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2022 General Election in Portugal – Lessons to be learned by us all

Jim O'Connell writes about the recent Portuguese elections.

'Portugal's Socialists have won a big victory!'. This recent Guardian headline would make you think that the people of Portugal had risen up and thrown off the shackles of neoliberal capitalism.

But unfortunately, that is not the case.

These 'socialists' are a party like the Irish Labour party. They portray themselves as representatives of the working class while wholeheartedly supporting and enforcing the neo-liberal policies that widen the gap between ordinary people and a privileged establishment.

Portuguese cheerleaders for the idea that capitalism can be defeated by parliamentary governance touted a 'confidence and supply' type arrangement. The radical left "Left Bloc" and the old Communist party entered the cosy so called 'geringonca' ('contraption') agreement with the Labour style Socialists.

This was no case of "the tail wagging the dog" and the Labour style "Socialists" were given a useful breathing space in which to maintain and strengthen their dominance. The radical left could have supported the left government on a case-by-case basis and threatened to bring Labour down when they went against workers.

Instead, they signed up to a written agreement and kept the Labour style party in power for year after year. They discredited themselves by doing this.

The Socialists were then able to blame Left Bloc and the Communists for "political instability" when they finally withdrew support and brought down the government in late 2021. They were not being punished for causing the election – but for being quiet for so long.

The resulting 'snap' election brought in some disappointing and worrying developments.

The Labour style socialists got an overall majority which will greatly facilitate them in pushing through policies aimed at making ordinary people pay for measures brought on by the Covid crisis, climate change and rising inequality on the European continent (Portugal is a member of NATO).

The radical left's policy of unquestioningly facilitating a centre-left government and then only pulling out when it was too late (not supporting *one* budget after supporting many others) meant that the relatively recent gains they had made for real left politics and workers' rights took a kicking.

The most radical workers were demoralised and the centre ground was able to grow. This is even more frustrated considering the strikes that spread across the country in recent times from nurses and teachers to Metro workers.

The radical left's parliamentary presence was *drastically* reduced with the Communist's percentage of the vote falling by a third and the Left Bloc by half! The centre-right PPD (like Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil) emerged unscathed by the election "instability" and is still at 27.8% - maintaining their position as having the second biggest share of the vote.

The danger of a right-wing coalition between the PPD (like Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil) and the far right Chega (the fascists) may arguably have meant more support of the centre ground Socialists, but one of the most worrying parts of the election has to be the gains for Chega the far-right, anti-immigrant party.

They have increased their representation from one parliamentary seat to 12. This can only embolden anti-worker, anti-union, racist and anti-socialist voices already heard in Portugal and elsewhere across Europe.

The radical left should have played a leading role in the strikes and protests of workers on the streets while being a voice for those struggles in parliament. At the same time, they could have united with workers who supported the centre left to oppose the fascists on the streets.

There is much scope for the radical left to use the "dung-heap" of the parliamentary system to make gains for real socialism and equality. A means to this end is arguably some form of conditional support for a left government by a sizeable presence in the opposition benches where real influence on policies can be brought to bear without facilitating neo-liberalism.

A radical left that supports left government on a case-by-case basis, that prioritises strikes and protests and fights for real socialism can make gains in the present period.

The main representatives of the radical left in Portugal chose to take that position a step further and into the area of fuller participation in a 'social democratic' government. They fell into a trap and as a result they have lost a lot of credibility and real influence.

The biggest losers are the ordinary working class who will suffer at the hands of the Labour style "Socialists". Among the winners were the 'centre ground "Socialists" who have become a larger *somewhat* softer alternative to the right parties.

Another winner has been right wing extremism - now with parliamentary justification for their dangerous policies. Anyone on the radical left considering the possible option of entering any kind of power sharing arrangement within a left government surely must take heed of these developments.

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

www.rednetwork.ie