

Social Democratic-led alliance wins Romanian election

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The Social Liberal Union (USL) led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta emerged as the clear winner in the legislative election held in Romania on December 9.

With 58.6 percent of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies and 60.1 percent in the Senate, the USL—an alliance of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the pro-market National Liberal Party (PNL)—will enjoy a comfortable majority to form the new government.

The conservative Right Romania Alliance (ARD), formed around the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) of President Traian Basescu, lost almost half the votes it won in 2008, scoring only some 16 percent of the popular vote in both houses.

The other parties that will be represented in the new parliament are the populist People's Party that took 14.3 percent of the votes and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), with 5.2 percent. Only 41 percent of registered voters participated in the election.

The elections, held 10 months after the conservative government of Emil Boc was forced to resign by massive anti-austerity protests, reflect the extent to which Romanian workers have been disenfranchised by a political establishment increasingly responsible only to European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials. Ponta's USL managed to capitalize electorally on the resentment felt by wide layers of the population towards Basescu and the conservatives, responsible for pushing through the harshest austerity measures in Europe.

In 2009, under the auspices of the EU and the IMF and with support from across the political spectrum, President Basescu and Prime Minister Boc, who headed a government dominated by the Democratic Liberal Party, imposed a draconian program of cuts on the

impoverished Eastern European country. Public sector wages were slashed by 25 percent, VAT raised from 19 to 24 percent, unemployment and social security benefits cut, hundreds of thousands of state employees sacked and preparations made for a massive program of privatization, including in education and health care.

These attacks were met with determined resistance by the working class and the greatest wave of strikes and protests since the fall of the Stalinist regime in 1989. Boc used intimidation and police measures against workers, but also relied on the support of the trade unions, which isolated and strangled opposition by teachers and railway workers.

In January 2012, mass protests in the capital Bucharest forced the resignation of the conservative government and the formation of a "transitional" USL cabinet, led by Social Democrat Ponta, tasked with preparing new elections.

The demonstrations became increasingly dominated by a middle class layer, gathered around various NGOs and pseudo-left groups such as the European Left-linked Socialist Alliance Party. These layers prevented the protests from developing into a wider movement against the profit system by channeling popular discontent behind the unions and the Social Democrats. Before the election, both the union bosses and the fake left groups publicly endorsed the campaign of the USL.

In the months before the election, Ponta promised a smooth transition for the austerity program, and has shown his willingness to enforce it in the face of popular opposition. He has maintained anti-worker legislation enacted under Boc, and continued the previous government's measures of intimidation against teachers and rail workers.

In September, in a move aimed at reassuring Romania's international creditors, the government

went ahead with the highly unpopular privatization of the Oltchim chemical plant, shutting the factory and leaving thousands of workers without wages.

Ponta's main campaign theme was that he had "returned the money that Boc took in 2010", by allowing a token raise in public salaries in two increments of 8 and 7.4 percent. This measure was already agreed with the IMF before Ponta took office as a means to take some pressure off the conservative government and is a cynical campaign maneuver. In the last 10 months alone basic food prices have risen by more than 5 percent and there are strong indications that wages will remain frozen for years to come.

Ponta has already pledged to the IMF to liberalize the energy market, and has cut funding for local government. Many local officials have announced that they will cut back on subsidies, which will lead to an exponential increase in energy costs for households. Building associations have calculated that energy bills this winter could top 500 euros [\$US 654], in a country where the average monthly wage is around 350 euros [\$US 458].

USL officials have announced that they will seek to assemble a two-thirds majority in parliament that would enable the governing coalition to change the constitution and pass legislation reorganising the country into eight economic regions, with additional responsibilities transferred to the central government. This would make it easier to impose the implementation of cuts in social spending and public infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.

Ponta will use the election victory to claim legitimacy for renewed attacks against the working class. He has already reached an agreement with the IMF and the EU on a timetable for the privatization of Romania's largest state-owned companies, such as the national railway (CFR), the postal service, the national airline (Tarom), and the energy company Hidroelectrica.

The USL plans to rely on its close ties to the unions to attempt to suppress workers' resistance in the coming months. The unions were officially co-opted into the government in May with the creation of a special Ministry for Social Dialogue. Liviu Pop, general secretary of the

Free Trade Union Federation in Education (FSLI), said of his nomination to the government post: "The position is not for me, but for the union movement to

which I belong".



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