosocialist viewpoint. When we speak about the good life, we are also inspired by this idea coming from South American indigenous peoples.

We are trying to express the very simple idea of what an essential human right is, what is fair, what everybody should have, what must be guaranteed and not be put at risk as it is today. If it were not at risk, we would have a good life. I guess this encapsulates our way of presenting our political proposal.

Both motions to the convention note the large protests in Portugal of migrant workers and against racism. How is the Left Bloc aiming to strengthen its support and implantation

among migrant workers, who, as in the Mediterranean countries, are largely concentrated in low-paid casual work in cleaning, hospitality, aged care and tourism?

Left Bloc activists are present in the two most important fronts where the left deals with immigrant people. The first is in the intensive agriculture in the South, where an immigrant workforce is concentrated. We try to connect to these workers through their networks of associations, in order to fight for those working “illegally” (without residency papers) and surviving in appallingly inadequate housing — a very cruel existence for workers in intensive agriculture. We are at the centre of efforts to denounce these conditions, which too often escape the attention of even PCP-run municipalities where this agriculture is based. So, on the left, we are the main force dealing with the underpayment, bad working conditions and miserable housing of this workforce.

The second front is around the digital platforms of the delivery companies that employ a large mass of immigrant workers — Brazilians, Asians, Africans — who once taken on by these digital platforms, end up overexploited and underpaid. Here we also have a developing intervention, a very difficult and new experience for us. We are trying to develop this experience by engaging these communities in networks of solidarity and self-help.

This experience is very important. As recently as mid-June we were able to pass a new law in parliament against casualisation in these “uberfied” sectors, initiating a process of public inspection of the working conditions and work contracts of the workers in these platforms. Together with the organised workers in this sector we are following the process very closely in order to change the brutal conditions that prevail there.

Finally, we have a very large Portuguese community that is victim of racism and mainly composed of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of immigrants from the former Portuguese colonies. We try to link up with and win over these people in the anti-racist movement and in the fight to give visibility to the oppression of this race-categorised community. We do it through participation in the anti-racist movement, in the Black people’s movement and in our practice in the party.

This approach includes giving prominence to the presence of Black people and race-branded people in the leadership of the Left Bloc and on our election tickets. For instance, the first Black woman to have an executive position on Lisbon City Council is [our representative Beatriz Gomes Diaz](#).

However, there is a long way to go in this country, which has an imperial and colonial history in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and a long history of slavery and exploitation. We are bringing together the demands and the historical material that empower the Black and race-categorised people in Portugal in the fight for historical memory, dignity and acknowledgment of the meaning of the violence of the oppression exerted in the countries that were Portuguese colonies. This part of our country is still paying the price for the policies that the ruling class and powers-that-be in Portugal imposed there for centuries.

The housing affordability crisis, which is common to most of the advanced capitalist world, is particularly sharp in Portugal, where average house prices have doubled in less than a decade and where, as in Spain, the dire situation is exacerbated by economic dependency on tourism. What are the Left Bloc’s proposals to resolve the housing crisis?

Today, Portugal is one of the countries most harshly hit by the speculative and financialisation dynamics of the housing market.

Our huge housing crisis is the result of gentrification, the expulsion of the people from city centres towards every more distant outskirts, as well as of the increase in the demand for housing in the big

cities — mainly Porto, Lisbon, the Algarve, Madeira — from non-residents. This is one of the factors driving the rapid impoverishment of the population, together with the rise in bank mortgage interest rates.

The proposals of the Left Bloc in these circumstances are:

- Firstly, huge investment in increasing the stock of public housing, at accessible rents.
- Secondly, a ban on selling houses to non-residents, because in this country this housing is almost entirely dedicated to speculation and luxury lifestyles.
- Thirdly, an end to the “golden visa”, a mechanism to promote the selling of good houses to rich foreigners, mainly oligarchs from China, Brazil, Russia and Ukraine.
- Fourthly, a rent ceiling to prevent owners of private dwellings from imposing exorbitant rents.

As far as the banks are concerned, we demand a limit on the proportion of their income that any family has to dedicate to paying their mortgage. With the rise in the Euribor rate, the part of family income that is being spent on paying the mortgage is increasing very fast and becoming very high for a large number of families.

The difference between the monthly mortgage payment applying today compared to when the hikes in the Euribor rate began should be funded from the record profits of the banks — the highest in at least 15 years.

The Left Bloc is deeply involved in the campaign for proper funding of the SNS, with a national June 3 demonstration featured at the convention. How is this campaign progressing?

The movement in defence of the SNS is strategic. Privatisation of health services has been going on for several years now and it is taking place through disinvestment in the public health service. As a result, people find it increasingly difficult to get a timely appointment with their SNS doctor and, as waiting lists get longer and longer, they also find it very difficult to get their surgery, even in urgent cases.

The door thus gets opened to private business investment in health provision and health insurance, as a lot of people move into private sector health care. This, however, just happens to be subsidised through the national budget via contracts made directly by the SNS with private providers!

This is a dreadful way of managing public funding: it should be devoted to expanding the capacity of public health provision to make it universal, accessible and timely for everyone that needs it. That demand was at the centre of a new movement that was launched in early June and which gathers together not only nurses, doctors and hospital and health centre personnel, but also citizens that use these services and want to defend them.

It is critical that Portuguese society mobilise for the SNS by giving citizen support to the demands of the trade unions of the health care professionals. Their demands are just: better careers and wages so as to be able to recruit and retain the professionals that are needed in the service. Today there is a huge problem of insufficient, increasingly old, overstressed professional staff in all health services.

These problems must be solved, but the professionals alone cannot solve them — they must have the active solidarity of the community. That is the challenge that we are dealing with in the “More SNS” movement, as it is called: to take the fight for properly funded national public health care beyond the

health sector and into society at large.

The Left Bloc program implies a very different type of national budget, with increased funding of public services and infrastructure for the ecological transition financed by greater contributions from those who can afford to pay. Has the Left Bloc developed an alternative budget process that can be used to visualise its priorities?

The visualisation of the priorities of the national budget was one of the main characteristics of the period when there was an agreement between the PS and the parties of the left. The process of bargaining that took place at that time connected social movements, social protest and trade unions with concrete negotiations over every new budget.

This process was very visible, on the daily media for weeks and months, every year of that four-year term. The budget was discussed in its entirety, from its main priorities down to specific details. This bargaining was very important because it gave discussion over budget options a very public profile as parliament itself became a kind of a bargaining arena between the left and the socialist government.

The right wing was marginalised in this process, reduced to complaining about the pressure of the left and about the results of this bargaining, even though the greater part of this bargaining was good news for ordinary people. It also made it very difficult for the right wing to assert an alternative social and economic agenda of their own, since the bargaining brought gains to the working people.

So, this is the main experience we have had, a parliamentary experience, but a very public one that provided a good visualisation of what a budgetary process is.

Of course, if we had been part of the government, this bargaining would have been much more discreet, done much more indoors, and been less scrutinised. Whereas in other countries left-wing parties participate in government alliances with socialists, we do not do it. We were supporting the PS government from outside, in the parliament, but we were in permanent conflict with the socialists in parliament and with the government. This was a permanent bargaining process and, I think, a very formative one for all of us involved in it.

Of course, after 2019, the process was not strong enough to deal with the pressure and the blackmail of the right wing, and, as I have already mentioned, it was not easy to vote against the government. But you must take into consideration that during the period of the agreement (between 2015 and 2019), the Left Bloc was able to make good use of this bargaining process and it repeated its very good election result at the end of the agreement.

How much in the way of policy development and concretisation of plans for the ecosocialist transition do you feel the Left Bloc has still to develop?

As far as the ecosocialist transition goes, I think there's a balance we must find — and it is what the Left Bloc is trying to achieve — between developing a very detailed and accurate political program for the transition and making full use of the opportunities the balance of social forces gives us to impose actual concrete changes.

We think the ecosocialist transition will be the product of the social struggles against climate injustice. Of course, the left must have its own proposal, and we have ours. We presented it as part of our national program.

Ecosocialist planning is economic planning determined by social and climate justice criteria. This

means we must carry out the transitions in production and distribution and make the technical choices needed to produce these changes, but do that in a way that brings economic progress interconnecting two dimensions: the ecosocialist transition is the creation of a fair and sustainable economy. This process must involve a debate within the climate movement and the trade unions that develops the general conscience of the working class around climate issues.

At the same time, of course, we have had meetings all over the country of the people doing the technical work on the choices for eliminating carbon emissions.

Relations with the Communist Party of Portugal (PCP)

In his *Diário de Notícias* interview Louçã said that “the relation between the PCP and the Left Bloc is converging a lot in regard to concrete national policies and measures. It is diverging a lot, and more and more, in relation to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” For its part, the recent PCP congress resolution scorned the Left Bloc for “submission to the dominant ideological environment [and] alignment with the aims of imperialism”.

How is the Left Bloc’s perspective of “convergence of all the political sectors of the left that express their rejection of the government’s policies of inequality” and “a broad popular leftist camp that changes the balance of power in favour of those who work” possible without a solution to Left Bloc-PCP rivalry – either through a (presently unimaginable) strategic agreement, or through the marginalisation of the PCP (not in prospect, at least in the short term)?

The relations between the Left Bloc and the Communist Party are not going to develop either through strategic agreement or through marginalisation.

The way we relate to the PCP is by affirming very clearly the big differences we have around international issues and around questions of social progress, issues like LGBTIQ+ rights, transgender rights, drug policy and euthanasia. We want to make the large differences we have around these critical issues as visible as possible. But we simultaneously seek common ground for social struggle with comrades from the Communist Party and other wings of the left who should come together against the Socialist Party’s absolute majority and its neoliberal policies.

We are doing that right now. We are doing it in the housing movement, where all the left comes together around joint appeals and in big demonstrations. We also try to do it in the movement around health care, but it is more difficult there because the Communist Party has a more sectarian approach, since it controls parts of the trade union movement in the sector and tries to have open mobilisations done exclusively via structures controlled by its members.

With different experiences, our orientation is always to seek the most united possible forms of social mobilisation against the neoliberal policies of the government.

Recent polling shows the Left Bloc recovering support to its historical 9-10% levels, while the PCP is still to recover from the 4-5% level. What explains this apparent gap? Is the PCP’s [position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#) part of the cause?

Ukraine was a very dramatic moment and a bad year for the PCP, because they very openly identified with Russia’s stance and narrative justifying the invasion. It was very badly received, including by parts of its own membership and voting base.

The PCP also paid a certain price, maybe in more activist circles, for its hostility towards the Left Bloc and for its authoritarian methods in the trade union movement. All the minority currents in the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP, controlled by the PCP) are publicly protesting at being prevented from presenting and discussing their own proposals at the level of the CGTP leadership. This is inconceivable in a healthy trade union movement. But it is happening right now in the leadership of the CGTP, and that is public news.

The PCP's hostility towards the Left Bloc, a party with which the Communists share many proposals and views on economic and social issues, taken with its authoritarian practice in the trade union movement, are the reason for a certain scepticism towards the party that is growing in parts of the left and also lies at the root of its inability to expand its influence in recent years.

Ukraine

Majority motion A, now Left Bloc policy, states: “The existence of global US hegemony does not change the imperialist nature of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which the Bloc condemned with the same clarity with which it has condemned the Putin regime over the years. The left can’t expect anything else from an oligarchic dictatorship and militarist adventurism”. It calls for “a Ukraine Peace conference under the aegis of the UN and the European Union (EU)” and an end to the arms race. The motion is silent on Portugal providing arms to Ukraine, and does not call for an immediate ceasefire.

Motion E, by contrast, while “vehemently” condemning Russian aggression, demands an immediate ceasefire and refers to European Parliament resolutions on Ukraine for which Left Bloc MEPs voted, stating: “The Left Bloc cannot remain tied to any decision that whitewashes this subordination [of the EU to US policy]”.

What is the policy of the Left Bloc on a ceasefire in the war and on Portugal supplying arms to Ukraine?

From the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the main issue for the Left Bloc was the right of self-determination of the Ukrainian people. That was the principal problem on the table. On the day after the invasion, on February 25, the Left Bloc issued a statement calling for the Portuguese government to demand of the EU that it define in concrete terms its conditions for a ceasefire in the region of Donbas and for negotiations aimed at establishing peaceful coexistence for all peoples in the region.

At the same time, the Left Bloc said that the demand for a ceasefire had to be linked to the demand for withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory invaded in February 2022 and that it also had to be linked to a concrete proposal for negotiations aimed at achieving a peace agreement. It is not possible to separate these three elements: withdrawal of troops, ceasefire and the opening of negotiations; they must be simultaneous.

As far as Ukraine's access to defensive weapons is concerned, what is at stake is the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state and respect for the integrity of its territory. Ukrainian military defence is legitimate to expel the invader. Thus, the guns that have been supplied to Ukraine by the imperialist countries from the West are mainly defensive weapons which are needed for Ukraine's national resistance effort.

The protection that is being provided by NATO to the government in Kyiv does not change the nature of the national resistance of Ukraine. It has never been the case that the national struggle for

the liberation against an invader or colonial power changes nature according to the kind of imperialist forces that might, at one moment or the other, support those national struggles.

So, we think this theory applies in the Ukrainian case; that we are dealing with a struggle for national liberation, and we should not only be actively supporting a ceasefire based on the withdrawal of Russian forces and finding the way to a peaceful agreement with Russia, but also that we should not oppose the supply of defensive — I stress defensive — weaponry to Ukraine.

European Union

Majority motion A notes the perspective of a return to austerity on the part of the European Commission and says: “Cooperation between European states is an important element of a strategy to contain the radicalised right wing, on condition of a democratic turn that accepts the sovereignty of peoples, the development of social rights and ecological planning.”

This perspective, certainly desirable, is light-years from the present-day EU, with its border policy against refugees, increases in arms expenditure, support for the Moroccan monarchy in its war on the Western Sahara freedom struggle, and effective denial of the right to self-determination.

How can the political tide be turned in Europe to make such a democratic turn feasible?

Well, the EU is a war machine against social rights. If you read the treaties that are at its core and which state the way in which the European institutions (the ECB, the European Commission and the European Council) should connect and act, you will see that they were designed and built to escape democratic control, escape the inspection of the people’s directly elected representatives, and to impose permanently — and with little national capacity of deciding otherwise — neoliberal reforms and setbacks for workers and the popular classes. That is the nature of the EU.

When the Left Bloc speaks about cooperation between European states, we are not speaking about the actually existing EU. It is unreformable and can only be substituted with new forms of cooperation between sovereign states.

The Left Bloc has had a long debate on these issues and has also been updating its views on the EU, not only before but also after the Troika intervention in Portugal ten years ago and after [the intervention of the Troika in Greece](#) and the capitulation of the SYRIZA government of the time. So, we do not have any kind of false illusions about the role that the EU can have. We know that the respect for sovereignty, the development of social rights and the ecological policies that can deal with climate change will only be achieved in a completely different framework.

Strengthening the Left Bloc’s implantation, interventions and functioning

Motion A notes the growth and better organisation of the Left Bloc’s trade union presence (in telecommunications, health, education, and the security industry). Could you give some details of these advances? How are you trying to build greater Left Bloc participation in a Portuguese trade union movement that seems to be shrinking, losing vitality and not gaining coverage of the areas where younger workers are concentrated, and with its main organised contingent, the CGTP, becoming more bureaucratised?

The Left Bloc's social implantation has been growing steadily over the years, and today, despite the big difficulties rising from the hegemony and authoritarianism that the Communist Party still exerts in the functioning of specific trade unions and the CGTP, there has been room for us to grow in influence in certain sectors, professions and trade unions.

The sectors mentioned — telecommunications, health, education, the security industry — are among the parts of the working class that have been most engaged in struggle in recent years. We are also building, as I said also before, among workers in the digital platforms, culture and the arts, and wherever casualisation and new forms of exploitation of the working class emerge.

We are gaining from these experiences, trying to connect them and generate a political debate to advance an alternative vision of what the working-class struggle should be in Portugal today, including the roles for trade unionism and for enterprise-based rank-and-file committees. We have some interesting experiences that provide very rich material for this debate.

We have also been developing critical mass in the health sector. Comrades of ours have been leading the formation of left-wing tickets in the doctors' and nurses' associations. This has been a rich experience that links with the health sector unions and the More SNS citizens movement in defence of the public health system. This is taking its first steps and we hope to play a very active role in it in the next period.

Then there is the teachers' struggle, which has been central in the last period and where there has been an increase in organised struggles and strikes around the small minority trade union that has emerged in the sector. It remains very small, but had the initiative to start a movement when the traditional trade unions were failing to understand the situation. This minority grasped that there was huge resentment among teachers and that there was willingness to fight, and they advanced, bringing the traditional unions after them. This exposed the role of the PCP's rule in the trade unions and the consequence of this rule: a bureaucratisation of the unions and a lack of answer to the workers.

In what other areas has the Left Bloc had successes? What are the areas that still need most attention? What remains to be achieved in making the Left Bloc a fully national organisation?

In territorial terms, the Left Bloc has today a very widespread presence in the country's small and medium-sized cities. Of course, after the general election result we experienced a big drop in our public financing, and it had consequences for the ways that we can develop our territorial structure. But we are trying to solve this problem and to step forward.

Motion A says that Left Bloc's reduced dependence on public financing as a result of its vote was a blessing in disguise: "The reinforcement of self-financing ... is a change in internal culture that needs to be deepened." How?

We are tackling our goal of reducing dependence on public financing through a combination of across-the-board financial campaigns, introducing elements of self-financing and having a fundraising component in each and every public initiative that we undertake. Also, by changing the structure of our spending and propaganda in order to save and, in the near future, have the capacity for a huge increase in the self-financing part of our budget.

This was well understood by the members since the cause of our present difficulties is well known to everyone.

A persistent complaint in Left Bloc pre-convention contributions is that its conventions are – unlike those of other European left organisations – structured according to competing motions (platforms), of which many members do not identify 100% with any of them, and that this decision-making method tends to entrench “tribal” tendencies.

On the other hand, this method of structuring conventions also requires members and delegates to decide what they actually want for the organisation, instead of wasting their time in discussion of hundreds of (usually minor) amendments to a (usually massive) single, pre-cooked document, a la PCP.

Do you see any ways in which the procedure of Left Bloc conventions can be improved?

There is room for participation in our congresses for comrades who do not engage with any of the main platforms. It is true that you can only present yourself as a candidate for the leadership of the party under a global political platform. But you can present yourself as a candidate for delegate under a local political platform independent of the global political platforms.

Local platforms that can link up between themselves and build a shared political identity – and they do this – then present themselves to convention and make their contribution without being part of any of the major political camps. This is the tradition of the party. It is very important in order not to have conventions dominated by the debate between the big alignments. And this has been our experience to date.

The Left Bloc has experienced an influx of nearly 1000 new members, mainly but not only younger and “with a strong identification with the Left Bloc’s ecosocialist, anti-racist and anti-conservative profile”. How do you envisage the work of educating and training this “intake” to be able to take responsibility for leading the organisation in the future?

The way we handle this challenge is to carry out specific welcoming meetings for new members and apply a policy of encouraging them to take areas of responsibility. At the same time, we always try to have a good presence of young people in the elected organs of the party and on its election tickets.

Young Left Bloc members are not ghettoised in a separate organisation, we refuse to have a separate youth organisation. This means that there is always a presence of the younger comrades throughout the Left Bloc’s structures. They are inside the party, engaging with the older comrades, but, of course, with space for dealing with their own concerns. They elect a national coordination of young people in order to deal with the young people’s issues, and they organise their national educational program and their annual national camp.

However, as far as the day-to-day life and organs of the Left Bloc go, they are members in full rights.

The left and the social democracy: Portugal and Spain contrasted

There’s a sharp contrast between the approach of the Spanish left to the left of the social democracy and its Portuguese counterparts, the Left Bloc in particular. In the Spanish state, it is just accepted that the non-PSOE left should govern in alliance with the PSOE, and that having “our people” in government guarantees a better result than leaving the job to the PSOE apparatchiks. The Left Bloc’s approach has been that of the *geringonça*: external support for the PS against the right on the basis of an agreed set of undertakings, leaving the organisations free to pressure, criticise and showcase its policies in areas not covered by the agreement.

After four years of Portuguese *geringonça* (2015-2019) and three-and-a-half years (2019-2023) of Spanish “cohabitation” by Unidas Podemos (UP) as a minority partner in a PSOE government, what conclusions would you draw as to which approach is to be preferred?

When the Left Bloc lost half of its vote in 2022, Pablo Iglesias, at the time leader of Podemos, rushed into public debate to make a balance sheet of the Portuguese experience, the “Portuguese model”, as it was called. He was critical of our option of staying outside the PS government. He said we should have been in government to have influence, to have our voters understand that to vote for the left is to elect possible members of government, change the rules, and change government policies. So, Iglesias always had a bad prognosis about the Portuguese experience.

But the fact is that, as I have already said, at the end of the “Portuguese model” (in 2019, after the fulfilment of the clauses of the four-year agreement with the PS), the Left Bloc kept its influence and re-elected its 19 MPs. So, there was no negative balance sheet to be drawn from that orientation.

The loss of half of our vote happened more than two years after that, when, with no agreement with the PS, we had to choose between being an autonomous force of the left using its representation to exert influence over government decisions or becoming an unconditional supporter of the PS. We chose the first option. At no time have we had any doubts about the nature of the PS government, a government of the liberal centre. We never saw it as part of a progressive camp, as a left government. We always saw it as offering an opportunity, through political agreement, to extract gains for the working class.

In contrast, when we look at the balance sheet at the end of the near four-year term of the PSOE-UP government in Spain, we have to be honest and say that the advances that the left wing got from participating in the government with the PSOE were tiny and few. This is true not only on the international level, for instance [with the criminal deal between the Spanish government and the Kingdom of Morocco against the Saharan people](#) — for the first time in recent Spanish history, the left was unable to avoid this turn in Spanish foreign policy — but also in terms of social policy and the reformed labour law: the complete abrogation of the right-wing labour counter-reform of 2012, specified in the PSOE-UP agreement for government, was abandoned.

So, the strategic debate is about how to find ways of building electoral majorities that block the right and far right’s path to power and at the same time, within these majorities, allow an open conflict with the liberal centre (the PS or PSOE). That is, we need to think about how to build a strategic alternative from the left that is able to make policy for the majority. We do not want to be the left flank of a government that goes on implementing liberal politics and remains completely subordinate to the monetary and budgetary rules of the EU and the Eurozone.

If you make a serious balance sheet of [the labour law reform](#) that was led by Yolanda Diaz and Pedro Sanchez, or of the social policies in general of the Spanish Government over the past four years, you have to make an effort to find the hallmark of the left. And despite this, all these forces — Podemos, the United Left, Yolanda Diaz’s Sumar — all agree on the essential point: their goal is to locate ministers inside a government led by the socialists.

This consensus translated into convulsion, with violent clashes between the organised components of [the Sumar candidacy](#). In the next parliament, the parties that held ministries in the outgoing government (Podemos and the Communist Party of Spain/United Left) will have together, at best, ten members of parliament, even if there will be a majority of MPs from the PSOE together with Sumar. So, [in the context of the new reconfiguration of the left in Spain](#), this marginalisation of the parties that signed the previous PSOE-UP government has to mean something.

When we lost electoral influence in Portugal, in 2022, that was a problem, of course. But in Spain the naturalisation of left integration into government (as an apparently necessary consequence of the clash with the right wing) poses the question of the real political influence of the left. We have to do everything to block the access of the right and the far right to government, true. But we should by no means erase the left and its goals into a “progressive bloc” that is hard to distinguish from the simple liberal centre rule of the PS.

Understanding the belated rise of Portugal’s new far right

Chega is a late arrival in the wave of far-right reaction in Europe. What features does it share with other far-right forces? Why did it emerge so belatedly? Does it have support in the state apparatus, judiciary, armed forces and police?

For many years there was a party, the Party of the Social and Democratic Centre (CDS-PP), which was kind of a gathering together of the remnants of the dictatorship, political personnel from its last years, with close connections with the church and sections of the bourgeoisie, sections of the employers’ confederation, etc.

At its electoral peak, CDS-PP got the same score that Chega gets today, around 12%. CDS-PP disappeared from the political landscape and its cadres are now orphans. They are not in Chega — they did not become politicians for the far right.

But the far right absorbed the popular vote this party had, so you can see this as a kind of *aggiornamento* [updating] from the grassroots of the right wing, from its voting base.

When you note the political personnel of these new ultra-right political parties — not only Chega but also Iniciativa Liberal (IL, Liberal Initiative) — they come from the middle cadres of the traditional right-wing parties.

So, rather than Nazi and fascist groups getting parliamentary representation and growing, we have sectors from the previously existing right-wing formations fragmenting and reorganising, adopting elements of the radicalised right — of Donald Trump and Viktor Orban, and also of the ultra-liberal right from all over Europe.

In the case of Chega, we should also note its organic fragility. For example, one-third of its elected members on local council executives resigned from the party last year. Not for any specific political difference, but because of clashing personalities and personal ambitions. Also, the last congresses of the party were ruled to be irregular by the Constitutional Court.

So, this is an organisation that is still very weak, which still gets its representatives and candidates from people with very loose connections with the party itself, and that reflects its lack of real social presence. Yes, Chega is very visible in parliament. It has a very charismatic leader, André Ventura (who came from the [liberal-conservative] Social Democratic Party), but it is a very loose organisation with very little capacity for street mobilisation.

The only sector with real far-right influence in its organised ranks is the police. In no other sector, in no other expression of protest, does Chega have anything comparable, not even in massively mobilised sectors, like teachers and nurses. Nowhere else does the far right have any capacity for mobilisation.

Nonetheless, the far right still connects with the traditional themes of the Portuguese right: anti-

Roma racism, colonial nostalgia and Salazarism, the normalisation of the fascist dictatorship and the Colonial War viewed as an heroic epic. All that goes with macho nostalgia and a very strong rejection of feminism. These are the main features of the Portuguese far-right narrative, as represented by Chega.

Then there is IL, another radicalised party of the right, but which is very different. IL is an ultra-liberal party, inspired by Hayekism [based on Friedrich Hayek's ideas], one of many European parties of this type. An extremist liberal party, anti-Marxist but not ultra-conservative, with an agenda focused on economic issues like lowering tax rates.

IL has a high-income support base and is much more concentrated in wealthy inner-city *milieux*. Its typical voter is younger and more educated. It does not express xenophobic and racist ideas openly and refuses to make them part of its agenda.

Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister António Costa aims to build the PS vote by splitting the right and frightening left voters into seeking shelter with PS against Chega's rise. How does the Left Bloc counter this tactic?

The main way that the Left Bloc deals with this is by explaining that Chega is a "federation of discontent" — discontent with neoliberal policy and its results in wages, health, education, etc — despite its lack of policies to answer these needs, or even a more radical version of neoliberal policies. This is the direct result of the bad politics of the socialist government.

So, we answer the far right by finding the largest unity in the movements that resist fascism, racism, misogyny, homophobia or transphobia, but also by underlining our opposition to PS neoliberalism and by responding on the terrain of alternative economic and social policy.

This orientation coincides with how protest has developed in the first year and a half of the PS's absolute majority. Every demonstration that has emerged comes with left-wing demands: those of the teachers, of the health workers, of the workers in the legal system; the demands of the feminists, the demands of LGBTIQ+ movement, the demands of young people who are fighting for housing.

They all connect with the left and with our left demands. They have no connection with, and there is no presence of, the far right in these demonstrations. This is very, very important because the opposition in the streets to the Costa government is not a far-right opposition at all. It is mainly led by social movements and trade unions, which connect directly with the left-wing parties and the left-wing opposition, either with the Portuguese Communist Party or the Left Bloc.

That is the way we can create a left-wing pole of attraction that can win over those social sectors in the working class who are in shock because of the neoliberal policies of the PS and could be more vulnerable to far-right demagoguery.

In the Spanish state, support for far-right party Vox, which mainly comes from the rich and very rich suburbs, is also concentrated among Spanish speakers in the poorest and most abandoned Mediterranean coastal regions with large migrant worker populations. Is the Portuguese situation similar? What does the Left Bloc propose to counter the influence of Chega?

The characteristics of immigration in Portugal are quite different from Spain. Here, Chega is closely connected to the interests of our intensive monoculture in agriculture, which is very much dependent on immigrant labour.

So, Chega has shifted its message more to themes like Romaphobia, corruption in politics, ultra-

conservatism around LGBTIQ+ and feminist concerns, and opposition to euthanasia and abortion. These are the main issues along which the far right tries to build its identity, more than with a straightforward racist and anti-immigrant stance, which would, at a certain point, clash with the interests of some of its own supporters and financiers.

Also, Chega voters are different from their Vox counterparts. The typical Chega voter is male, middle-aged to elderly, and from the popular classes. As I said, the more highly educated, urban right-wing voter who might vote Vox in Spain tends to vote IL in Portugal.

P.S.

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