

## European elections

# Support for Portugal government nosedives

Paul Mitchell  
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In Portugal, as elsewhere, support for the ruling party plummeted in last week's European Union elections where 21 seats were being contested.

There was a record low number of voters—just 34 percent. Votes for the two right-wing government coalition partners, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Peoples Party (CSD-PP) collapsed from 40 percent (1.4 million votes) in 2009 to 27.7 percent (909,000 votes), leading to the loss of three of their 10 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

The coalition failed to make any capital out of its May 5 announcement that Portugal has made a “clean exit” from the €78 billion (\$102.5 billion) bailout agreed in May 2011 with the European Commission, International Monetary Fund, and European Central Bank (the troika).

Since 2011, a series of troika-dictated austerity measures, including a record €3.9 billion cut in the 2014 budget, have worsened the economic crisis. This year, Portugal is expected to miss its budget deficit target and €13.5 billion worth of loans are due for repayment. Economists reckon it will take decades for the country to pay off its €738 billion in public and private debt. “Enhanced surveillance” by the troika will continue until at least 2038.

Austerity measures have slashed the living standards of the Portuguese working class and youth. There have been deep cuts in public sector jobs and wages, lower pensions, unemployment benefits and redundancy payments, higher income taxes and value-added tax and increased charges for medicines and doctor bills. The working week has been extended without any increase in pay and holiday entitlement slashed. Official unemployment remains above 15 percent, higher than the euro zone average and would be larger if tens of thousands of people had not moved abroad in search of

work.

The Socialist Party (PS) was unable to capitalise on the disaffection with the PSD/CSD-PP government. It was only able to increase its vote by a meagre 90,000 from 2009 to just over 1 million resulting in one more MEP and making a total of eight. The PS negotiated the original bailout deal and is fully in agreement with the austerity measures. Its main criticism of the government was that it had not listened to the PS's proposals to achieve cuts.

The main beneficiaries of the election were the Democratic Unitarian Coalition (CDU), an alliance of the Communist Party (PCP) and the Ecologist Party (PEV) and the right-wing “eco-capitalist” Earth Party (MPT).

The CDU recorded its best-ever electoral result at 12.7 percent—416,000 compared to 380,000 in 2009, giving it a third MEP. The PCP campaigned for a “restructuring” of Portugal's debt to free up money to “stimulate” the economy, a withdrawal from the euro to give Portugal control of its own exchange rate and a mixture of reforms based on economic nationalism, explicit acceptance of capitalism and support for the state. A constant PCP theme has been to blame “big capital and its power centres” for increasing exploitation, liquidating “social rights” and destroying “what remains of our country's sovereignty.”

The PCP advocates economic nationalism in opposition to socialism, which former leader Álvaro Cunhal made plain in 1995. He absolved Stalinism and himself for the betrayals of the working class in the 20th century, declaring that “capitalism's potentialities were underestimated and socialism's potentialities overestimated.” He attacked the EU from the standpoint of defending Portuguese capitalism, saying, “The major consequences of European integration for

Portugal are very serious. With a policy of national capitulation, the right-wing government sacrifices Portuguese interests to foreign interests.”

Through its control of the main trade union confederation the CGTP, the PCP has limited strikes and protest actions the union has called to urging President Anibal Cavaco Silva (PSD) and the Constitutional Court to veto some of the government’s austerity measures and call early elections due in 2015.

The Earth Party MPT is now represented in the European Parliament for the first time and has two MEPs, including its leader and former Chairman of the Portuguese Bar Association, Marinho e Pinto, as a result of a tenfold increase in its vote from 24,000 in 2009 to 235,000—over 7 percent of the total. Since its formation in 1993, the MPT has participated in a number of coalitions with the PSD and CSD-PP.

The MPT campaigned as a loyal opposition to the government, for “the defence of the values of Democracy, Freedom, Citizenship and Ecology, which are also the values that guided European integration.” It secured extra votes largely thanks to Pinto’s demagogy. He has a reputation as a critic of the country’s establishment, including judges and police. The MPT called for a return to the “purity” of European ideals such as justice and solidarity, “effective regulation of the European financial system” and “supervision of banking” and an end to “the organised crime of big business” and the “iron monopoly” exercised by existing political parties.

The Maoist Workers’ Communist Party (PCTP/MRPP), which European Commission president, José Manuel Durão Barroso, joined in his youth, also increased its vote from 43,000 to 54,000.

The election was also a disaster for the pseudo-left Left Bloc (BE), which saw its votes drop by well over half—from 383,000 in 2009 to just under 150,000. It lost two of its three MEPs.

The BE was formed in 1999 out of the merger of three parties—the pro-Albanian Maoist Democratic Union, a group of exiles from the Communist Party around the formation Politics XXI and members of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat—a group claiming adherence to Trotskyism with a long record of providing a political cover for reformist and former Stalinist parties.

In 2004, the PSR transformed itself into a political association, claiming that although it “stubbornly conducted propaganda on the themes of the Transitional Programme and on the results of subsequent programmatic developments, it rarely managed to go beyond this elementary stage of political action and never succeeded, on its own, in having an influence on political life as the BE now does.”

The party’s strivings for “influence on political life” has seen a rapid decline from the heights of 2009 as a result of opposition to the PS’s pro-capitalist, pro-austerity policies. At that time, it obtained around 10 percent of the vote in elections to the National Assembly and 16 deputies.

When the PS government first agreed to the bailout with the troika, the BE responded with a memorandum, “Fifteen immediate measures for a decent economy,” in which it declared baldly, “We demonstrate that it is possible to cut much more in expenditure in 2010, at much higher rates than expected by the government while promoting a recovery policy for job creation.”

In 2011, the BE supported Manuel Alegre, the PS candidate in the presidential elections, calling for “unity” against the PSD and CDS-PP. It has been calling for a “government of the left,” but for months refused to say what that meant. Its leader Francisco Louçã eventually broke the silence, declaring, “no left without the PS”, which he later qualified as meaning a PS without the then prime minister and party leader, José Sócrates.

Like the PCP, the BE has refused to campaign for the cancellation of Portugal’s debt, instead calling for its “renegotiation” at lower interest rates. The BE’s parliamentary deputies voted in favour of the troika bailout of Greece and its MEPs’ voted for the imperialist military intervention into Libya.

With little to distinguish it from the PS, the EU election voters abandoned it in droves.



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