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European Union

A balance sheet of the European elections

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The principal lessons of the European elections of June 7, 2009 are the following: massive abstention; a progression of the Right flanked by the far Right; a collapse of social democracy; an increase in the votes for the ecologists; the radical Left, left reformist or anti-capitalist, maintains its positions, without making new advances, except in Portugal and in Ireland.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/zero.jpg>]

Crisis of legitimacy

First of all, the recent European elections confirmed widespread popular abstention. The rate of abstention, at 57 per cent on the level of the European Union, increased further compared to the elections of 2004 where it had already, at 54.6 per cent, beaten the previous record. The level of abstention decreased in 9 countries and increased in 17.

This level of abstention provides a fresh demonstration of the crisis of legitimacy of the European Union and the governing parties which situate their policies within this framework. It is the result of the peoples of Europe being marginalised in the process of building a European Union that is neoliberal and anti-democratic.

In spite of the “No” votes from the left in France, in the Netherlands, and in Ireland, in the referendums on the European Constitutional Treaty, the EU has maintained its neoliberal policies. Furthermore, far from constituting a protection against the economic crisis, the EU has shown itself to be incapable of coordinating a response to it. The massive abstention is a protest against these policies. Given the high level of abstention, this election can thus only give a deformed reflection of the real relationships of forces. That does not, however, invalidate the principal tendencies of the situation, in particular the progression of the Right and the collapse of social democracy.

But as a result of this level of abstention, the majority parties won only a limited number of votes and percentages of registered voters: in France, the UMP, Sarkozy’s party, which came top of the poll, with nearly 30 per cent of the votes cast, won only 11 per cent of registered voters! This phenomenon can be seen in a number of countries. It indicates the volatility of the electorates, the crisis of representativeness and of representation of the parties and institutions.

It is a sign of profound political and social instability in the countries of the EU, and therefore of the possibilities of sharp turns in the situation. Once again, that does not cancel out the progression of parties of the traditional and populist Right, and of the far Right, but it relativises the consolidated character of these relationships of forces.

Progression of the Right

The traditional Right progressed in 16 countries and regressed in 11 others. It won in the big countries that it controls: in Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria and Hungary. In Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, as well as in Slovenia and at Cyprus, the parties of the Right also came top of the poll. The paradox of the situation is that the first stages of the crisis are reinforcing the parties of the conservative Right which have precisely been the most zealous in the application of neoliberal policies. The acceptance, the support or the moderate criticism of the “stimulus programmes” of the Right by social democracy have benefitted the traditional Right.

In this first phase of the crisis, the reactions of fear, anxiety, of “turning inwards”, in a situation of deepening of the crisis of the workers’ movement and the Left, have indeed reinforced the conservative Right. This push of the Right

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was accompanied in a series of countries by a rise in the forces of the populist Right and the far Right, in particular in the Netherlands, where the far-right, islamophobic and anti-European party of the deputy Geert Wilders obtained 16.4 per cent of the votes and 4 MEPs. In Austria, Finland and Hungary, the forces of the far Right, which unleashed campaigns against immigrants, also made progress. In Britain, the British National Party (BNP) obtained 2 MEPs, with 6.7 per cent of the vote. Greece also saw a breakthrough by the far Right, with 7.2 per cent for LAOS.

This progression is related to the rise of xenophobic and racist currents in a series of countries. The idea of making immigrants a scapegoat for the crisis is spreading in Europe. Witness the anti-immigrant diatribes of the Northern League in Italy and the reactions in Britain, in certain sectors of the working class, around the slogan "British jobs for British workers". The movement of public opinion in certain Central European countries against the "Roms" (Gypsies), can give a certain social base to the populist Right or the far-Right. The Right as a whole progressed in 18 countries and regressed in 9 others.

Losses for social democracy

The third of the principal lessons of the poll is that social democracy has suffered losses and in some cases has seen its vote collapse. Whether in power or in opposition, it has lost ground. It regressed in 17 countries, it was stable in Sweden and progressed in only 9 countries - Greece, Ireland and Malta as well as the countries which were formerly ruled by the bureaucracy, but there it is a particular kind of "social democracy", coming from the former ruling parties: in Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovenia.

The European Socialist party (ELP) thus regressed in the majority of the principal countries of the European Union. The ELP lost ground in particular in the countries where social democracy is in power: in Britain, Spain, Portugal.

It experienced a real electoral rout in Germany where it only managed 21 per cent of the, one of the poorest electoral results in the history of the Social-Democratic Party (SPD), not to mention the collapse of the Socialist Party (PS) in France (a drop of 13 per cent compared to the last European elections in 2004). Social democracy is paying for its "social-liberalism". From concession to concession, from adaptation to adaptation, from "reformism without reforms" to "reformism with neoliberal counter-reforms", the European socialist parties have become increasingly integrated into the management of the capitalist economy and institutions and have experienced a relative loss of their social and political bases in the popular classes. That does not mean the end of the socialist parties. They can return to the foreground, as a result of a deepening of the economic crisis or of social and political crises... but the increasingly strong tendencies towards their transformation from classic social democratic parties into American-style democratic parties, a process already completed in Italy with the transformation of the ex-Communists into partisans of the Democratic Party, can spread today through the whole of European social democracy.

Breakthrough for the ecologists

In a series of countries, the crisis of the big traditional apparatuses of the Right and of the social-democratic Left has left considerable space for several currents, from ecology to the radical Left, via a whole series of left reformist forces. In these elections, it was the ecologists who took most advantage of this space.

With nearly 60 MEPs elected, they have come out of the election strengthened. One of the most significant breakthroughs was that of the Europe Ecology list of Daniel Cohn-Bendit in France, which obtained more than 16 per cent of the vote. The considerable increase in their votes is the product of two phenomena: the aggravation of the crisis of political representation of the traditional apparatuses, but above all the steadily increasing importance of the ecological question.

The problems raised by climate change and the unease based on the whole of the environmental questions naturally

favoured the ecologists. These socio-political modifications must lead anti-capitalists to reinforce the ecosocialist dimension of their programmatic responses and their political intervention. The ecologists cover the entire political spectrum, from left to right. There are among the forces of the ecologists, “ecosocialist” currents, there are “ecoreformist” currents, linked to the Left, there are fundamentalist currents, but the political force which will dominate in the European Parliament, in particular around the figure of Cohn-Bendit, is a “centre-left ecology”.

Based on the institutions of the European Union, Europe Ecology in France and the European Greens are aiming for a broad alliance of socialist parties, “centres” and ecologists. In France such an orientation aims, on the one hand, at the transformation of the Greens, judged “too much on the left”, “too amateur”, into a party that unites ecologists, through a candidature at the next presidential election of Nicolas Hulot (an ecologist and a popular presenter of television programmes on ecology on the TF1 channel) - and on the other hand, at the construction of a centre-left alliance, involving the ecologists, the PS, and the Movement of Democrats (Modem) of Francois Bayrou. Will the ecologists confirm their results in the next elections? Can such projects of construction be carried through to the end? Much will depend on the developments of the crisis, on social resistance and on the capacities of the anti-capitalist forces ...

Radical Lefts

If the ecologists saw an increase in their votes, the radical Lefts (left reformists and anti-capitalists) did not make any new breakthroughs, except in Ireland and in Portugal.

Parties like Die Linke in Germany, the SP in the Netherlands or the Left Front in France maintained or slightly reinforced their electoral positions. The Left Front – involving the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party - obtained 6.3 per cent of the vote, increasing by only 0.5 per cent the score of the PCF in 2004 (5.8 per cent). In spite of a good campaign, there was no dynamic of the Left Front. In Germany, Die Linke hoped for a two-figure score, but they only got 7.3 per cent of the votes... And already the right wing of the party, represented especially in the regions of East Germany, is reproaching Die Linke, with having had a campaign... “too much on the left”!

The Party of Communist Refounding (PRC) in Italy, with 3.23 per cent, no longer has any representatives in the European Parliament. In fact the crisis of the PRC led to the constitution of two blocs, one headed by Bertinotti (one of its former leaders), whose rainbow project, with the Greens and the ex-Socialists, was oriented towards new alliances with the Democratic Party and the centre-left, and another based on a “communist identity” project involving the continuation of alliances with the centre-left in the governing executives of the cities and the big regions.

In Britain the results of the radical Left were disappointing, with the list NO2EU getting one per cent, the same as the SLP of Arthur Scargill.

Syriza (a coalition of the radical Left) in Greece, by winning 4 per cent of the vote and getting one member of the European Parliament elected, did not achieve its goal of getting 3 MEPs elected.

The Danish organization Folkebevægelsen mod EU (Popular Movement against the EU), by centring its campaign against the European Union, by affirming clear positions of defence of the rights of immigrant workers coming from the Eastern European countries, succeeded in getting re-elected its MEP, Soren Sondegard, who is also a member of the Red-Green Alliance and of the Fourth International.

Finally, in the anti-capitalist Left, we must underline the results of the Socialist Party in Ireland, which, after the campaign of the Irish “No” to the Treaty of Lisbon, sent an MEP to Brussels. In the local elections, which took place at the same time in Ireland, other active forces of the “No from the left”, such as “People Before Profits”, also had some success.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/blocoelectionnight.jpg>]

Bucking the trend: Left Bloc did well in Portugal

But we must especially remark on the excellent results of the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) in Portugal, which made a real breakthrough, winning 10.73 per cent of the vote and getting 3 MEPs elected. The advance of the Bloc is related to the collapse of the ELP but also to the absence of ecologist formations. In fact the success of the Bloc comes from the accumulated experience of its councillors and its MPs, from its ability to promote popular campaigns, from its ability to intervene as a global political alternative.

In France, the NPA consolidated its electorate by obtaining 4.98 per cent of the votes cast (840,713 votes). It progressed compared to the results of the LCR-LO lists at the previous European elections in 2004 (+ 2.3 per cent) but did not manage to have an MEP elected, which led to a certain disappointment. But the NPA made real breakthroughs in the working-class and popular districts, getting scores of up to 8-10 per cent.

The evolution of the political situation, the ability of the trade-union leaderships to channel and contain working-class combativeness and then to make it decline, had a negative effect on the level of struggles and slowed down the dynamic of the NPA.

For many organizations of the anti-capitalist Left, it was their electoral baptism of fire. The Polish Party of Labour, Izquierda Anticapitalista in the Spanish State, ArbetarInitiativet (Workers' Initiative) in Sweden, the LCR-PSL in Belgium, the SSP in Scotland, Antarsya (an anti-capitalist coalition) in Greece conducted militant campaigns, but their results did not exceed one per cent. In spite of the weakness of these results, these organizations made advances in their construction: more influence, more implantation, more members.

These elections did not permit the formations of the radical Left (left reformist or anti-capitalist) to make a leap forward on the road of constituting a political alternative. The polarization to the right in these elections limited the emergence of forces to the left of the Left... except in Ireland and in Portugal. But they remain a factor in the political situation in many countries of Europe.

Political lessons

What are, within this framework, the general political lessons?

1. These elections are the confirmation that the workers' movement, the Left and anti-capitalists are in a difficult situation. The first phases of the capitalist crisis are benefiting the traditional neoliberal Right. We thought that the crisis would open up spaces for anti-capitalist ideas and policies. We have scored a series of points in the political and ideological debate. But we have not been able to transform our ideas into a material force. The Right held firm and confirmed its policies. Contrary to what some people have explained on the way the crisis is being managed, there has been no Keynesian or neo-Keynesian turn. There has been more state intervention but it has been to consolidate neoliberal policies. The industrial restructurations have reinforced the attacks against the workers: freezing or lowering wages in some companies (either directly or by an increase in working hours), reduction of social budgets, privatizations, new attacks against social security and pensions. That is what the workers and the unemployed of Germany must expect after the elections in September.

2. After some skirmishes, the level of struggles, in Europe, has not measured up to the attacks brought on by the crisis and by the policies of the governments. There have been trade-union days of action, mobilizations against lay-offs, actions and demonstrations by sectors of the trade union movement, as in Germany, but not struggles on a national level that could inflict setbacks on the policies of the employers and the governments. In France, where the level of struggles and resistance remains strong – the highest in Europe - the social mobilizations of several million workers were channelled into a succession of trade-union days of action which exhausted the combativeness of the

workers. Having adapted to the main lines of neoliberal policies, the trade-union leaderships did everything to avoid confrontation with the employers... the result was to provoke demobilization and confusion...

3. Although the present European political conjuncture is difficult, this conjuncture is part of a new political period which is heavy with tensions, with social and political contradictions. The main outlines of the period have not been called into question. We are going to see twists and turns and new political conjunctures. In the first place, we are at the beginning of the crisis. It will last and it will deepen. Its systemic dimension, its multiple economic and ecological dimensions will lead to changes in the political situation.

Although one cycle of struggles and of social reactions, corresponding to the first year of the crisis, is ending, there will be other reactions, further resistance and more social struggles. Of course nothing is automatic. The crisis will not lead mechanically to social struggles, and even struggles do not lead naturally to a rise in political consciousness. There is even polarization, and we can see it today, on the right and on the left, and even between the radical Left and the far Right. But we should not forget our analysis of the crisis as a global crisis. The radical Left has not been able, at this stage, to present a credible political alternative, but the situation of the Left after these elections indicates, more than ever, than what is at stake is an overall reorganization. The PS and entire sectors of social democracy will be led either to make alliances with centre-left forces, including ecologists, or will themselves undergo qualitative mutations that will accentuate their "social-liberalism".

The trade-union leaderships are undergoing a process of increasing integration into the mechanisms of managing the crisis. The spaces created by the social-liberal evolution of the traditional Left call for audacious policies of anti-capitalist unity.

4. We have to hold to our course, taking into account the difficulties of the present conjuncture. Faced with the attacks of the Right and the retreats of the workers' movement we must persist in our policy of unity of action - the unity of action of the entire Left, of the entire workers' movement against the capitalist plans - but also to give more place in the profile of our organizations, in their proposals, to anti-capitalist unity. We have to take up with more force the proposals of anti-capitalist unity. This unity has a content: the response to the economic and ecological crisis. The radical Left must be a left of struggle, but it must especially be a left of answers to the crisis. Immediate demands must be articulated with answers to the crisis, in the field of distribution of wealth, public and social property right across the economy and not only in the "public services", in a new mode of production and consumption based on social needs. From this point of view, our ecosocialist responses are central. Lastly, the anti-capitalist Left must assert itself as a party defending a governmental alternative centred on immediate proposals ("if you were in power what would you do first?") and also on new democratic practices and institutions. Within the Left, we have to re-launch the debate on alliances and perspectives of power, combining there too unity of action against the Right and the employers and anti-capitalist unity. Confronted with the offers of alliances from social democracy (or even, as in France or Italy, of "common houses"), we have to oppose anti-capitalist unity to social-liberal unity.

To reiterate the two possible options in the coming situation: social-liberalism or anti-capitalism; and to challenge all the formations situated on the left of the Left, on this question. "Do you choose unity with the social-liberals or anti-capitalist unity?" The question of the independence of anti-capitalist formations with respect to the traditional leaderships of the Left remains a decisive criterion for reorganizing the Left.

5. Within this framework, we must continue to construct an anti-capitalist pole in Europe. Because one of the points of support to re-launch activity, encourage the unity of action of the entire Left, continue the strategic and programmatic discussion, is the existence of the organizations of the anti-capitalist Left. Of course, their development is unequal, but their responsibility is decisive. Over and above the present conjuncture, they have accumulated forces and experience, and some of them, such as the Portuguese Left Bloc or the French NPA, have an electoral and political audience which makes them credible forces to the left of the PS.

A balance sheet of the European elections

But a series of significant organizations - like the British and Irish revolutionary organizations (the SWP and the SP), left currents inside and outside Die Linke in Germany, the anti-capitalist currents in Greece, Sinistra Critica in Italy and Izquierda anticapitalista in Spain, the Polish Party of Labour (PPP) – represent forces which it is necessary to take into account in order to advance along the road to a new anti-capitalist force in Europe.