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Portugal

"We are not living in a period of resignation"

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Catarina Martins (a 39-year old actress), was leader of the Professional Association of Scenic Arts between 2004 and 2006. She was elected to Parliament for Porto in 2009 on the list of the Left Bloc [1] and re-elected in 2011. During the 8th Congress of the Bloc, on 10 and 11 November 2012, she was elected Coordinator of the Bloc, a task she shares with Joao Semedo (a 61-year old doctor), who has been an MP for the Bloc since 2005. We reproduce here the interview conducted by the delegation of Izquierda anticapitalista (IA, Anticapitalist Left, section of the Fourth International in the Spanish State) to the Left Bloc Congress on November 10, 2012, in Lisbon.

Izquierda Anticapitalista: What is the situation of Portugal today and what is the situation of the Left Bloc at the opening of its congress?

Catarina Martins: Portugal is today being subjected to a "rescue" plan of the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission and International Monetary Fund) and to very high interest rates on government bonds, which is adding austerity to the austerity from which it was already suffering before.

We had a government of the Socialist Party (PSP), which said that it was imposing austerity (cuts in wages and public services) in order to "avoid" being subject to the IMF. The truth is that, as we had warned, the economy deteriorated even further and so we find ourselves with a "rescue plan" which is not intended to solve the problems of wages - as they claimed - but to solve the problems of national and international banks.

The social situation has greatly deteriorated, because the economy is in a worse and worse state. Since we have had the Troika in Portugal 200,000 jobs have already been lost, which is a lot considering the size of the country. Cuts in wages ranged between 20 and 30 per cent, depending on the sector. Public services suffered a major attack. At present the youngest sectors of the population are emigrating, as at the time of the colonial war in the 1960s. We are therefore in a situation of a very alarming deterioration of collective life and social conditions. The Secretary of State for Education was himself obliged to recognize that tens of thousands of children suffer from hunger in school.

While all this is happening, the state is reducing social benefits for the poorest in society and delegating public assistance by signing contracts with institutions linked to the Catholic Church. Thus, not only have economic infrastructures been privatized (electricity, transport, and they want to privatize the post office, water, etc., etc.), but they are also destroying the Welfare State in the name of charity. This government and the Troika are completely dismantling the social consensus that existed in Portugal since April 25, 1974 - progressive taxation and help for the weakest members of society.

A year and a half ago we had elections. At that time the Bloc said: "the Troika will not pay wages, it will protect the banks and therefore the only way out of the crisis is to renegotiate the debt". A year and a half ago it was very difficult to get this message across. There were many people who said that to renegotiate the debt was "to not pay, to not meet our national commitments". Our discourse was not understood... it was worth nothing.

The economic and social situation has increasingly deteriorated. Today, we see that people of all political colours – even various sectors of the Right - including those who attacked us, find that the economic recession is reducing our GDP so much and that interest on the debt has increased so much, that it is not possible to pay the debt while it exceeds the country's GDP. And, even if they are very far from us in the ideological field, they are beginning to say that the only way out of the crisis is by renegotiating the debt.

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That's how far we have come in a year and a half of deepening social crisis, a period that has made it possible to take forward this great debate in Portuguese society. And it is the instrument that is available to the Left now: it is possible to say that in order to protect the Welfare State and wages, we must renegotiate the debt, that it is the only way. This is what we are engaged in today.

IA: You said that when the PSP headed the government, it said that its measures would make it possible to avoid the "rescue" and then we saw that this is not the case. However it is not suffering from a crisis as deep as that of the other European social-liberal parties, such as the Greek (PASOK) or Spanish (PSOE) parties. Why do you think this is not the case? How could this crisis develop in the future?

Catarina Martins: Countries are different and have different social majorities. There is a social base of the PSP, which is saying today that we must renegotiate the debt, and there is disaffection, increasing with every passing day, between the social base that supports the PSP and the leadership of this party. There are also a few leaders of the PSP who are finally saying that now we must renegotiate the debt, that privatization is killing the economy, that we are losing the capacity to invest, that we are losing sovereignty. But in reality the PSP continues to say that the solution is possible only in the framework of the memorandum of the Troika.

It is natural that in Portugal a part of the population thinks that the Welfare State was built by the PSP, although the Left fought for that. Because it is true that public education and the national health system were developed under Socialist governments. But it is also true that the PSP has turned its back on the Left on many occasions, it has turned its back on its social base, and is largely responsible for the discredit of politics that exists now. And it is a worrying phenomenon, because when people do not have confidence in their ability to organize, to be present both in the institutions and in the street, to "run inside and run outside", as we say in the Left Bloc, they lose power, they give up.

However we should point out the positive signs that exist in Portugal today: in September of this year we had successive demonstrations with a level of participation that we had not had since the early days of our revolution of 25 April 1974. This shows clearly that there is a change. This means that we are not living in a period of resignation. The people who now take to the streets are not saying, "We want better austerity" or "We want a smiling Troika"... They are saying "the Troika should go and get....." and demanding an alternative.

Bipartisanship, this centre of interests that had governed the country, has already lost the confidence of the majority of the population and people are taking to the streets to express their demands. As a result, we are in a moment where we have to build new social majorities. That is, to mobilize all those who feel that bipartisanship has never provided them with answers, who understand now that the Troika project has suffered the same failure, that it is not controlling the debt and that it is increasing the deficit in order to have new pretexts to impose more austerity.

That is how the Troika works: it provokes the recession of the economy, unemployment skyrockets, the deficit remains out of control and the debt rises still further. And when that happens, it says "we need still more": more cuts in wages, more cuts in the Welfare state... It is a vicious circle that has a clear objective, which the Troika does not want to admit but which is clear to anyone who looks at what is happening in Europe: destroy the Welfare State and break the working class.

I think that we are on the point of building this social majority in Portugal and that this is a job that needs to be done, in which we are involved, about which we are enthusiastic. We see the importance of doing this with many forces and in a form that will be broad and non-sectarian, because we must unite to create this force. We need to revive the Left. In Portugal, this is the time to do it.

IA: Formally, the next elections you will have will be the municipal ones. At this congress there were discussions around the hypothesis of electoral alliances with the PS at this level, on the initiative of the minority motion. How could you envisage such a scenario?

Catarina Martins: I must say that at this time in Portugal the debate about the municipal elections interests the "barons" of the big parties of bipartisanship who hold office more than it does the people of the Left. Our forecast is that there will be early legislative elections before the municipal elections, because the coalition is crumbling and we do not have confidence in presidential governments. We say that democracy must respond to the crisis.

If there is a political crisis because the government incapable, because it no longer has support even in what was its traditional social base, that there is a coalition which people no longer understand, which is undermined by scandals, then we have to appeal to democracy.

So the first battle must have as its objective the overthrow of the government and the rejection of the state budget which is being discussed in Parliament. It is a budget which reduces wages and which does something very perverse: it exacerbates inequality. Portugal is one of the most unequal countries in Europe, according to all statistics and indicators. This government is preparing to implement a brutal tax increase which will not only reduce wages and will thus cause huge difficulties, but which makes taxation less progressive and which will therefore increase inequality and cause the destruction of public services.

The government knows that its budget will be rejected and is already saying that it will have to "refund" the Welfare State. But for it "refund" means privatizing health, privatizing social security and imposing 50,000 or 60,000 redundancies in the civil service. So, rejecting this budget, not letting it go through, that is the battle that interests people.

With regard to your question about the municipal elections: in the Left Bloc we take the position that we have to make alliances with parties and movements, whenever it is possible and whenever the whole Left unites to fight the Right that is installed in power. But these alliances must be based on programmes. What we do not accept are "tactician" games (imagine the absurdity of coalitions in some places with the PSP against the PCP and in others with the PCP against the PSP...). Such games make no sense and in this regard, we do not make such tactical or arithmetic calculations. That is why we believe that we must have our own programmes and our own lists in the municipal elections; we must be prepared for that. But being prepared doesn't mean not building bridges, not allying with independents, with groups that are active in defence of public services, of public water supply (this is currently a debate in Portugal), nor does it mean that we do not make any coalitions with left parties. But then it must be all of the Left.

IA: Faced with the retreat into national identity that we see in Europe, the Bloc demands "more Europe". What Europe is it demanding?

Catarina Martins: what we have always said is that we need more Europe, but more of a Europe of peoples, more of a democratic Europe, more of a Europe based on solidarity. We have had a Europe of the "directory", in which the big countries control the small countries, and at the same time a Europe of finance, whose governments are not at the service of their people, but at the service of the financial system. The way in which the European Central Bank has been conceived proves it. That is where the inability to respond to the crisis comes from. This demonstrates that our analysis was correct.

We say that solutions do not come from nationalisms that isolate us from each other. We have always said that the nation was the space of democracy and as a result, we reject federalisms which put in question this space of

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democracy. But we need a more democratic Europe, a Europe which invests in employment, a Europe where the Central Bank (ECB) will be at the service of the peoples and not of finance, a Europe where all countries have a voice and not a Europe of the "directory".

What we propose are economic measures: the pooling of debt in Europe is necessary; the ECB must take action on the sovereign debts and not action that favours the bankers; we need strong concerted action on a European level against capital flight and tax evasion (whether through offshore companies, transfers, etc.). We know that without cooperation on a European level most of these problems will not be resolved, which does not remove the responsibility of each government of each country to renegotiate the debt, to combat capital flight, to combat offshore companies... We do not accept that they do nothing on the grounds that everyone is waiting for Europe. This is a discourse with which governments are trying to deceive the people and which we refuse.

On the other hand we defend the need for a more democratic Europe and therefore we believe that we need to initiate a constituent process which would actually be discussed and voted on by the peoples. In Portugal no European treaty has ever been submitted to a referendum. The Portuguese population has never been called upon to give its opinion on anything at all that was decided in Europe: it was not consulted on the eurozone, on the Treaty of Lisbon, on the fiscal treaty, or any other! What we advocate, therefore, is a broad European debate involving all European organizations, so that all the peoples and all the countries are represented. We need to create a balance of power that does not currently exist at present in Europe, against the "directories" and against a Europe that has been captured by finance. We need such a debate.

We put forward a proposal: a bicameral Parliament, where one chamber represents the countries and the other the peoples. We have always been internationalists. We are internationalists. We are a Left in solidarity with peoples in solidarity. And of course the European space is a space of conquest for this solidarity, for this force, against the financial system. That is why we do not abandon Europe, we are very demanding about Europe and we will fight with all our might against this Europe of the "directories" and of finance.

IA: As a leader of the Left Bloc and as a member of Parliament, what do you think of the movements that have surrounded parliaments, such as the 25 September movement in Madrid and those that have taken place on some occasions in Portugal? What results can they have?

Catarina Martins: These are very demanding movements. In other words, democracy is not limited to electoral acts. Democracy is exercised every day. So if laws are adopted that are so violent against the peoples, it is good that the peoples call the parliaments to account. But it is important that these movements should be for democracy and should be pluralist. Because at this moment in Europe there are temptations towards a far-right populism that is against democracy, against representation.

The bourgeois bipartisan parliamentary system is not what we want; this is not the democracy we need. But the destruction of the representative bodies that exist would not change anything; it would give an even greater space to finance, because if finance is organized, the people must also organize. In Portugal we have a somewhat different political system from other European countries, because our Constitution is derived from the democratic revolution of the years of the "ongoing revolutionary process". It was really discussed and is very popular. Thus, despite all the deficiencies, we have a more representative democracy in Portugal, which means that the opposition parties have more possibilities to present draft legislation... It is not enough. But we must demand more and not less.

The movements which are appearing and which are making demands on parliaments are very important. The Left must understand this and be present. Some people say that movements of this type have never built anything. I think that is a mistake. They are building the alternative, they build ideas, they build political demands, they are fighting capital. If the Left is not in these movements, then yes, extreme right wing populism can fill the space and these

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movements, instead of being the builders of democracy, could become the destroyers of it. But we take on all our responsibilities. We are present and now these movements are reinforcing democracy, strengthening the power of the people, the sovereignty of the people. They are very important.

IA: Another important issue addressed in this congress is that of the "government of the Left", also looking to the example of Syriza in Greece. How do you see this from the strategic point of view?

Catarina Martins: We believe that the government of the Left is both an instrument and a goal. It is an instrument for building when we say that we want a government of the Left and we make concrete proposals which should be the basis for the building of such a government. We are open to discussion regarding these proposals. To strengthen them, to create an alternative, we develop a critical space for discussion in order to change the social majorities, the relationships of forces. But it is also a goal, because the only way out of the crisis is a government of the Left, which breaks with the memoranda of the Troika, which renegotiates the debt, which recovers the wages that have been lost, which reclaims the dignity of labour, which does not tolerate people saying that it is finance that is supporting the world. It is labour which founded the world and that is why we have to impose respect for labour and solidarity with it.

A government of the Left is not an offer. It cannot be built on the basis of arithmetic "tactical manoeuvres", on the basis of parliamentary relationships of forces. This would be meaningless. The government of the Left will be built in the course of the struggle for the social majority and the majority of ideas. And so if someone speaks of a "government of the Left" by looking towards the present Parliament to see what could be a majority in favour of such a government, that will never come to anything. The arithmetic of this Parliament does not provide a basis for a government of the Left. Such a government will be the result of a reconfiguration of forces.

We have always put forward proposals of convergence. We have not sat on the "correct" side of History, saying that "we are right". We want to change things now, by putting these proposals into action and thus creating social majorities.

There are difficulties, as there have always been on the left, but the Left Bloc overcomes these difficulties when everyone says that it is impossible. When the Bloc was formed, it united left currents which up until then had not been able to unite. Everyone said we would only survive for six months. Well, thirteen years later the Bloc is still there. Similarly, we were the only ones to say that it was possible to renegotiate the debt and now everyone is saying it.

The road to building a government of the Left is open. It will not be easy and nothing will drop down to us from the sky. Looking at the Greek example – however, Greece and Portugal are very different countries, with their own political, cultural experiences... - the example of Syriza is important because of its coherence. Syriza has always said that it was necessary to break with the memorandum of the Troika. In other words, there is no "good" austerity. There is no question of supporting a government which would be "the lesser evil" with the Troika, because there is no evil that is "lesser". It is in the nature of the Troika to reduce budgets for more sacrifices, more destruction, more bankruptcies. That is why the example of this coherence is so important for the European Left.

Syriza has grown because it has this coherence, because it understands that the problem is not a question of alternating governments, that what is needed is an alternative. The bipartisan system is useless. Other faces doing the same thing is not an answer, it is the loss of the heritage of the struggles of the Left. The example of the coherence of Syriza is for us important because the Left Bloc has always said that there cannot be "tactical manoeuvres" based on despair, that that leads to abandoning what is essential, the matrix of the Left, our matrix. A new social majority in Portugal, as in Europe, will be built by the Left that has kept its coherence. A Left which has the coherence of socialism, of internationalism, of the defence of labour.

IA: What role could the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) play?

Catarina Martins: In Parliament we have already voted together in favour of many initiatives and, recently, we took a step forward by presenting together with the PCP a motion of censure. We are very committed to this debate. The PCP must also discuss its positions, it will soon hold its congress, we'll see. We are completely open to mobilization, as always.

IA: What are the prospects for the general strike this coming November 14 in Portugal? In your opinion, what is the importance of such a form of struggle in several countries at the same time?

Catarina Martins: In Portugal general strikes are difficult, because employment is very precarious, unemployment is high and wages – including for those who have regular employment contracts - are very low (the minimum wage is less than €500, the nominal wage has been reduced to the level of ten years ago). But despite all these difficulties there will be a big mobilization. People are mobilized. So it is very important, because such a strike is a weapon in the struggle.

The Portuguese Right is at the moment developing a discourse about "the harmful effect of strikes on the economy" and other similar barbarisms. When there are so many people who cannot go on strike, it's easy to have this discourse and it is thoroughly irresponsible. A general strike involves solidarity between all sectors, for whom it is a very hard form of struggle, it's difficult and so we have to do it. It is important that there is a general strike at the very moment when the Right is against the right to strike. To say "no" to that. The strike is the weapon of those who work, it is a response to the government, it is an act of resistance.

Moreover, this strike is all the more important for Portugal because it is an Iberian strike and because other European countries are also joining it. Because the government relies heavily on our isolation. We are a "small" country, we are "alone", "we must do what we are asked to do"... It is very important to understand that the austerity that is killing Portugal is the same austerity that is killing the whole of Europe. The fact that workers are rising up in solidarity, all together, has very great importance. It is a strong signal of a struggle in solidarity against capital and it is also important to show that we are all together, that the struggle in Portugal is the struggle in the Spanish State, the struggle in Greece, Cyprus, Malta... And also in France, Italy and other countries that will certainly join it. This is our Europe, built on solidarity, the Europe of labour, the Europe of the people. We must strengthen it.

For this Europe, the European general strikes, which we need to prepare, are a step forward. It was so difficult to get there. So many people said not so long ago that it was impossible and now look, we are getting there. We must continue, we must deepen the struggle. Because if we want to solve European problems in the governments where we will be, in the European Parliament, saying that Europe must be based on solidarity, this will only be possible if a struggle based on solidarity exists, in the workplaces, in the streets, in the popular mobilizations. For that reason too, this strike is very important.

[1] Bloco de Esquerda, BE, was founded in 1999 by the People's Democratic Union (União Democrática Popular, UDP), Revolutionary Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Revolucionário, PSR, Portuguese section of the Fourth International), and Politics XXI (Política XXI, PXXI, a current coming out of the Communist Party. See Alda Sousa, Jorge Costa ["Starting anew with the Left Bloc."](#)