

Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution—Part 2

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This is the second in a three-part series. Part 1 was published on July 15.

Following the military coup on April 25, 1974, an explosive movement of the working class threatened to lead to revolution in Portugal.

The coup was led by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA, Movimento das Forças Armadas), which installed General António de Spínola as president and head of a seven-man Junta (JNS).

The ruling elite were able to prevent revolution and allow a breathing space to defend capitalism by relying on the reformist Socialist Party (PSP, Partido Socialista Português), the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP, Partido Comunista Português) and the petty bourgeois radical groups.

Following the coup workers took over factories, offices and shops and peasants occupied farmlands. Half a million marched through the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, a week later on May Day. The revolutionary atmosphere spread through the armed forces, with soldiers and sailors marching alongside the workers carrying banners calling for socialism.

Spínola appointed the First Provisional government on May 16 1974, consisting of seven military ministers and two seats each for the PCP, PSP and semi-fascist Popular Democratic Party (PPD, Partido Popular Democrático). The PPD was founded shortly after the revolution and its leader Francisco de Sá Carneiro, who had been a deputy in Caetano's government, accepted the inclusion of the PCP in the Provisional Government knowing the vital role it could play in policing working class opposition.

Throughout the revolution the PCP clung to the state apparatus through the MFA, thereby tying the working class to the ruling elite.

To enforce labour discipline and implement the austerity programme in the MFA's "battle for production", PCP leader Álvaro Cunhal was appointed a minister without portfolio and the PCP's Avelino Gonçalves became minister of labour. The PCP was to occupy this post in subsequent provisional governments too, exhorting workers to "Save the National Economy" and condemning any manifestation of independent activity by the working class.

The PCP was also part of the MFA's governing council.

The MFA emerged as the most important decision-making body in the country. The leadership of the MFA rested with the Council of Twenty, whose decisions usually required ratification by the 240 delegates comprising the General Assembly. The Council of Twenty included the president and the six other members of the JNS, the five military ministers (the prime minister, two ministers without portfolio, and the ministers of the interior and of labour) and Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho the commander of COPCON "armed intervention" units. Throughout the revolution the leaders of COPCON promised they would "eventually" arm the working class, but their real role was to prevent the development of popular vigilance groups or workers' militias.

The MFA's political programme called for the creation of a provisional government that would organise elections for a Constituent Assembly

tasked with drawing up a constitution.

The MFA's rise to prominence can be attributed to the PCP, which promoted the concept of "the alliance of the MFA and people" and glorified so-called leftist military generals like Carvalho and Vasco Gonçalves. The PCP stated, "The MFA is the motive force and guarantee of our revolution ... the PCP holds that the alliance between the popular movement and the MFA is a necessary and decisive factor for the establishment of a democratic regime, a prime guarantee of the development of the revolutionary process."

At the time of the April coup the PSP numbered no more than 200 people. By the following year it had grown to 60,000 members—mainly white-collar workers and professionals. Its growth can be put down to the actions of the PCP and radical groups and the support it received from the Western powers.

The PCP strengthened the right wing in Portugal by splitting the working class with their collaboration with the MFA, seizing the PSP's paper *Republica* and physically attacking PSP meetings. By denouncing workers' strikes, calling for a monolithic union under its control and supporting the MFA's military dictatorship, the PCP allowed PSP leader Mário Soares to pose as a more radical, democratic, and even more Marxist than the PCP's Cunhal.

The Western powers were alarmed that Portugal—a founding member of the NATO pact—confronted a revolution. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Soares that he faced being the "Kerensky [the Russian leader whose short-lived rule preceded the Bolshevik Revolution] of Portugal." The result was an influx of foreign financial aid to the organisation, particularly from the British Labour Party and French Socialist Party. In February 1975 Edward Kennedy attended a round table discussion with the PSP leaders.

The first PSP congress in December 1974 received fraternal greetings from social democratic parties from around the world. The guest speaker was Santiago Carillo, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party.

Following the coup, strikes hit all sectors of the economy. Workers set up committees that demanded a minimum wage, the arrest of fascist sympathisers, workers' control and socialism. On May 15 1974, 8,400 workers occupied the Lisnave shipyards. Timex workers struck on June 3, continuing the struggle started in November 1973, and two weeks later 25,000 CTT workers went on strike, paralysing the post and telephone services. Newspapers were taken over and the manifestos of the parties filled their pages.

The former corporate unions, which the PCP had taken over through its Intersindical union federation, denounced the strikes as "irresponsible" and their demands as "impossible" and organised a demonstration in Lisbon against them. The army was used to break up the strike at Timex and protect the factory and its machinery. The broadcast of a cultural festival in which the theatre group Comuna attacked the Catholic Church was switched off on the orders of "higher authorities".

The Confederation of Portuguese Industry (CIP, Confederação da

Indústria Portuguesa) warned that the working class actions were “dangerous to the national economy.” The CIP called in public for a Western-type democracy, but many of its members also funded fascist parties and organisations, including the one founded by Salazar himself—the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). The de Melo family’s CUF monopoly bankrolled the Democratic and Social Centre party (CDS—Centro Democrático Social, forerunner of the right-wing Popular Party that is in today’s coalition government).

The CDS was founded by Freitas do Amaral, former adviser to Caetano and supported by the Catholic Opus Dei. However, these organisations had no popular support. The first CDS congress in January 1975 had to be abandoned because of riots outside. Further congresses were held in secret.

On August 27, the provisional government introduced an anti-strike law that the PCP and PSP helped draft. Strikes were only allowed if they were deemed to be “in the spirit of the Programme of the MFA”. All strikes had to have ballots and a 30-day cooling off period. No strikes were allowed in the essential services and political or solidarity strikes and occupations were banned. The next day army units including COPCON surrounded Lisbon airport, which the workers at the state airline Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP) had occupied. Workers who refused to obey military orders were arrested and told they would only be reinstated “on condition they took no further part in political activity”.

The actions of the social democrats and the Stalinist gave the reaction a second wind. On September 10, 1974, Spínola called on the “silent majority ... to awaken and defend themselves from extremist totalitarianism”. Plans were made for a demonstration two weeks later. In response to troop movements and the closing down of radio and TV stations workers erected barricades and thwarted the attempted coup. But Spínola was simply allowed to resign as president to be replaced by his old boss General Costa Gomes.

A new provisional government was set up, minus Spínola and three other members of the JNS, which was to last until the next right-wing coup attempt in March 1975.

In January 1975, a Federation of Workers’ Committees called Inter-Empresas was formed linking Timex, TAP, Lisnave and other companies. One of its first actions was the organisation of a demonstration against the arrival of NATO ships in Lisbon docks. The provisional government forbade all demonstrations and the PCP attacked the organisers. Despite this, 40,000 people took part.

The government then approved the economic plan drawn up by Major Ernesto Augusto Melo Antunes, who was a member of the “Group of Nine” officers in the MFA, and which was endorsed by the MFA General Assembly. The plan excluded “the social-democratic control of the management of capitalism ... but it does not exclude a pluralistic society ... the class struggle now under way must take into account the alternative role which the middle classes can now play.”

It called for partial nationalisations, the take over of some large and badly managed estates and increased foreign investment.

Spínola attempted another coup in early March 1975 sanctioned by Kissinger and US Ambassador Frank Carlucci, but his troops mutinied at the last minute. Spínola fled to Spain and then Brazil. Many businessmen behind the coup attempt were arrested, including seven members of the Espirito Santo family who owned one of Portugal’s largest banks and the de Melos, but all were later released.

The JNS was abolished and replaced by the Council of the Revolution. In the wake of working class resistance a fourth provisional government was formed that nationalised the commercial banks (but not three international banks). Because the banks were often holding companies, the government took control of almost all the country’s newspapers, insurance companies, hotels, construction companies and many other kinds of businesses—equivalent to 70 percent of the country’s gross

national product. The minimum wage was raised and a programme of agrarian reform promised.

The PCP dutifully declared that business had been “nationalised in the service of the people”, but the capitalist nationalisation proposed differed from that carried out in most Western countries after the World War II only in extent. Economic and state power still lay in the hands of the bourgeoisie, if only in part through their shadow in the social democratic and Stalinist parties. Nationalisation aimed to provide a more stable infrastructure and environment for private enterprise and to limit the power of the workers committees by making the appointment of managers a state function.

Elections were held on April 25, 1975, for the Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution. The PSP won nearly 38 percent of the vote, the PPD took 26.4 percent and the PCP 13 percent.

Following the elections and with no sign of the promised agrarian reforms, movements in the countryside joined the insurrectionary situation in the cities. Landless agricultural workers in the south seized the large farming estates on which they worked and started developing them collectively through organisations such as the Red Committee of Alentejo. The PCP called the occupations “anarchistic” and proposed that all future occupations be controlled by the unions (which they in turn controlled).

Between June and August 1975, following the exit of the PSP and PPD from the fourth provisional government over the Republica affair, the PCP and its allies were left in virtual control of the state and the ministries. The “Gonçalvists”, as the military wing of the PCP was known, dominated the MFA’s Council of the Revolution.

The MFA and PCP convened a Front of Revolutionary Unity (FUR, Frente de Unidade Revolucionária) to “institutionalise” the “pact” between the MFA and the people. This involved the formation of local assemblies, municipal assemblies and a National Popular Assembly, which would replace the provisional government. The aim of the MFA proposal was to consolidate the control of bourgeois military officers, destroy the independent character of the workers’ committees that had sprung up and prevent moves towards dual power and soviets/workers’ councils. The assemblies could only start their work after “an evaluation by the MFA” and would be subject to military control at all levels to preserve their “independence from all parties.” No political organisations were to be permitted in the armed forces except the MFA itself.

To be continued



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