Some lessons of the Podemos Experience

22 Jun 2021

Dave Kellaway looks back at the Pablo Iglesias era which found the Spanish left in the political ascendancy.

A month or so ago, Pablo Iglesias failed in his bid to push back the right wing ascendancy in the Madrid regional elections. The defeat turned into a personal turning point for him as he resigned from all his leadership responsibilities both in in Unidad Podemos (United We Can) party and in the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) government.

It marked the bitter end of a personal journey in which he had played a leading role for a time in trying to radically challenge the 1978 regime that emerged from the end of the fascist Franco dictatorship. He had 'reached for the sky' and helped create what he called 'a great electoral war machine' that threatened, momentarily, the hold of the PSOE on the left of politics in the Spanish State.

His political background was within the old Izquierda Unida (IU – United Left) as a left Eurocommunist. In the end ironically he had led his grouping full circle back into that sort of framework. It is a junior partner, a left cover for what is essentially a social liberal government that is no challenge to the 1978 regime. Some pundits even suggest that the current incarnation of the IU will recuperate the crumbling remains of the Podemos movement.

Nevertheless as the Anticapitalistas' comrades, Miguel Urban and Brais Fernandez correctly note:

> *On the one hand the balance sheet is disappointing. Podemos was not capable of reaching the objectives it had set at its*

*foundation and has been converted, in Gramscian terms, into a 'transformismo' project [=as a strategy to prevent the formation of an organized working-class movement by co-opting and neutralizing its ideas and leaders within a ruling coalition, a passive revolution with no self-organised movement –**Tr**]. However its establishment led to the opening of a new, unexpected political cycle . For the first time in decades, an anti-neo-liberal force aimed to conquer political power.*

MIGUEL URBAN AND BRAIS FERNANDEZ

Rise of Broad left or class struggle movements

In the last few months there have been a number of articles and books on the ***Pasokification*** of European social democratic parties. It refers to the way the Greek social democrats of Pasok led their party into disintegration through becoming more and more moderate. Progressive, mass radical movements like Podemos, Syriza in Greece, Corbynism in Britain, Mélenchon's party in France were partly reactions from the left to this process of Pasokification. They responded to the increasingly social liberal line of the social democrats exemplified by Blair or the Zapatero government in the Spanish state.

The restructuring of global capital from the 1980s with the destruction of the old European industrial heartlands severely weakened the trade unions and communities which were the historic base of these traditional left parties. Neo-liberal austerity policies following the 2008 financial crisis also fuelled some social mobilisations particularly in Greece and the Spanish state with the 'indignados' (angry ones) bringing tens of thousands onto the streets for sustained periods. The younger generation, including many unemployed or underemployed

graduates, joined forces with trade unionists, especially from the public sector. People wanted proper work and decent education and welfare.

Social democratic parties were no longer able to provide any reforms to protect working people as they had done during the post war boom when the bosses were able to make profit while conceding an increase in workers living standards and welfare provision. Even later during periods of capitalist growth stimulated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, cheap goods from China and an expansion of credit we saw a social democratic leader like Blair keen to embrace the new capitalist reality even while providing some concessions on social spending.

However it is now clear that all of these radical movements have been defeated and failed to sustain their challenge to capitalist stability. It is worth examining the Podemos experience both for specific lessons and because its strategic problems mirrored some of the problems facing the Corbyn project.

Origins of Podemos

Podemos was formed in January 2014. The mass demonstrations of the 15th May movement popularly known as the 'indignados' were ebbing. A group of university politics professors in Madrid and the Anticapitalist Left, the section of the Fourth International in the Spanish State, decided the time was right to set up a new political movement that could channel the hopes of the indignados. According to Urban and Fernandez (op cit.) there were four main influences on their thinking:

a. the historic competitor to the left of the PSOE, the Izquierda Unida, formed from the Eurocommunist Spanish CP, had been completely bypassed by the indignados and had failed to take any real lead
b. the Left Bloc in Portugal had successfully brought

together various left forces and had become a national political force that had even overtaken the Portuguese Communist Party

c. Syrizia had at that stage not been defeated and was inspiring people across Europe
d. the Bolivarian experience led by Chavez in Venezuela was particularly important for both Iglesias and his friend, Errejon, who had spent time there.

The initial programme adopted was opposition to austerity. It included removing the addition to the constitution supported by both the PSOE and the conservative Peoples Party that enshrined 'balanced budgets' regulated by the EU. It was for full implementation of the 128th article of the constitution which states:

> *All wealth of the country in all its forms and no matter who owns it, is subordinated to the people's interest.*

Exit from NATO and full abortion rights were other key points as well as a commitment to challenging the rigid unionism of the Spanish constitution with respect to Catalonia and Euzkadi. It is important to remember these points to assess how far the Podemos leadership moved away from such a programme in subsequent years.

According to a participant in these meetings Iglesias was happy to sign up to all these points but Errejon was much less enthusiastic. This probably reflected both that Iglesias understood that these were just paper positions that could be modified and also foreshadowed Errejon's eventual split from Podemos to a more moderate position.

So we can see this movement formed in a quite a different way to Corbynism which emerged out of the traditional Campaign group of Labour MPs. There were no founding programmatic discussions for this project and while the radical left helped

mobilise behind Corbyn we had no leadership role. Although there were some links with the anti-austerity mobilisations of previous years, especially those around student fees, the scale of these mobilisations were much smaller than in the Spanish state. Social Media though played an important role in both movements. There were some similarities in the demographics of the activists.

Opportunities and dangers of explosive growth

Podemos broke through immediately at the European elections in 2014 getting nearly 8% and 5 MEPs. In the 2015 and 2016 general elections it received around 21% of the vote, coming close to an historic overtaking of the PSOE. In October 2014 it had 170,000 members and up to 500,000 members were claimed in 2020 but this was before members had to pay. This was phenomenal growth for a new party. All the forecasts completely underestimated its success.

Something similar happened in Britain with Corbynism – at least until after the 2017 general election. Politics is much more volatile today because of the crisis of traditional party allegiances, the emergence of new politicised generations and the acceleration that social media can produce. As we have seen with Corbynism it can go up very quickly but also deflate rapidly too.

The initiators of the Podemos project were swamped and overrun by the impact and the sheer numbers who flooded in. As Urban and Fernandez ruefully admit:

> *This huge upsurge in interest and numbers was channelled much more skilfully by the 'populist hypothesis' that the 'anti-capitalist perspective'. The latter always had to intervene within the framework of the former.*

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The Anticapitalistas (ACs) were the only organised left group involved in the project. It had a few hundred members with a thinnish implantation outside the major cities. Some of the key activists from the social movements were initially sceptical about Podemos. Inevitably once things looked good many of the people who first disdained it then joined and often just followed Iglesias uncritically.

Emmanuel Lopez in this article examines the sociological phenomena underlying Podemos. He points out the key role of the new precarious, unemployed graduate generation which was attracted to the party. We saw a similar phenomenon with Corbynism.

But this explosive growth meant a rapid social promotion or integration into the institutional process for many of these new activists. It also helps explain how the local branches (circulos) became hollowed out. This issue can also affect radical or revolutionaries in new, rapidly growing parties. Revolutionary Marxists from the Socialist Democracy current experienced this when they helped build Lula's PT (Workers' Party) in Brazil. Bureaucratisation and integration does not just affect reformists. Lopez (op cit.) again comments on this:

> *After the 2015 general election the party had thousands of political positons and jobs available for distribution – MPs, senators, councillors and full time staff. To become part of this 'industry of representation' was subjectively very appealing. In the final analysis this explains why the party was able to keep some sort of base after it abandonment of mobilisation in the communities and workplaces after 2016*
>
> *EMMANUEL LOPEZ*

Neither left nor right, ‘construct the people’

The Podemos leadership at the first national congress at Vistalegre accepted an organisational model where minorities like the Anticapitalistas were deliberately excluded from the leadership team. Tendencies were not given any sort of proportional representation. Plebiscitary online voting was established too which meant tens of thousands voted online on proposals put forward by the Iglesias team. Local and regional structures with regular debate and the election of delegates – the ‘traditional’ form of left political organisation were shunned in favour of social media. This made it more difficult to develop a rich political debate in the local branches.

A few years later this top down, limited form of internal democracy actually made it difficult for a key ally of Iglesias, Errejon, to defend his positions when he broke from the Iglesias political line towards a more moderate position. He had been an enthusiastic supporter of the original internal rules!

Consequently there were large majorities for the Iglesias strategy that was inspired both by Latin American left populism and specifically the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In today’s conditions to win political power it was argued the left had to abandon some of its historic categories. So Podemos adopted the slogan ‘neither left nor right’.

It is true that in terms of the mainstream left and right of centre parties, there were less and less differences in how they managed austerity so there was some support for this approach. However this led to a disconnection with the material world of class exploitation through capitalism, class struggle and the repressive nature of the state. There was an overemphasis on ideological processes so the task of

progressive parties is to ‘construct the people’, through effective communication and marketing, providing a new political narrative that people can understand and support. This popular coalition is transversal in the sense that it can pick up support across all political, ideological currents and is not limited by narrow class definitions or antagonisms.

There is nothing wrong with thinking about how we present a socialist or class point of view to a mass audience but the links to capitalist reality cannot be severed. Conversely of course wooden propaganda from orthodox Marxists does not work either.

On one level, this huge investment in developing a tight-knit centralised team that developed a sophisticated media communications strategy was successful in building support, bringing Podemos to over 20% of the vote. Some electoral material was brilliant in conveying the unfairness of the system was and why change was needed. We can learn from it.

For once the left was being audacious and optimistic about what was possible, that it could challenge a big mainstream party like the PSOE and even overtake it. In some polls it actually did. But along with the ‘promotion’ of activists into full timers or party representatives, it meant the local circles were neglected. Self-organisation, building alternative political structures and forging a vibrant new culture from the bottom up, were not priorities. As long as it was riding high in the polls it was difficult for alternative voices like the Anticapitalistas to convince people of a different way forward.

As Lopez remarks in his article (op cit.):

> *in this way ‘populism’ fulfilled a role for this generation similar to the one Marxism played for the generation of the 1978 transition; it was like an ‘elites theory’ that articulated an understanding of power not based on a theory*

> *of political economy and classes and a consequent complex analysis of the conjuncture but rather as a sort of 'popular articulation' converted into a business of communications expertise.*
>
> ***EMMANUEL LOPEZ***

Such ideas sat easily with a leadership predominantly made up of university professors and a membership that was predominantly composed of youngish graduates.Before Podemos, Iglesias had run a very successful political TV programme.

The workers movement had been weakened and become more isolated as a result of de-industrialisation and restructuring. This also means that mass communications have taken over a role and weight that the organic intellectuals and independent institutions of the workers movement formerly contested. We can see this to a degree in Britain too. Look how the mass media assault on Corbyn was more difficult to resist given the weakness of the workers movement's independent media and institutions.

Three strategic errors

Fernandez and Urban identify three key strategic problems with Podemos:

- *an ingenuous approach to the question of state power*

It adopted mainstream academic political theory, considering the state as a fluid body, a social relation but did not draw out the real implications of such statements. The judiciary, police and the army, because of their class and ideological composition, are bodies that are structurally reactionary and can only be neutralised with active, antagonistic social forces. On the other hand workers in the health, education and public administration, where Podemos had a lot of support, are a potential base for 'constituent' change from within the

state itself.

None of the lessons of the Syrizia debacle were taken on board. In the end Podemos won control in certain places and today are junior partners in the PSOE government but are managing the system within the usual limits. Most worryingly the leadership exaggerates and distorts the actual progressive impact of its executive power e.g. with some of the welfare reforms it has lobbied for.

- *a wrong notion of political economy*

The Podemos leadership also saw society as a field of political manoeuvring where economic power was an external force to challenge but not the social relation that configured the whole of society. It went from its early promises to take over key sectors of the economy to a classic Keynesianism. The spell when Podemos governed Madrid exemplified that as it managed the same old urban development led by finance capital.

- *the national question in the Spanish State*

Again initially Podemos was able to lead the debate about re-founding the constitutional system but this was later abandoned so today it has lost ground in Catalonia and Euzkadi to progressive or independent nationalists who are seen as more militantly against the centralising regime.

Why did a radical or revolutionary alternative not do better?

Readers may say you could be right about some or all of your criticisms of Podemos but why didn’t the revolutionaries who were inside Podemos from the beginning not pick up more support and challenge the Iglesias leadership more strongly?

Throughout the process, the Anticapitalists(AC) both enthusiastically built Podemos and maintained an alternative

strategy which meant they were excluded from the central leadership team. Comrades took on party posts and became regional or European MPs. The mass media regularly reported on the AC's alternative positions at the two congresses. The fight for a different internal democracy was proven to be justified as the subsequent Errejon split showed the failure of the movement to manage its internal discussions. The very weak or non-existence of local branches today also bears out their analysis.

After the leadership decided to become ministers in the PSOE government it was widely reported on TV and the newspapers that Anticapitalistas had decided to leave the party. They had argued for the Portuguese solution favoured by the Left Bloc of not participating in the government but allowing it to be formed and supporting it on an issue by issue basis.

Participating in such broad based class struggle or left social democratic movements is a good way of building a radical or revolutionary current. As a result of their involvement the ACs have increased and consolidated their membership and strengthened their national profile. Those groups that stood apart in sectarian purity have not done any better than those forces who helped build the new movements. Indeed we saw the same thing happen with the Corbynist project, those groups who stayed apart from it have not gained from its demise. Today AC leaders strongly defend their involvement. In any case, the final outcome could not be predicted in advance. Just as in Britain with the Corbyn experience the left has not gone back to the position there were in during the Miliband period. Gains have been made.

However this is not to say that the AC comrades made no mistakes or that tactical moves are easy to make. Ensuring that you put resources in maintaining your profile and own organisation while participating in a broader party is essential. It is easy to become the best builders and become sucked into all the broader party's tasks. This is also true

for revolutionaries who choose to work inside the Labour Party.

You also have to break out of a small group mentality when you are thrown into a group with mass support. Negotiating with new partners on a national level takes a different skill to the sort of interaction you are used to. Coming to terms with the new communications is also important. The ACs had, to a degree, some difficulty in all these areas.

Another problem is preparing for a possible exit if this movement collapses or moves decisively in a moderate direction. Deciding when to leave and doing it in a non-sectarian way is often difficult. The mass media in the Spanish state commented on how amiable the parting was in areas like Andalusia where the ACs had a strong base and a well-known local leader like Teresa Rodriguez. Ritualistic denunciation of betrayal is not always helpful.

Finally, Urban and Fernandez make an interesting historical reference in considering the Podemos story:

> *In our opinion here is a tension between the Leninist truth – organisations can be built if there has been an accumulation of cadre prior to their development – and the Luxemburgist one – organisations are built during the process itself. In the case of Podemos this tension was resolved in the worst possible way. Neither the political nucleus of Podemos had a sufficient accumulation of cadre that could structure the emerging process nor did the process itself compensate for those deficiencies. The limitations of the period combined with subjective decisions in the worst form possible.*
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> ***MIGUEL URBAN AND BRAIS FERNANDEZ***

Today Podemos has gone from a party with an anti-system and constituent strategy to occupying a space traditionally held by the Spanish Communist Party but without the latter’s

organic links with the workers movement. At the same time it has severely weakened its links with the social forces that formed it in the first place. The anticapitalist left has to rebuild the movement from the bottom up both inside and outside the institutions.

Reprinted from Anti*Capitalist Resistance,