

Portugal and the collapse of European social democracy

Chris Marsden

10 June 2011

The defeat of Portugal's Socialist Party government in the June 5 general election has brought forth a plethora of articles on this latest example of the rout suffered by Europe's social democratic parties at the hands of the right wing.

The Economist notes the scale of this political debacle: "Ten years ago almost half of the 27 countries that now make up the European Union, including Germany, Britain and Italy, were ruled by left-wing governments. Today... the left is in charge of just five: Spain, Greece, Austria, Slovenia and Cyprus."

The collapse in support for the social democrats—including the defeat of Britain's Labour Party by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition last year—is presented as a product of the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008. The official mantra is that the "left", or the "centre-left", are not trusted with the economy in times of crisis. They have been profligate spenders and saddled taxpayers with unnecessary debt, which only the right wing is prepared to tackle by administering the necessary bitter medicine of cuts and austerity.

The *Guardian*'s "Why the right won yet again" says of the victorious leader of the [conservative] Social Democratic Party (PSD), Pedro Passos Coelho, that he "was aided by [SP leader Jose] Sócrates's failure to acknowledge the depth of Portugal's crisis, and his hesitancy in spelling out the consequences of austerity."

The aim of such media propaganda is not to analyse the real causes of the collapse of European social democracy, but to insist that the electorate has drawn the painful, but correct conclusion that savage austerity measures are needed.

The real lessons of Portugal are the polar opposite of this presentation.

In reality, the collapse in support for the social democratic parties was prepared over years by their previous abandonment of any connection with their reformist past and transformation into overt parties of big business. What the end of the speculative boom and the 2008 collapse revealed was the full extent of this political rot and its implications for working people.

As with Labour in Britain, and most likely in Portugal's larger neighbour, Spain, in the very near future, the SP's defeat was due to the corrosive mixture of a long-matured alienation, fuelled by the hostility generated by the party's imposition of the very austerity measures now being advanced as a panacea. It was Sócrates and the SP who negotiated a 78 billion euro loan and agreed in return to the savage cuts demanded by the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank. It was they who mortgaged the future of the working class to the very financial speculators responsible for an economic crisis that has produced record unemployment and driven millions more into poverty.

The working class has tried again and again to fight back. Mass strikes and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands have taken place, coinciding with and inspired by the revolutionary struggles in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the Middle East.

The elections were precipitated by the PSD withdrawing support for the latest in a series of austerity packages advanced by the SP. The deliberate aim of this political maneuver was to stifle this developing movement of the working class. The election campaign was waged between two parties pledged to meeting the demands of the "troika" for cuts. With a 9.5 percent swing, around half a million people—from among the most conservative social layers—were convinced by the PSD that they should

switch their allegiance from the SP. But a far broader and more representative constituency is reflected in the record 41.1 percent rate of voter abstention and the increase to four percent in spoiled and blank ballots cast.

These are overwhelmingly working class voters, who did not see any alternative offered that articulates their concerns over mass unemployment, economic insecurity and social immiseration. Their numbers are greater than those voting for the PSD and SP combined.

This is the picture repeated more or less throughout Europe. Masses of workers have repudiated their past political allegiance to the social democratic parties because they are viewed—entirely correctly—as no different in essence from the traditional right-wing parties of big business. The ruling class knows this too. It is happy with the victory for the PSD because Coelho is pledged to “go beyond” the austerity measures agreed by the PS and voted against them “because they did not go far enough.” But as Diogo Teixeira, CEO of Optimize Investment Partners, which helps manage Portuguese government debt, stated immediately prior to the election: “The market does not have a position in terms of preferring the Socialist Party or the Social Democratic Party. The only preference is for a clear majority.”

Had the PS won, the working class would now face a struggle against its efforts—rather than those of the PSD—to impose cuts. This is already the case in Greece, where the PASOK government faces an escalating oppositional movement to its imposition of IMF-ECB-EU dictates; in Ireland, where the Labour Party is in coalition with the conservative Fine Gael; and in Spain—likely the next of the PIIGS to apply for a “rescue package”.

Portugal’s working class has also come face to face with the impossibility of finding an alternative to the degenerate social democratic parties from the direction of the Stalinist and pseudo-left parties. In the 2009 election, the Communist Party and the Left Bloc won nearly 18 percent of the vote and held a significant constituency amongst public sector workers in particular. In the latest election, their vote fell to less than 13 percent—due entirely to the halving of the Left Bloc’s support. This is pay-back for their unswerving support for the SP and the trade union bureaucracy. Last year, the Pabloite Revolutionary Socialist Political

Association, a key component of the Left Bloc, declared, “We have to recognize that our field of battle is more reduced than it was five or ten years ago... The Left Bloc will choose in its own time the forms of confrontation with the government.”

That time never came. The working class was left under the control of the SP and the trade union apparatus, and the political initiative was handed to the bourgeoisie.

The working class in Portugal and throughout Europe is faced with the necessity of making a decisive political and organisational break with the decayed remnants of social democracy, Stalinism and the trade union bureaucracy—what was once regarded as “the labour movement”. A new workers’ movement must be built, based upon genuinely socialist and internationalist foundations.

To defeat the onslaught of big business and the banks requires a rebellion against parties and trade unions that serve the interests of the financial elite just as surely as their conservative counterparts. A new leadership must be forged, in order to mount a continent-wide revolutionary struggle for socialism. This is the task to which the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* is dedicated.

Chris Marsden



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact