An Exchange of Views on the Situation in Portugal

written by Saulo Colon | November 13, 2015

The following discussion was originally published in Internatonal Viewpoint
What will happen now in Portugal? Here we publish an exchange of views between Stathis Kouvelakis, leading member of the Left Platform in Syriza and now of Popular Unity in Greece, and Catherine Samary leading member of the Fourth International, from France. Thoughts on Stathis Kouvelakis's text "From Greece, taking the risks into account: Some thoughts on the situation in Portugal" "The risks are however immense and seem to me to outweigh by far the expected gains," says Stathis Kouvelakis. What are what he calls "the three ways of summing up" this opinion? (His text is below.)

Stathis Kouvelakis.
First thought The question of the debt is dodged – whereas the PS repeats that it wants to remain within the framework of the European commitments. ("it is just impossible to see how even a "relaxation" of austerity can take place without dealing head-on with the issue of the debt and the straitjacket of the eurozone, and it is just crazy to imagine for a second that the PSP is willing/prepared to do that – actually even the BE and the PCP are relatively cautious on these two issues".) This is true. And it will be a major question. But: a) the ratio of debt to GDP in Portugal is weaker than in Italy, close to that of Belgium and does not imply a current subordination the European mechanism of stability (EMS): there are more margins than for Greece; and it is necessary to see more closely what are the agreements and means of financing recommended to implement them: Stathis seems to affirm an "assessment of costs/benefit", without concrete evaluation of the gains for the population and the room to manoeuvre …

b) Why not propose to all the European and Portuguese left to put back on the table the question raised by Tsipras, of a European conference about the debt, to thus loosen the grip of the bilateral relations with the Eurogroup: it is a major "lock" for the dominant policies and a subject which requires acceptable and coherent "rules" for a Union, therefore the respect of principles. Let us discuss democratically, and on pluralist bases: in short let us seek a European politicization of the challenges of the debt, making possible a democratic challenge to the legitimacy of the pressures from the Eurogroup, shedding light on the mechanisms and criteria of tax and budgetary effectiveness, and what are the European common popular interests against the dominant "arguments" on the national debt; c) This could also be prepared by a procedure of audit started in Portugal independently of the governmental agreements – launched by groups from the civil society.

Last remark on this same subject: neither the leadership of Syriza, nor its left (for opposite reasons that do not finish the debate) supported the work of the Committee for the Truth on the Greek Debt, and thus truly did not campaign around these challenges. A European campaign does not interest those who consider that there are no specifically European strategic and internationalist stakes. This is in fact linked to the second point: Second thought "The Greek experience has also shown that between full scale confrontation and capitulation there is no intermediate way". Was that "shown"? And is it thus general? In other words does one need a European campaign for all countries to leave the EMU and the EU? There is no place for struggles for rights against or within the EU and the EMU? And has that "been shown" simply by the Greek case alone? In other words, there weren't any other possible policies than that of Tsipras – or leaving, despite all the debates on this subject?

In addition, would there be no more room for struggle in countries in a better relative situation than Greece? Was the Greek experiment the only and last – or the first attempt to carry out a national fight against austerity, in the name of the interests of the people in all the Union, in particular? Third thought The difficulty of the "red lines" – and logic "would you dare to reverse the left government"? – in Greece, or in Portugal? ("It is conceivable to withdraw support if the government crosses some "red lines" – but experience shows that defining those "red lines" is far from being simple.") This is an essential question. But in what has the example of Syriza, on this point too, exhausted the subject and "demonstrated" the absence of possible criteria and safeguards? In my contribution written for the next issue of the review Les Possibles of the Scientific Council of Attac, I comment on this argument in particular – which is in my opinion essential for any political struggle apart from a clearly revolutionary situation: what are the acceptable compromises? Who judges? On which criteria? All betrayals are made (sincerely or not) in the name of the "lesser evil". One cannot face these difficult dilemmas by pre-existing recipes, outside a concrete examination of what the suggested compromises would bring, in their context and dynamics: do they improve the concrete situation of the population and give – or not – confidence in an alternative policy?

The procedure to judge this is more important for transforming a failure into support for the future, than the choice itself. Let us hope that this will be the fundamental lesson learnt by the Portuguese comrades for deciding at each stage. This itself implies that a judgment from outside – although not without interest – should at the very least be relativized. The 3rd Memorandum accepted by Tsipras continues the austerity policy and breaks a great hope of resistance to austerity. This is the opposite situation to that opened by the 70 points of the agreement negotiated in Portugal: they are commitments to real breaks with the policies in operation in Portugal, opening new possibilities. The path will be strewn with obstacles, faced with difficult confrontations and choices which will arise rapidly. Nothing is guaranteed. But each battle can and must shake the legitimacy of the Eurogroup and the operation of the EMU if it is carried out in defence of fundamental human, social, political rights: this is the guiding principle to which all currencies and finance must be subordinated. Thank you to the Portuguese comrades, for widening the new possibilities, from which we must still learn.

Catherine Samary

From Greece, taking the risks into account: Some thoughts on the situation in Portugal I am very hesitant commenting on the recent developments in Portugal and I listened yesterday with a lot of attention the arguments of comrade Mariana Mortágua at the plenary session of the Historical Materialism conference. I also read the interview Francisco Louçã, the historical leading figure of the Left Bloc, gave to Ugo Palheta in the Contretemps website [1]. However, on the basis of the

Greek experience, the lessons of which have now begun to be widely understood by the European radical Left, I feel I have some responsability issuing a comradely warning to the comrades of the Portugese radical Left (Left Bloc/BE and PCP). I understand the situation is far from simple for them. There is huge pressure from the electorate to "give a chance" to the Socialists to form a government and bring down the attempt to constitute a minority government of the Right, staged by Cavaco Silva and Passos Coelho with the full backing of the EU.

It’s clear that a socialist government dependent on the support of the radical Left and, at least formally, committed to reverse some austerity measures, will be from the oustet under the fire of both the EU and the domestic ruling class. In this context one could perhaps understand the tactics of "external" support to a socialist government on the basis of some common agreement which becomes void if violated by the socialists. The risks are however immense and seem to me to outweigh by far the expected gains.

There are three ways of summing this up. 1. The first is the idea that a party such as the PSP would be ready to confront the EU and the domestic bourgeoisie to implement some, even modest, anti-austerity measures seems to me a complete illusion. Even a party of the radical Left such as Syriza, in a country which has experienced social movements of a magnitude unknown in Portugal, proved utterly unable to pursue the confrontational approach that is necessary to get even the most minimal of "concessions". To put it very simply, it is just impossible to see how even a "relaxation" of austerity can take place without dealing head-on with the issue of the debt and the straitjacket of the eurozone, and it is just crazy to imagine for a second that the PSP is willing/prepared to do that (actually even the BE and the PCP are relatively cautious on these two issues).

2. Secondly, the Greek experience has also shown that between full scale confrontation and capitulation there is no no intermediate way. And this applies not to some kind of radical anticapitalist set of demands but to the very moderate programme on the basis of which Syriza won the January 2015 elections. Even the current Syriza government, which has signed up a horrendous Memorandum and is committed to its implementation, is totally unable to get the slightest concession from the EU on issues such as an ultra-minimal and incomplete protection for home repossessions by the banks. The EU institions will be even less inclined to be lenient with a PSP government supported by the BE and the PCP and they will most certainly behave in a way comparable to the blackmailing to which the first Syriza government was subjected.

3. Of course supporting a government without being part of it is less risky than full participation. It is conceivable to withdraw support if the government crosses some "red lines" (but experience shows that defining those "red lies" is far from being simple). In any case, it’s quite likely that the PSP leadership will use the agreement with BE and the PCP the way Tsipras behaved vis-à-vis the left of his own party when he entered the downward spiral of concessions paving the way to surrender. That is constantly blackmailing it by saying "don’t you dare overthrowing the leftwing government of this country". And his calculation proved right: he trapped Syriza’s left until it was in a way "too late", that is until the cost of withdrawing from the government became costly for the left opposition and quite manageable for him.

The experience of Rifondazione Comunista "external support" to the first "centrel-left" Prodi government (1996-1998), a support that was withdrawn after two years, also showed that a "junior

partner" to the left has more to lose in such an exercise than the main "moderate left". Concerning more specifically the BE, to which I feel very close, I think this move contradicts the lucidity with which these comrades drew the lessons from the Greek tragedy and changed significantly their position on the euro – a point emphasized in both interventions of Mariana and Francisco mentioned above as well as the great piece by Catarina Príncipe in Jacobin [2] published after the elections. It's always a very sensitive issue to express disagreements with comrades giving the fight in another country but I fear that the Portugese radical Left is entering a road that will end up dilapidating the precious political capital it has so painfully succeeded gaining these last years. However, the extent of the disaster suffered by the Greek people and the Left of my country, and my own personal responsability in this outcome, oblige me however taking that risk. Hoping of course, as I did when I was writing on Syriza in these last months, that I prove wrong. Source Facebook Stathis Kouvelakis. Footnotes [1] Une nouvelle situation politique au Portugal ? Entretien avec Francisco Louçã. [2] Hope for the Portuguese Left – "The election's silver-lining came from the forces to the left of social democracy".