



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://app.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5993>

Slovenia

A radical left in Parliament, a contradiction or a perspective?

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV530 - March 2019 -

Publication date: Tuesday 19 March 2019

Description:

As we know, the left-wing parties of Western Europe, such as the German party Die Linke, play a folkloric role or, in the best of cases, that of a moral corrector and have very little influence on political events. Their parliamentary work is mostly limited to agitation. In Eastern European countries, these parties often fail to enter Parliament.

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As we know, the left-wing parties of Western Europe, such as the German party Die Linke, play a folkloric role or, in the best of cases, that of a moral corrector and have very little influence on political events. Their parliamentary work is mostly limited to agitation. In Eastern European countries, these parties often fail to enter Parliament. [1]

However, in some southern European countries they have become an important factor, without which governments of the liberal left could not have existed. This is true at least in Portugal [2] and Slovenia [3]. In a sense, this is also the case in Spain [4].

This poses the question of how these parties can defend the demands of the working class and whether this situation can serve to reinforce the anti-capitalist movement of workers. In this article, I will try to describe some of the subjective and objective obstacles that are to be found on this path and to consider possible solutions.

Being radical in a system that absorbs

In principle, the question of whether anti-capitalist parties should enter parliament has had a positive response for a long time. Already in his day, in controversy with his opponents (supporters of the boycott of the elections), Lenin affirmed that the parliament, and I use here the expression of Althusser, is an ideological apparatus of state that those who fight for socialism must use. This apparatus is indeed a forum for agitation and, at least in modern parliaments, a source of funding for a party. It should be used to strengthen the anti-capitalist movement. However, we must not forget that this is the apparatus of a capitalist state. Parliamentarism, separating politics from economics and considering the population as the sum of atomized abstract individuals ("one man, one vote"), and not in collective terms - a particular class or social group - makes compromises between the capitalist class and the subordinate classes. These compromises may be more or less favourable for the working class (workers, small and medium-sized farmers, small artisans and proletarianized white-collar workers), but it is still a compromise aimed at maintaining its exploitation and subordination.

This is why parliamentarism feeds opportunism. In the struggle for popularity, parliamentarians (deputies and their assistants) adopt the jargon and objectives of "reality", they tend to adapt to the dominant ideology or to one of its spontaneous variants. The more their lives depend on Parliament, the more likely they are to intrigue for privileges and responsibilities within the party. Such practices create a gap between them and party members [5]. They are only asked to participate in formal rituals to confirm the decisions already made, as is expected of all voters in a bourgeois democracy. Although the "classical" parties successfully practise this mechanism, for the anti-capitalist party it is destructive, because it widens the gap between its programme and the possibility of realizing it. It is not an exaggeration to speak of the emergence of a small bureaucracy which, in its relation to the anti-capitalist party, recalls that of the Soviet nomenklatura with its society. According to Mandel [6], the Soviet nomenklatura was actually the ruling social group, but it was not a new (ruling) class. Unlike the capitalist class, whose vital interests coincide with the reproductive needs of capitalist society (the tendency to increase individual profit is indispensable for the accumulation of capital in general), the intrigue and corruption of the nomenklatura reduce the efficiency of the state-run economy and impede control by workers. This may also be the case for a ruling group of an anti-capitalist party: intrigues for "posts" in the party reduce the number of activists, while the adoption of media jargon and a "realistic" practice lead to the abandonment of its objectives, or even of its programme.

For parties such as Ljevica in Slovenia or the Portuguese anticapitalists, which have a real influence on liberal

left-wing governments, this situation can lead to paralysis or even capitulation. The parliamentary support they give to the government (in order to exert influence on it) with the aim of strengthening the anti-capitalist movement, risks becoming the backbone of "political stability", that is, ultimately preserving the power of the bourgeoisie. At least, if their decisions begin to be determined objectively by "governance" ("and if after the fall of the left liberal government, populists came to power?") And by the subjective and personal interests of their nascent bureaucracy ("what will we do if we are outside Parliament?"). If countermeasures are not taken, it is only a matter of time for the party to become part of the political class [7] - or lose its place in Parliament (why would people vote for a left copy rather than for the original?).

What can these countermeasures be? An anti-capitalist movement can only develop by creating autonomy in relation to the system. It must therefore guarantee its autonomy on the ideological-political and material-financial levels as well as its autonomy in action.

Ideological and political autonomy is necessary because the anti-capitalist movement must develop its own analysis of reality. For this it can rely on help from academics and it can work with NGOs. But such a consciousness cannot be produced in the ideological apparatus of the state, because it produces analyses from the perspective of the dominant ideology and the interests of the ruling class. Without a valid analysis of the situation, political decisions are at best the product of intuition, and their accuracy is the result of coincidences.

Autonomy of action means the ability to work politically, independently of parliament and bourgeois civil society - including the trade unions, because even trade-unionism is embedded in the ideological apparatus of the state.

Material and financial autonomy means the independence of the party from all sources of funding that subordinate the party to the logic of the system, which is often the case for NGOs.

Of course, nobody is saying that this autonomy should be absolute and be built immediately in all three areas. In reality, for example, ideological and political autonomy can compensate for the lack of autonomy of action or material and financial autonomy, because the cadres of the party who are best trained in this sense will be more able to fight against opportunism and will be more inclined to solidarity than to rivalry for obtaining privileges.

From the abstract to the concrete: a transitional programme

I will therefore examine in a little more detail ideological and political autonomy. To begin with, it should be noted that the programmes of today's anti-capitalist parties are less radical than those of the anti-capitalist parties of the past, and even those of the social-democratic parties of the post-war period [8]. This stems in part from the old Marxist principle of how consciousness is determined: since world capitalism and its ideology are stronger today, a less advanced ideological-political platform can nevertheless be described as radical.

The result is another characteristic of these programmes: their contradictions, at least apparent. Certain tax and social policy measures, as well as any more ambitious attempt to transform the economy in the direction of workers' control and planning, are unthinkable in the legal framework of the European Union. However, these parties rarely consider abandoning the European single market or at least the common currency. And even if this reformist position vis-à-vis the European Union is partly a consequence of the effort not to be cut off from the broad masses, these contradictions are also a consequence of the ever-greater integration of society into the world capitalist market. This now affects social life in areas that, in the golden age of European capitalism, did not depend on it. The strengthening of capitalism is of course the product of integration into the global market of all countries and its penetration into all

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areas of a country's social life. Because of this the paradox is intensifying, which determines the political activity of those who are fighting for socialism: on the one hand, the circumstances require more radical measures for any real change, on the other hand, and for the same reason, it is more difficult to make the broad masses aware of that, not to mention their practice.

How to overcome this paradox? At the conceptual and political level, the main task is to formulate a transitional programme [9]. The transitional programme bridges the gap between the minimum programme, that is, the parliamentary-reformist programme, and the maximum programme, that is to say, socialist-revolutionary. The transitional programme is the means to begin the implementation of the maximum programme, which is in turn a precondition for the development of the anti-capitalist movement itself.

At the moment when the Trotskyists were elaborating the transitional programme, world capitalism was in a serious crisis and the bourgeoisie of the capitalist countries, like France, was powerless to overcome it without falling into fascism.

Nowadays, the starting point of the transitional programme is a crisis of the forms of integration of the various countries into the world capitalist system, whereas, as I said, anti-capitalist solutions to practical problems seem utopian and anti-capitalist ideas cannot overcome the blockages of the spontaneous ideology of the masses.

However, even though the crisis in the European Union is producing an often racist reaction today, because of this crisis there is also a potential to break the political blockage of the working class. We must not be naive: in this area anti-capitalists will not easily overtake the nationalists, as was shown by the break-up of Yugoslavia. However, unlike the time of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, today the crisis is not one of a social order that is subordinate and, at least in principle, anti-systemic (the "second world" of "real socialism") but that of the dominant capitalist order. In other words, as Althusser would say, the situation is not overdetermined by the crisis of the global anti-systemic movement, but by the crisis of the system itself. Thus, the situation as a whole, and with it the working class, advances a few steps, and the party that fights for socialism can and must become radicalized [10].

I cannot develop here the elements of such a transitional programme, in particular because they depend to a large extent on the concrete situation in each country. However, we must look for them where the policies of the big imperialist structures, such as NATO and the EU, directly affect the social position of the broadest layers of society. One of these issues is the demands of NATO (and also the EU with its military cooperation, so-called permanent structured cooperation or PESCO) for a drastic increase in military spending, particularly for the purchase of weapons, which will further reduce the already very limited capacity for investment in the health and well-being of the population. These interests of capital (of the military-industrial complex) are directly contradictory to the interests of the working class (peace and well-being). Thus, an abstract objective (anti-imperialism) encounters concrete struggles here (even parliamentarian ones) and tangible benefits (the protection of common property and acquired rights), thus enabling the anti-capitalist movement to win a victory [11].

It is precisely through such struggles that the opportunist pressure of parliamentarism can be neutralized. Without this, opportunism blurs the distinction between anti-capitalist, that is to say anti-systemic, parties, and bourgeois parties. The main conflict appears first to be between the left (liberal) and the right (conservative), even though in reality it is a struggle between the working class and capital, along with its representatives in politics.

It is no coincidence that neither Ljevic nor the Portuguese anticapitalist parties have practically failed to obtain "concessions" in this domain, since the local political classes are subject to other centres of power and their opposition to the interests of their own "people" is stronger in this area. But if it is so strong, then it may be easier to explain it and therefore to mobilize against it.

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Of course, such neuralgic points must be found in all areas, for example in tax policy. It is unfortunate that left-wing parties and European trade unions have not been able to mobilize the working class against tax policy, which reduces taxes on capital and high incomes, thereby creating a fiscal deficit making it possible then to "justify" antisocial policies, such as VAT increases and the reduction of social rights. Recent mobilisations in France (11) show that such attacks against the working class, even under the mask of "ecologism", can be used to radicalize the movement and mobilize huge masses under the slogan: "We will not pay for your crises (ecological, budget, security ...)!"

The transitional programme is obviously not just a piece of paper, it is first and foremost a practice, which is only possible on the condition that the anti-capitalist movement has a certain ideological-political autonomy, an autonomy of action and on the physical and financial level. The development of a transitional programme is therefore not simply an "intellectual act" but an organizational question. According to Lenin [12], the task of socialists is to make agitation and propaganda. Propaganda is an activity in which many ideas are transmitted to a small number of people and agitation is an activity in which a few ideas are addressed to many people. Propaganda is the teaching of the structure of classes and their struggle to members and activists, while agitation is the commitment to "spontaneous" forms of this struggle for better working conditions, for higher wages ... including parliamentary work. The more the understanding of what another world can be like and why the old one is in crisis is developed, the more it can replace the "spontaneous ideologies" that dominate the working class.

For this reason, at least in the ideological and political sense, the quality of parliamentary work depends on the quality of propaganda work. Therefore, the establishment of conditions conducive to propaganda work and the development of all kinds of agitation on this basis, including in parliament, are the indispensable conditions for building the anti-capitalist party and movement.

Ljubljana, December 18, 2018

[1] This article is part of the debate on the balance sheet of the first parliamentary experience of the Slovenian anti-capitalist coalition (2014-2018, 6 per cent of votes cast and 6 seats in the National Assembly), which led to the constitution of Ljevica (9.3 per cent of votes cast and 9 seats in the June 2018 elections). It first appeared on the Radnicki Portal website, hosted by revolutionary Marxist activists from Croatia and Slovenia: [-< <https://www.radnicki.org/parlamentar...>].

[2] See Maria Manuel Rola, Adriano Campos and Jorge Costa: "Teachings of the Left Bloc Experience, a Non-Model", *Inprecor* No. 653/654, July-August 2018.

[3] Despite its "Eastern European origin", Slovenia has important characteristics of the southern periphery of Europe, namely a very similar technological, economic and monetary integration into European capitalism. As a result, the European crisis has manifested itself in the same way, while the debt crisis in these countries has directly affected the Slovenian crisis. See Marko Kržan, "Crisis in Slovenia: Roots, Effects, Causes," *Studies in Development* (METU Ankara), 41st year, No. 3 (2014). See also: Ana Podvrai, "Desna vlada lijefog centra" (The good centre-left government), *Bilten*, October 26, 2018.

[4] Thus, the Spanish PSOE minority government concluded an agreement with Podemos in October 2018, following which it will increase the minimum wage by 22 per cent. But unlike the left-wing parties in Portugal and Slovenia, Podemos's parliamentary representation is not enough to guarantee the parliamentary majority of the left liberal government.

[5] If party membership does not involve militant activity, it becomes passive and if the party does not have a practice of political mobilization (except in parliament), its members do not communicate with each other, do not form a true active community, so there is no real social connection between members, except for formal, abstract membership.

[6] Ernest Mandel, "Ten Theses on the Social and Economic Laws Governing the Society Transitional Between Capitalism and Socialism", *Critique* No. 3, Autumn 1974, pp. 5-21.

[7] My hypothesis is that what we usually call the political class is a fraction of the petty bourgeoisie. Its other fractions are the bureaucracy of the

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state apparatus and the so-called middle managers. The petty bourgeoisie is subordinate in fact and in the field of ideology to functionaries who are more or less proletarianized. In this respect, the parliamentary apparatus and the party constitute a petty-bourgeois institution, and opportunism consists in introducing petty-bourgeois practice and ideology into the internal and external activity of the party.

[8] Susan Watkins, "Oppositions", *New Left Review* 98 (2016).

[9] See Leon Trotsky, *Transitional Programme* (1938).

[10] Agitation is a mass activity that must be exercised on the periphery of the dominant ideology and ideological (parliamentary) apparatus, but always within its framework, since its effects depend on the possibility of relying on "spontaneous ideologies" and spreading in the media. This is how I understand Lenin's formula, that the party must always be a step, but a single step, in front of the working class.

[11] Of course, at first, it is not a question of leaving NATO, but at least of preventing the most harmful and risky investments and expeditions, that is, steps to an abstract, long-term goal.

[12] V.I. Lenin, "The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats" (1897) <https://www.marxists.org/francais/l...>