

Uruguay: On the first-round victory of the Frente Amplio

By Hector Benoit
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On October 25, José “Pepe” Mujica, presidential candidate of Uruguay’s ruling Frente Amplio (Broad Front), won by a wide margin over his nearest rival, Luis Alberto Lacalle, ex-president of Uruguay (1990-1995), representing the Partido Nacional (popularly known as the Partido Blanco).

While the vote for Mujica was not sufficient to grant him the presidency in the first round, the Frente Amplio won a majority of the ballots cast in the elections to the parliament, which suggests that “Pepe” will win by a comfortable margin in the second round, which is scheduled for November 29. Current polls give Mujica an 8 to 9 percent lead over LaCalle.

The October 25 vote also included two plebiscites, one on overturning the amnesty that was granted to members of the security forces for the crimes they committed during years of dictatorship that began in the early 1970s, and the second on granting Uruguayans living abroad the right to vote by mail ballot. Backed by the Frente Amplio, these changes to the country’s constitution were both defeated.

The Frente Amplio is a broad coalition whose “left” characteristics are quite limited. Some 40 political groups participate in the electoral bloc. Among them are Guevarists, “Posadasite-Trotskyists,” Christian Democrats and everything in between. Many of the participants in the Front do not consider themselves socialists.

Mujica is an ex-Tupamaro guerrilla who became a senator, while his vice-presidential running mate Danilo Astori is an economist who served as finance minister in the current government of President Tabaré Vazquez, who is also a member of the Frente Amplio.

In last month’s first round, the Frente Amplio won 47.96 percent of the votes, followed by the right-wing National (Blanco) Party of Lacalle with 28.53 percent. The Partido Colorado, which ruled Uruguay from 1865 to 1959, trailed in third place with just 16.66 percent of the ballots cast. The Colorados’ candidate was Pedro Bordaberry—the son of the country’s ex-president and dictator, Juan Maria Bordaberry, who has been charged in the Uruguayan courts with responsibility for the disappearance and killing of opponents of the dictatorship in the 1970s.

Also participating in the election were the Partido Independiente with 2.44 percent of the vote and the Asamblea Popular (whose candidate Raul Rodriguez was previously part of the left wing of the Frente Amplio) with 0.66 percent.

Playing a significant part in the elections were Uruguayan

workers who, due to chronic unemployment inside the country, have left for neighboring countries like Argentina and Brazil in search of work. It is estimated that there are close to half a million of these “exiled” Uruguayan workers.

In the first round of the election, close to 40,000 Uruguayans crossed back across the border to cast ballots, most of them for Mujica. The number is significant in a country the size of Uruguay, which has a total population of just 3.5 million.

The Frente Amplio has a long history. Líber Seregni is considered the symbolic founder of Frente Amplio and was its first candidate for president in 1971. Seregni said that the founding of this coalition took place on October 7, 1970, with the issuing of the “Call of the Independent Citizens.”

From that moment on, according to Seregni, various groups abandoned their particular programs and united, building the Frente Amplio, which exists until this day despite some changes. Almost all of the political groups that are not affiliated with the traditional parties of Uruguay—the Partido Nacional (Blancos) and the Partido Colorado—participated then and participate now within this amorphous front.

If the current government of Tabaré Vazquez has enjoyed a majority approval rating (60 percent according to recent polls), it is above all thanks to a relatively favorable international conjuncture that permitted a modicum of economic growth in Latin America, even as economies contracted in Europe and North America.

The Vasquez government presided over a modest increase in industrialization and job creation, but this was due solely to trade concessions, above all from the United States, which was interested in weakening Mercosur (the Latin American trading bloc led by Brazil and Argentina). Vasquez to some extent turned his back on Mercosur and signed separate trade agreements with the US and Europe.

The history of the Frente Amplio has been one of bitter defeats for which the Uruguayan proletariat has paid dearly.

Today, it is considered probable that in 1971 the Frente Amplio would have won the presidential elections, if they had not been rigged to give the victory to Bordaberry, opening the door to the repression that began in 1972 and gave rise to an open military dictatorship within a year. Recently declassified CIA documents make clear that US President Richard Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, together with the British government and the military dictatorship in Brazil, then headed by General Médici,

participated in the election fraud. According to these same reports, there existed plans for the overthrow of a Seregni government if it had managed to come to power.

During the decades of the sixties and seventies, when military dictatorships came to power in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, as well as Uruguay, a large part of the Uruguayan left, influenced by Guevarism and the Cuban Revolution, adopted “armed struggle” as a strategy for the overthrow of the existing states.

The MLN (Movement of National Liberation) in Uruguay (known popularly as the Tupamaros, in honor of Tupac Amaru, the Peruvian indigenous leader who fought the Spanish) took this path, developing a strategy of urban guerrillaism. After achieving initial successes—largely in the form of bank robberies, distribution of expropriated food in impoverished neighborhoods, prison breaks and kidnappings—the movement was crushed, with its principal leaders imprisoned.

A similar development took place in Argentina with the PRT-ERP of Mario Roberto Santucho (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores—Ejército Revolucionario Popular), which initially was affiliated with the Pabloite revisionist movement that had broken from Trotskyism, the so-called Unified Secretariat led by Ernest Mandel.

The Pabloites played a crucial role in glorifying Castroism and guerrillaism and rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity for building a conscious Marxist leadership through the construction of parties of the Fourth International. The results were catastrophic.

In Uruguay, the armed struggle failed, creating only a mythological heroism. All of Latin America paid a heavy price for Castroism and Guevarism, supported by the Pabloite revisionists.

These theories and policies of guerrilla warfare served to isolate the most radicalized sections of the students, youth and sections of workers themselves from the proletariat and the movement of the masses. The workers’ movement was left under the domination of its Stalinist and reformist leaderships, turned into a mere spectator to the heroic deeds of the armed guerrillas.

These petty-bourgeois movements were also easily infiltrated by the apparatus of state repression and defeated, while serving as an ideological justification for the dictatorships that seized power in Latin America. This facilitated the processes of intervention in the unions and the smashing of democratic rights of agitation and propaganda, thereby blocking the work of building a Marxist leadership and delaying for many years the reorganization of the workers movement through the building of the Fourth International throughout the region.

The current candidate for president, José Mujica, was a Tupamaro and spent more than 10 years as a political prisoner. The majority of those who participated in the Tupamaros, despite some internal divisions, today support the Frente Amplio, opting for the electoral road to power.

The Frente Amplio, despite seemingly being the polar opposite of armed struggle, is a Uruguayan version of the popular front strategy that also caused terrible defeats for the international working class.

The strategy of the Popular Front is that of a political alliance between the working class and supposedly “democratic”

bourgeois parties, which serves to subordinate workers’ struggles to the interests of the bourgeoisie, private property and the capitalist state. Initiated under condition of a rising movement of the masses, these fronts have repeatedly served as the antechamber to the counterrevolution.

In Latin America, this policy found its finished expression in the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende that paved the way to the military dictatorship in Chile. And there was the case of Liber Seregni in 1971 in Uruguay itself.

In this sense, the so-called strategy of “armed struggle” and the policy of the popular front, rather than constituting polar opposites, played complementary roles in politically paralyzing the working class.

In the political platform of Mujica, one can hardly find even the pretense of a socialist program. What predominate in the program of the Uruguayan Frente Amplio are the development proposals elaborated by vice-presidential candidate Danilo Astori.

His program of industrialization and jobs creation is based on a national development project that is totally implausible. In the election propaganda of the Frente Amplio, for example, there is a proposal dubbed “Uruguay Develops.” This program would supposedly offer guidance for the opening of small businesses, credit for the creation of cooperative associations, plans for increasing productivity, technical advice on developing small export firms, etc.

But in the face of a world capitalist economy that is becoming ever more internationalized, and in the midst of the worst capitalist crisis since 1929, any attempt to find a neo-national development solution is absolutely utopian and condemned to failure, all the more so in a tiny country like Uruguay.

For the Uruguayan working class, the only way out lies through a socialist and internationalist program that advances the demand for the United Socialist States of Latin America. The fight for a common struggle by the workers of Uruguay—many of whom, as we mentioned, are expatriates—with Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean and other Latin American workers is a perspective that is far more coherent with the objective reality of the country and the region as a whole than the economic nationalism of the Frente Amplio.

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