

Left Bloc pleads for alliance with Socialist Party in Portuguese elections

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The petty-bourgeois Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE) is calling for an alliance with the ruling social-democratic Socialist Party (PS) in legislative elections set for January 30, 2022. The snap elections were called by Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa at the start of November, after Prime Minister António Costa's six-year minority PS government collapsed amid mass strikes.

The previous week, Costa's government had failed to pass its 2022 budget in parliament, as its long-term allies, the BE and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), suddenly voted against it. It is the first time that a budget has been rejected since the 1974 Carnation Revolution toppled the *Estado Novo* regime of fascist dictator António Salazar.

The vote against the Budget by the BE and the PCP was not due to any genuine opposition to the austerity measures the PS planned to impose and had already implemented for several years. Both parties have loyally supported all the PS budgets since the PS came to power in 2015, and are fully complicit in the attacks on workers' living standards that have come with them.

The last-minute decision of the BE and PCP to vote against the government came amid a massive wave of strikes across Portugal, involving tens of thousands of workers from multiple different industries. Rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, nurses, firefighters, civil servants and prison guards have all taken part in industrial action between September and November, mostly calling for increased wages as the cost of living continues to skyrocket.

Terrified of the growing upsurge of the working class and of anger at years of declining living standards, the BE and the PCP felt compelled to vote against the budget in parliament, to maintain the charade that they oppose austerity, and avert an uncontrollable social

explosion.

Far from breaking with the right-wing, pro-austerity politics of the PS, however, the Left Bloc is campaigning for an ever closer relationship with this party. Catarina Martins, national coordinator of the BE, has complained that her party had not been in a formal coalition with the PS over the last two years, presenting such an alliance as a stabilising force.

According to Martins, the Left Bloc had "proposed a written agreement in 2019 which, unfortunately the Socialist Party refused." The fact that "in 2015 we had an agreement didn't resolve all the problems," Martins continued, "but it gave a perspective of common change and common responsibility to the parties which made the agreement, as well as to the country ... which brought stability."

From 2015 to 2019, the minority PS government ruled thanks to an alliance known as a *geringonça* (or "odd contraption") with the BE, PCP and Greens (PEV), a confidence-and-supply arrangement whereby the pseudo-left and Stalinist parties agreed to support the government on all major votes. Since the elections of 2019, the BE and the PCP have continued to back the PS from outside the government, with no written agreement in place.

"For five years, the BE made the budgets possible for the minority PS based on agreements to resolve the country's problems," Martins continued. "This is our willingness."

In a separate statement on Twitter, Martins grovelled before the PS leader in her efforts to promote an alliance, replying to claims that she would like to see a new leadership in the Socialist Party by declaring that "After the elections, it is with António Costa that I hope to negotiate solutions. And I will raise them during the [election] campaign, even if it hinders the

appeal to an absolute majority.”

This was in response to statements by Costa himself that he doubts whether a new agreement with the BE would be feasible, declaring in an interview last Monday that “I can’t say that I will continue the *geringonça*, when the PCP says it is unrepeatable and the BE leader says that it is necessary to change the leadership of the PS.”

In an appearance at the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Lisbon, Martins again pleaded for collaboration with the PS.

Asked about potential governance scenarios after the January elections and the possibility of the conservative Social Democratic Party (PSD) once again coming to power, she responded: “I don’t speak for the PS. But the Left Bloc can say two things. The first is that we will never have a right-wing government if the Left Bloc can prevent it.” The second thing, Martins stated, is that the BE “has always been clear about how we can construct majority agreements.”

The truth is that Portugal already has a right-wing government, which the BE fully supported. Martins’ calls for further collaboration with the PS is an exposure of the Left Bloc’s own anti-worker, pro-austerity politics. With the backing of the BE and the PCP, the PS government imposed a series of European Union-dictated austerity measures, which have slashed living conditions for the Portuguese working class.

Average monthly wages in Portugal are a pitiful €984, one of the lowest figures in the whole EU. Meanwhile, a fifth of Portugal’s 10-million strong population face poverty and social exclusion, and nearly 10 percent of the employed population live on incomes below the poverty line.

The hostility of the PCP and BE towards the working class was utterly exposed in 2019, when the PS government called out the army to break a nationwide truckers’ strike, which led many fuel stations to run dry. The BE endorsed the mobilization of the army against the working class, with Martins declaring: “In certain fundamental sectors, it is understandable that there are minimum levels of service; in other sectors it is not understandable.” About fuel availability, she added, “The government will have to do whatever is essential for the country to function.”

The last two years of the PS government have also coincided with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which

has had disastrous consequences in Portugal. Over 1.1 million people have been infected with the virus in this country, and over 18,000 have died—the equivalent of nearly 600,000 deaths in a population like that of the United States.

The BE has seen its popularity plummet since the elections of 2019, with its vote share falling from around 10 percent that year to a predicted 5 percent in current opinion polls. The PCP’s support has stagnated at approximately 6 percent. This is a direct result of these two parties’ support for PS policies of austerity, strike-breaking and mass infection. The BE and PCP are correctly seen as entirely complicit in these reactionary attacks.

The main beneficiary of this fall in support for the BE has been the far-right Chega (Enough) party; opinion polls suggest it may win as much as 9 percent of the vote in January, soaring up from 1.3 percent in 2019. The reactionary role of the Left Bloc and PCP has allowed Chega to falsely posture as the sole opposition party.

No opposition to the emerging far-right will be forthcoming from the PS, Left Bloc or PCP. The task of workers in Portugal is to build a politically independent movement to oppose austerity, the growth of fascism and the “herd immunity” policies of the whole ruling class, as part of a struggle for socialism in Europe and internationally.



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