

Portugal's Prime Minister Barroso nominated as European Commission president

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The European Council of Ministers has nominated Portuguese Prime Minister José Manuel Durão Barroso for the presidency of the European Commission. Barroso's nomination by the ministers, who are appointed by national governments, must be approved in a secret ballot of members of the elected European Parliament on July 22.

If elected, Barroso has declared he will apply a "healing hand" to the crisis confronting the European Union over its relations with the United States and the lack of political support and legitimacy for the EU project amongst Europe's peoples.

The recent European elections produced major reversals for nearly all the continent's ruling parties, widespread abstentions and significant votes for right-wing parties opposed to the EU. Most workers no longer distinguish between the social democrats, whether led by Britain's Tony Blair or Germany's Gerhard Schroeder, and the traditional parties of the right.

The largest group in the European Parliament—the right-wing People's Party and Democrats—support Barroso's nomination. However President Poul Nyrup Rasmussen of the second largest bloc—the European Socialists—warned, "We would never be prepared to give our confidence and our political support to any nominee whose intention would be to take the European Union (EU) in a direction that is not ours."

The social democrats criticise Barroso for not having "proven experience in promoting the European project" and lacking "a strong belief that strengthening Europe's competitiveness can and must go hand in hand with social responsibility and security."

Barroso was the third choice candidate for president and did not even appear on the list of contenders two weeks beforehand. He defeated Belgium's Liberal Party Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and former British Conservative Party cabinet minister and current European Commissioner in charge of relations with non-EU countries, Chris Patten.

Verhofstadt, who was sponsored by the German and French governments, blamed "the yanks" for torpedoing his presidential bid. He is closely associated with attempts to develop a military capacity independent of United States and talked recently of Europe's need for "emancipation" from America.

Patten's nomination was opposed by French President Jacques Chirac, who said it was a bad idea to have a candidate from "a country which doesn't take part in all European policies."

Chirac insisted that the president must speak French and come from a member state that is in the eurozone and the Schengen passport-free area.

President George Bush responded to Barroso's nomination with a personal telephone call to congratulate him. His nomination is a reward for his unflinching support for Washington's war against Iraq and helping to organise the pro-Bush "new Europe" bloc with Britain, Spain (when ruled by the right-wing Popular Party) and the eastern European states.

Barroso supported the Iraq War, despite opinion polls showing 84 per cent of the Portuguese population were opposed to it. He hosted the pro-war summit on the Portuguese islands of the Azores shortly before the war in Iraq, but the world's press regarded him as so subordinate to Bush, Blair and former Spanish Prime Minister Aznar that they cropped him out of the "family photos." One opposition figure in Portugal described him as a "butler" to the bigger powers.

Barroso, along with Blair and Aznar, worked behind the scenes to develop the coalition and ensure the isolation of France and Germany. He believes that an alliance with the US is Europe's key strategic task. He is an ardent defender of the European Rapid Reaction Force, but opposes its development without the permission of and consultation with the Bush administration.

The decision to nominate Barroso follows the appointment of Javier Solano, a former NATO secretary-general, as the European Union's first foreign minister and the adoption of the European Constitution. The protracted conflicts over these issues have threatened to cripple the EU's ability to make decisions.

The crisis in Europe arises from a major shift in the policy of US imperialism following the downfall of the Soviet Union. Under the Bush administration, US imperialism is trying to establish its global hegemony through its military superiority and assert itself as a European power—mainly by supporting Britain, the eastern European states such as Poland, and to some degree Italy and Portugal—and thereby curb German and French influence.

The French newspaper *Le Monde* declared that France and Germany "are quite determined to make up for this loss of power by securing important portfolios for their commissioners." Although German Social Democratic President Gerhard Schroeder insisted that Verhofstadt remained his preferred candidate, he said he would support Barroso if he appointed German commissioners

in charge of economic policy. Barroso retorted, “The selection of commissioners is the president’s job, and I’m not about to give up my responsibilities.”

Barroso has warned European governments that they have two choices—to build either a “counter-part or a counterweight” to the US. He continued: “We think it is very important to give high value to the relationship between Europe and the United States. We share the same values—there are differences of sensitivity and style, but the values are the same.”

That a compromise was reached over Barroso’s nomination in part indicates that all the European powers are agreed on at least one set of “values”—destroying vital welfare provisions and ensuring maximum exploitation of the working class on behalf of the major corporations. In Portugal, Barroso has been at the forefront of these attacks. Since his election victory in 2000, he has concentrated his energy on removing what remains of the gutted welfare system and laws protecting workers left over from the Portuguese revolution of 1974-75. He has kept Portugal within the EU’s budgetary requirements in the face of mass demonstrations and strikes and developed what journalists describe as a “thick skin”, indifferent to popular hostility.

The European ruling elite, knowing Barroso’s political pedigree, looks to him to champion these policies on a European-wide scale.

Barroso says he began political life after witnessing a fascist assault on his favourite teacher. Before the fall of the Salazar/Caetano dictatorship in 1974, he joined the Maoist Reorganising Movement of the Proletarian Party (MRPP) and soon became a leading member whilst a student at Lisbon University. The MRPP split from the Portuguese Communist Party in 1970. During the revolutionary events of 1974-75 it became notorious for organising violent provocations against the workers’ movement.

The MRPP openly aligned itself with the Portuguese Socialist Party and the ruling class. In 1975 its leader Arnaldo Matos described a military organisation of left-leaning officers as “the most democratic police force in the world,” only to see this force arrest hundreds of his members a few weeks later. In the first democratic elections in 1976 the MRPP leadership demanded its supporters vote for Ramalha Eanes, who was standing on a law and order campaign.

In Barroso’s official biography this chapter in his political life is omitted, but the episode is not lost on Europe’s political establishment. Italy’s *La Repubblica* declared: “He has the makings of a good president of the EU... He is such a flexible politician that he started his career as a sympathiser of Communist China and ended up the leader of an openly conservative party.”

The British *Times* added, “A former Maoist militant who once denounced capitalism and preached the dictatorship of the proletariat has travelled far.”

Soon after the Portuguese revolution was defeated, Barroso pursued an academic career teaching in Washington, where he said he gained a deep insight into US foreign policy and society.

Only three years after leaving an ostensibly revolutionary organisation, he joined the conservative Social Democratic party in 1980 and moved amongst its most right-wing faction around Anibal Cavaco e Silva, who became Portuguese president in 1985.

The Social Democrats have their origins in the Popular Democratic Party that was formed a few days after the revolution. Some of its founders such as Francisco de Sá Carneiro had been deputies in Marcello Caetano’s 1969 government.

In 1992, Silva made Barroso head of foreign affairs and in 1999 he became party chief. After narrowly defeating the ruling Socialist Party government in elections in April 2002, Barroso became prime minister of a coalition government with the far-right Euro-sceptic Popular Party of Paulo Portas, who is currently the defence minister. The People’s Party and Democrats group in the European Parliament, which numbers amongst its members Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the far-right Austrian Freedom Party of Joerg Haider and Spain’s Popular Party, has expelled Portas’ party for being too nationalistic.

On July 5, during a one-hour meeting with Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio, Barroso abandoned his job as prime minister. According to Barroso, he left office to prepare for the commission job safe in the knowledge that he was acting in Portugal’s “national interest” and that he was confident in the stability of its “democratic institutions.”

Barroso’s resignation threatened to precipitate a general election and a dramatic defeat for the Social Democrats, especially since their trouncing in the recent European elections. However, Sampaio—after a week of consultations with former prime ministers and business leaders—announced that he would ask Lisbon mayor Pedro Santana Lopes, who succeeded Barroso as the leader of the Social Democrats, to form a government instead. Sampaio threatened Lopes that he will use his constitutional powers to intervene if he tries to change Barroso’s austerity programme stating, “I reiterate that the continuation of key policies—regarding Europe, foreign policy, defence, justice, as well as policies of fiscal constraint—must be rigorously respected.”

This precipitated a crisis within Sampaio’s own Socialist Party, which had called for early elections, leading to the resignation of its leader Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues.



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