

[Comment] Do the Socialists have vision and principle?

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The Party of European Socialists will launch its European election manifesto in Brussels today (11 February). In preparation for the elections in June, the PES has prepared its position on the European issues of the day. And there are some important issues at stake.

For example, a response is surely needed to the strikes and demonstrations that have been spreading in protest at the apparent undercutting of local pay and conditions by foreign labour.

As the economy deteriorates further, the concern of working people everywhere will be to protect themselves and their families from the worst of the recession. This is a concern that is shared across national borders, and cannot be solved by workers in one country trying to take advantage of those in another. If ever an economic problem needed a collective solution, it is this one.



(Photo: EUobserver.com)

Politicians on the left have a particular opportunity here. It is widely felt that a major cause of the economic crisis we are now in is the reckless, if now downright dangerous, behaviour by the banks and other financial solutions over the last few years. They pocketed the profits while the going was good, leaving everyone else with a problem when things turned bad (as they were always going to do).

There is a lot of resentment about the actions of those highly-paid bankers: the Socialists are in a good position to try and represent that feeling.

And then there is the need to move to a more environmentally sustainable economic model. How much regulation must there be in order to reduce carbon

dioxide emissions in Europe, and how much can be left to market forces? There is a left-of-centre vision on this issue to be presented to the European voters.

But the electorate will judge a party not only by its policies, but also by its personnel. Who are the Socialist candidates? And, specifically, who do the Socialists want to see as the next president of the European Commission?

One of the first tasks of the newly elected MEPs will be to endorse or reject the candidate for Commission president put forward by the European Council. Last time, Jose Manuel Barroso was elected, and there is talk that he might serve a second term.

But he is from the centre-right Christian Democrats: can the Socialists really be content to see such an important post in the wrong hands? If there are to be modifications to the Posted Workers Directive, for example, they have to come from the European Commission. Similarly, it is the Commission that will take a lead on the development of further European environmental laws. No political party can be indifferent to how this is done.

It is true that the Socialists are starting in second place – they have 217 MEPs compared with the EPP's 288 – and thus any person they might suggest as the next Commission president would start at a disadvantage, but since when did the PES pride itself on taking the easy option rather than the principled one?

The Greens and the Liberals have speculated about their own candidates for president, but they are so far behind the big two that they could not trigger a real contest. No, it falls to the Socialists to decide whether there should be in effect a European presidential election this summer.

If they nominate somebody to be an alternative to Mr Barroso, the Socialists will be declaring that political power in Europe should be given by the voters through the ballot box rather than picked up from friends in cosy meetings. If we are looking for the next step in the direction of a democratic Europe, this is it.

So, do the Socialists stand for a Europe where the voters decide, or where the Establishment decides? We will learn a lot about the Socialists on Wednesday.

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