

Portugal's Left Bloc fears backlash for its role propping up Socialist Party

Paul Mitchell
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Last month, a leading member of Portugal's Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE), Catarina Príncipe, revealed how the party had channelled the mass disaffection that erupted after the 2008 economic crash behind the discredited Socialist Party (PS).

Príncipe's article, "The Myth of Portugal," published in *Jacobin* magazine, expresses concerns that the BE has been exposed by helping to resuscitate the PS. Her public admission provoked a vexed reply, co-authored by three members of the BE leadership—Adriano Campos, Jorge Costa and Maria Manuel Rola—in the Pabloite United Secretariat's *International Viewpoint*, which attempted to exonerate the party it founded in 1999.

Neither Príncipe nor the other three leaders have principled differences. Their factional infighting is over how best to integrate BE's petty-bourgeois social base into official bourgeois politics, while still exercising a degree of control over opposition from workers and youth.

Mass disaffection in Portugal was expressed in the 2015 general election, with its record low 57 percent turnout. The right-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Peoples Party (CSD-PP), which had ruled in coalition and imposed years of austerity, saw its support collapse, but the PS was unable to capitalise on this. In contrast, the BE's anti-austerity rhetoric saw its share of the vote double to 10.2 percent and that of the Communist Party/Green alliance (CDU) increased to 8.2 percent.

The PS, after pre-election talk of forming a grand coalition with the PSD/CSD-PP, when faced with the unexpected vote for the BE and the huge abstention, decided instead to form a minority government. This was a calculated attempt to head off escalating social anger against austerity in the working class. The BE and CDU played the critical role by lining up behind the PS.

Writing at the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that the BE "is a party similar in all essentials to Syriza in Greece, which also struck a pose of 'defiance' towards the [European Union] that it married to a commitment to the defence of Greek capitalism."

"The PS," it stressed, "will never challenge the EU or the financial institutions and the BE knows this. It is consciously seeking to use whatever 'left' and 'anti-austerity' credentials it possesses in the service of the Portuguese bourgeoisie and the privileged petty bourgeois layer on which it is based and to deceive and disarm the working class, just as its co-thinkers in Syriza did in Greece."

Príncipe portrays the PS agreement with the BE as "in hindsight...a smart tactical move: in a climate of slow but steady economic recovery at the European and national level, it allowed the PS to use the breathing space to its own advantage, with the introduction of austerity-lite policies. At the same time, it was the perfect moment to co-opt the Left into a very difficult situation of supporting a government that would never be meaningfully anti-austerity or adopt the Left's own demands."

It was never a case of anyone being co-opted. The BE was an enthusiastic partner giving Prime Minister António Costa its support merely "on the condition that he give up some of his programme's more neoliberal policies." All the pre-election rhetoric about repudiating Portugal's debt and breaking with the European Union (EU) was abandoned overnight, even though Syriza's capitulation had shown that it was impossible to obtain any relief from crippling austerity measures without doing so.

According to Príncipe, the central question of the debt "has in fact disappeared from public debate." She explains that though the budget deficit has fallen and the economy has grown, earning the praise of the EU and financial institutions, these have been the result of fortuitous circumstances—a huge rise in tourism, the fall in the price of oil and an increase in consumer spending encouraged by "a shift away from the narrative that 'There Is No Alternative' to austerity."

Beneath the hyperbole about Portugal's economic success, Príncipe warns, the foundations of the economy have worsened, saying, "Public investment has been at a historic low since the beginning of this government, with no structural changes in the country's productive capacity and

only a very small level of private investment.”

The social position of the working class has also worsened. The EU-imposed labour reforms, Príncipe relates, have been left “untouched,” collective bargaining has “almost vanished,” and almost all new jobs are “precarious.” A recent study concluded that the real unemployment rate, at 17.5 percent, is double the official government figure of 8.5 percent.

Public services, Príncipe continues, are “crumbling” and health and education provision is “heavily underfunded and on the verge of collapse.” The Portuguese banking system “is a ticking time bomb, with more banks bailed out with public money but not under public control, leaving it more vulnerable to shifts at the European centre than in 2008.”

Príncipe concludes, “The truth is that the Left Bloc is today hostage to the PS. It has been weakened at many levels, from its membership numbers to its level of activity and program.”

She warns that “if the parties of the radical left settle for strategic orientations that merely help revitalize the social-democratic parties...and get lost in institutional dilemmas, they will start to reproduce forms, behaviours, and processes of bourgeois democracy.”

The truth is that the BE has, from the day it was created, been a bourgeois party representing those aspiring layers excluded by the old corrupt political set-up. Through the BE, they have integrated themselves into the establishment. They have no intention of heeding Príncipe’s pleas for “a radical rethinking of our priorities...to work from below, to reinvent its democracy, to grow from the grassroots, and to rebuild the popular movement.”

In reply to Príncipe, *International Viewpoint* published on July 1, “Lessons from the Portuguese non-model.” The three authors declared that Portugal should not be considered a model for the “left,” on the bizarre and anti-Marxist basis that “the circumstances are so peculiar that no generalization is possible.”

The Pabloites insist the BE is responsible for new laws on lesbian rights and other identity issues, the use of cannabis, and euthanasia. They claim that it has made the PS curtail privatisations, raise the minimum wage, reinstate four public holidays and unfreeze pensions, among other measures. Many of these, however, were promised by the PS and even the PSD/CSD-PP in their election manifestos to stimulate consumption and dampen social opposition.

It is also clear from a reading of *International Viewpoint* that the PS was quite prepared to concede some measures to introduce others. What took place was a pragmatic and unprincipled trade-off with the BE that did not fundamentally affect capitalist relations. The authors admit as much in their conclusion that “the two most important

areas which were not covered by the written agreement are the regulation and management of the financial system and the labor laws” and that in “major cases” there has been no change.

The Pabloites express dismay that the PS has reneged on its agreements with the BE. We are informed that it “does not intend to act” on “a concrete proposal” for a €52 billion debt-restructuring programme or “to present any sort of alternative to the European authorities.”

Under pressure from the Chinese government, which owns the largest Portuguese energy firms, the PS voted with the PSD/CSD-PP to reverse another agreement on lowering gas and electricity prices for the most vulnerable. Portugal has the highest household energy prices in the EU, largely because of a 52 percent government tax.

The Pabloites complain, “This major political tempest proved how difficult it is to challenge international capitalist interests, how vulnerable the PS is to their power. ...” as if this were a revelation.

The Pabloites are acutely sensitive over Príncipe’s criticisms of the BE for abandoning the social movements and becoming “hostage” to the PS. It “is not only a mischaracterization, it is sheer insult,” they retort.

However, PS leaders recognise the role the BE has played in resuscitating their party, which currently has a 13-point opinion poll advantage. Now emboldened, “some members of the leadership of the PS,” *International Viewpoint* tells us, “decided to challenge the pact with the left at the recent congress of the PS (June 2018).”

Despite the absurd Pabloite protestations, the Portuguese “model” has been “generalized.” This week Costa, feted by social democratic leaders across Europe eager to reverse their own parties’ decline, received his latest visitor, Spain’s recently installed Socialist Party (PSOE) Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

Sánchez declared that Costa’s “progressive, modernizing and pro-European” project has been a source of “inspiration” as he sought to form a minority PSOE government courtesy of BE’s pseudo-left Spanish equivalent, Podemos, which the Pabloites also helped create. Podemos’s main aim has been the pursuit of “a progressive government” with the PSOE. To that end, its leader Pablo Iglesias regularly proclaims Portugal as the best model.



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