

The Left in Government - A Strategic Project

Latin America and Europe Compared

By [Asbjørn Wahl](#)

Global Research, December 07, 2012

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [Europe](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

To Be in Office, But Not in Power

The experiences from having had left political parties in government in Europe in the era of neoliberalism have not been very exciting, to put it mildly. The most recent experiences from such governments in France, Italy and - to a certain degree - also Norway have proved anything from negative to disastrous. In all these three countries right wing populist parties have been the biggest winners - with growing support, including in the working-class, and increasing influence on areas like immigration policies. This is particularly worth noting, since one of the arguments from parties on the left for entering into centre-left coalition governments has been to contain and isolate the radical right.

In analysing these experiences we have to look at external as well as internal factors. Externally, the balance of power between labour and capital is the most decisive factor. This power relationship has changed considerably in favour of capital during the neoliberal era since about 1980. Internally, it is the character of the party in question which is most important - its social roots, its analyses of the current situation, its strategies, its relationship with trade unions and social movements and its aims and perspectives. In this regard, the ideological and political crisis on the left has to be addressed.

Even though a detailed analysis will have to go deep into the concrete situation in each country, its history and traditions, its class formations and its social and political forces, I have chosen a more generalized approach in this paper. My discussion focuses on the initial conditions for left parties to enter into broader coalition governments. Based on the most recent experiences, I will try to develop some general, minimum conditions for government participation for parties on the left - at least as a starting point for further discussion.

A Couple of Clarifications

However, before developing the discussion further, I should like to make a couple of clarifications which I think are important for the following analysis.

Firstly, I do not consider the traditional social democratic (or labour) parties (even if some of them name themselves socialist) to be part of the left. There are important differences between these parties and right wing and centre parties, first and foremost in terms of history, traditions and their roots in the working-class. This creates special challenges to the left. Politically, however, these parties have pursued more or less soft versions of neoliberalism since the 1980s. They have contributed to shifting the balance of power from labour to capital in society through liberalization, privatization and the undermining of labour market regulations.

Secondly, in Europe it has not been a question of the left winning majority governments (like for example in some Latin American countries). In the neoliberal era it has only been a question of joining centre-left coalition governments as a junior partner – most often in coalition with a dominant social democratic party and some green and/or social liberal parties. It has therefore always been a question of what kind of compromises the left party is willing to accept, and where the absolute conditions (if any) are in the different political areas. Political compromises from a junior position have been the order of the day for these parties.

The Balance of Power

The neoliberal offensive from around 1980 led to a considerable shift in the balance of power in society. Through deregulation and privatization power and decision-making have been transferred from democratically elected bodies to the market. Through New Public Management public institutions have been moved arm's length from politicians and made subject to quasi-market rules and regulations – with increased power to management and the market. Through international agreements and institutions (like the World Trade Organization and the European Union), neoliberal policies have been institutionalized at the international/regional level and further contributed to limiting the political space at the national level.

The room for manoeuvre has accordingly become very limited for left political parties which choose to enter into centre-left coalition governments. Even if many governments and politicians exaggerate the lack of political space, there is no doubt that it is strongly restricted in many areas. The free movement of capital, the right for capital to establish wherever it wants, and the free access to markets across borders are just some of the most important examples on how politicians, through deregulation and reregulation, have strongly limited their own possibility to pursue alternative policies in their own countries.

In short, not only have we seen an enormous shift in the balance of power in society, but also extensive institutionalization of the new power relations – something which simply has made many progressive, left wing policies illegal and in breach of international agreements. This, of course, represents serious challenges for political parties on the left, and any such party which faces the possible participation in a centre-left government has to take this into consideration. The significant English saying *“To be in office, but not in power,”* can easily come true in such a situation. The danger of becoming just a hostage for neoliberal policies is imminent.

Relations to Social Forces/Movements

Thus, governments have limited their possibility to regulate the economy and to restrict the power of capital, even if the actual government would like to do so. Any government that intends to pursue a radical welfare policy under such circumstances will therefore need strong social movements outside the parliament to challenge the increased structural power of capital. This has not been the case in most European countries over the last 20-30 years. There have been ebb and flow tides of social movements and trade union struggles in many countries, but strong, lasting movements with well developed class consciousness and long-term perspectives have been in short supply.

It seems also to be a problem for political parties on the left to stand with one leg in the government and the other leg outside, as the French Communist Party proclaimed when it

joined the so-called pluralistic left Government of Lionel Jospin in 1997. Anyway, this dual power strategy was obviously easier to proclaim than to carry out, and the actual results were not very encouraging for the French left.

In the current Norwegian context the need for such a movement outside Parliament is not even part of the perspective and strategy of the Socialist Left Party, which is currently in a broad centre-left coalition government. On the contrary, movements have been told by official representatives of the party to stay calm, to be patient and to give the government more time rather than to 'create problems for them' by criticizing them or mobilizing for more radical solutions.

In today's society, an enormous mobilization of social power would be necessary to move forward with a progressive social agenda. It would require the combination of strong and highly mobilized social forces and the existence of a political party deeply rooted in popular and working-class movements – and with the ability to represent these movements whether inside or outside governments. Most probably, a left political party of the sort which is needed to lead an emancipatory struggle for the popular classes will hardly be possible to develop without the existence of such strong social movements.

Class Consciousness

The political/ideological situation in the working-class is also of great importance. In Europe, this has been strongly influenced by the pretty successful post WWII developments, based on a class compromise and the social partnership ideology.

The effects of this development were twofold. On the one hand, the European Social Model or the welfare state led to enormous improvements of working and living conditions for the a majority of the people. On the other hand, these improvements, which took place under a social compromise in which capitalist interests gave many concessions to the workers, resulted in the depolitization and the deradicalization of the working-class. Another effect was a strong integration of the working-class in the capitalist order.

Even though the class compromise has broken down, or is breaking down, in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s and the following, neoliberal offensive, the labour movement in Europe is still strongly influenced by this social partnership ideology – including many of the political parties on the left. In other words, the ideological legacy of the social pact is still alive and well in big parts of the labour movement.

Some even aim at re-establishing the broad social compromise, or a New Deal, as it was called in the USA (under the current threat of climate change, some also aim for a New Green Deal). These policies, however, seem to be completely delinked from any assessment of power relations in society. They do not take into account the enormous shift in the balance of power which lay behind the class compromise which dominated the post WWII period, including the discredit of free-market capitalism after the depression of the 1930s. Calls for a new social pact from the political left are pretty illusory under the actual power balance and will only contribute to leading the struggle astray.

Competition With the Radical Right

The undermining and the weakening of the European social model, the welfare state, and the general offensive of capitalist forces, have led to increased discontent, insecurity and powerlessness among workers and people in general. The social and economic basis for the

discontent among people is in other words deeply embedded in the capitalist economy – particularly in its current neoliberal version, which increases the exploitation of workers, reduces their influence at the workplace, alienates them in relation to the work process as well as to society in general and makes life more socially and economically insecure.

The current financial and economic crises have further strengthened and deepened the discontent among workers. The political articulation of these problems, however, has not been very well developed on the left. This has contributed strongly to the rise of the radical right (right wing populist parties), which is cynically and successfully exploiting this situation. This success is exactly made possible by the lack of political parties on the left which understand the situation, take people's discontent seriously and are able to politicise it and channel it into an organized struggle against alienation, exploitation and exclusion – for a social, just and solidary society.

With the left party in a centre-left coalition government, dominated by social democrats, this problem can actually become even more serious, since the party then will be bound up in a number of compromises, and there is hardly any opposition on the left that can pick up and politicise the messages of the discontents. Thus, the participation in a broad centre-left coalition government, and all the compromises which necessary will come with it in the current conjuncture, will in itself limit the left's ability to represent and defend the interests of workers and ordinary people.

The right wing populists then become the only anti-establishment, system-critical alternative, while the centre-left government is mainly administering and defending the existing order. Thus we face the paradoxical situation that left parties, which have entered into broad centre/left coalitions with the aim of containing and isolating the radical right, in effect lead to the opposite – to the strengthening of right wing populist parties and the weakening of the left. This development can only be turned if the left is able to create a situation in which workers and people in general experience that they are part of a real emancipatory struggle, a struggle which the recent centre-left governments in Europe have not been able to launch.

The Character of the Party

When discussing the experiences with left parties in government, however, one cannot only assess external, but also internal factors. Does the actual party have a meaningful analysis of the situation? Does it have the strategies and perspectives necessary to mobilize social power for social change? If not, its political practice cannot only be considered a mistake – or an effect of external factors. Maybe we will rather have to conclude that this is not the party we need to lead the struggle for the emancipation of the working-class and the overthrowing of capitalism (if this is still our aim).

Most political parties on the left are a bit confused, influenced as they are by the ideological and political crises in the labour movement after the breakdown of the Soviet model in Eastern Europe and the end of the social democratic model (based on the social pact between labour and capital) in Western Europe. The character of the various parties on the left is therefore the product of many factors. The lack of strong social movements which can influence the party, radicalize it and deliver new activists with experiences from social struggles, is one factor. Another factor is a tendency among party leaders in particular to want to come out of political isolation and become accepted in society. A third factor is careerism of individuals in or close to the party leadership if they see a possibility to become

part of the government apparatus etc. All these factors will drive a left party toward more moderate and pragmatic positions.

Based on the experiences so far from left parties in broad centre-left coalition governments in Europe, it seems as if the actual parties have been too eager to become government partners, while the political strategies and tactics on how to use this position have been sparsely developed. It seems also as if the parties have underestimated how the current unfavourable balance of power, together with the broad composition of the government coalitions, limits the political room for manoeuvre for a junior coalition partner on the left.

These developments have led to crises of expectation. While the left parties themselves promise new policies, and the electorate expects reforms which can meet their needs, the results have proved to be quite meagre. Thus, left parties have come into a squeeze between peoples'/workers' legitimate expectations on the one side and the limited room for manoeuvre in broad coalition governments on the other. The result has become a loss of confidence in and support for the actual left party. Again, what we experience is a weakening of the left and a further strengthening of the radical right – exactly the opposite of what was the aim.

Minimum Conditions

Of course, socialist left parties should seek alliances with other parties, also in government, if this can contribute to shifting the balance of power in society from capital to labour. However, certain preconditions must be in place for the establishment of such coalition governments. Only concrete negotiations with other parties can in the end reveal whether or not the political preconditions are satisfactory. Generalized solutions therefore have to be taken with great caution. In spite of that, and based on the experiences so far with the Socialist Left Party in the Norwegian government, as well as with other experiences with left parties in centre-left government coalitions in Europe over the last 20-30 years, I will put forward the following four minimum conditions as a basis for discussion:

1) A socialist left party should not join a coalition government if this government is not opposed to a policy of privatization – at the national level as well as internationally. The government should defend, not attack, trade union and labour rights, and it should not take part in imperialist wars.

2) The party must let its participation in the government be guided by long-term socialist visions and strategies. It must also be able continuously to assess whether or not its participation serves these long-term goals and be able to break out if this is not the case.

3) Under the current balance of power, there is no possibility to carry out consistent anti-neoliberal policies from a government position without the existence of strong popular movements (including trade unions) outside the parliament. The actual party of the left must therefore also both understand the necessity of such movements and be able to join forces with them.

4) The political platform of such a government and its actions must address the problems, the insecurities, the concerns and the anxieties of ordinary people. Their discontent with current developments must be taken seriously. This includes a programme which challenges existing power structures, limits the power of capital, redistributes wealth and extends democracy. Only a government which, through concrete economic and social reforms, is

able to mobilize workers and ordinary people can have any chance to contain right wing populism. The indications from experiences so far are that only in a situation in which workers and people in general experience that they are part of a real emancipatory struggle, can the left in government succeed.

None of the centre-left governments in Europe over the last 20 years have met these four conditions. The conclusion of my analysis is therefore that government participation should be dealt with in a much more strict way than has been the case on the European left in the neoliberal era. Under the current unfavourable balance of power, with rather weak and fluctuating social movements, the main tasks of left political parties should therefore be to organize, to politicize, to raise awareness and to mobilize resistance from below in society. In this way the basis for possible future participation in governments can be developed.

Tactical Considerations

For a left party with the aim of overthrowing capitalism, passive but critical support of a centre-left government would probably be a better choice than to join the government under current power relations. It gives much more room for manoeuvre, and the possibility to pursue primary positions and more radical proposals than the often watered-down compromises reached in the government. One should also not forget that the execution of power is not restricted to government participation. To challenge a centre-left government from a position outside the government, in alliance with strong social movements, can have good effects on governmental parties which are competing for support from the same social basis.

However, an often heard argument from the actual political parties of the left has been that 'it would not have been understood or accepted by our electorate and the most radical parts of the working-class if we had not joined the coalition government.' The possible negative effect of staying outside the government would have been that the party had lost support and confidence among workers and people in general, according to this argument.

At least two points can be made against this argument. Firstly, experiences have proved that the actual parties have lost great parts of its support and confidence in government – and probably much more than what would have been the situation if the party had placed itself as part of the actual government's parliamentary basis, but outside the government.

Secondly, the effect of staying outside the government will probably depend on the way in which the political manoeuvre is made. Any party must of course say yes in principle to government participation – if the right political conditions are present. It is exactly the definition of these conditions which are decisive. If the left party picks up some of the most important demands from trade unions and social movements, and turn them into absolute conditions, it should have a good position to defend its position if government negotiations break down. The problem so far has probably been that the actual left parties have gone too far in compromising their policies already in the initial government negotiations.

Post script

However, the not so successful experiences from participation in centre-left governments in Europe over the last 20-30 years do not seem to frighten new parties on the left from following the same course. Rather the opposite, it seems to have become a dogma that left parties should join centre-left governments if the opportunity offers and the social

democratic party in question accepts it as a junior partner. Thus, the Left Party in Sweden, the Socialist Peoples' Party in Denmark, the Socialist Party in the Netherlands and the Left Party in Germany all seem to be on course for government participation as soon as the opportunity knocks. If this results in governments which are unable to meet peoples' and workers' needs and expectations in a deepening economic and social crisis, the situation can be really disastrous – and lead to a further strengthening of the radical right.

Asbjørn Wahl is Director of Campaign for the Welfare State, Oslo.

Published in Birgit Daiber (ed.) (2009), *The Left in Government: Latin America and Europe compared*, Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg foundation.

The original source of this article is [Socialist Project](#)
Copyright © [Asbjørn Wahl](#), [Socialist Project](#), 2012

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Asbjørn Wahl](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca