

Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution

Part 1

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The following is the first of a three-part series.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution. Following a military coup on April 25, 1974, a mass movement of the working class threatened to lead to revolution. The ruling elite was able to prevent revolution by using the services of the Socialist Party (PSP—Partido Socialista Português), Portuguese Communist Party (PCP—Partido Comunista Português) and the left radical groups.

A key role in those events was played by Mário Soares, leader of the PSP during the revolution and president of Portugal from 1986 to 1996. Speaking earlier this year, Soares warned that Portugal was today a country exhibiting “a strongly unequal system of distribution of wealth” and facing “an atmosphere of open protest and even social and political tension.”

Portugal is still one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Soares continued, “Once again, Portugal finds itself in a profound crisis in which certain elites are at a loss to understand what is the right path to take. The overwhelming majority of Portuguese feel viscerally the inequality and tragedy of rising unemployment in a society in which the horizon is being obscured.”

In the face of the call by José Manuel Durao Barroso, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) prime minister, for the Portuguese people to forget the revolution and celebrate Portugal's “evolution,” Soares is concerned that the ruling elite should remember the lessons of 1974. He is warning that the aggressive privatisations, labour reforms and welfare cuts (started under his own presidency) and the reassertion of Portugal's imperial past and influence by support for the war on Iraq could provoke another social explosion.

The 1974 revolution was ultimately shaped by Portugal's belated historical development.

From the fifteenth century Portugal had built up a colonial empire, resulting in a privileged elite that had little productive activity. With the development of its imperialist rivals, particularly Britain, Portugal's colonial possessions were threatened. The Peninsular Wars (1807-1814), when Napoleon attacked Spain and Portugal and indebted Portugal to Britain, had weakened Portuguese colonialism still further. Brazil became independent in 1822 and troops were needed to protect Portugal's remaining colonies from its rivals.

Through the “Anglo-Portuguese Alliance,” Britain came to dominate Portuguese trade. Sections of the small bourgeoisie were ruined, and industrialisation remained slow. Their discontent sparked the great liberal struggles of 1810-1836, but the main result was the breakup of a few large landed estates. The Portuguese monarchy was finally deposed by the revolution of 1910.

The period after the 1914-1918 First World War was one of

enormous crisis for global capitalism. This instability was reflected in Portugal, which saw eight presidents and 45 governments between 1910 and 1926—the period of the First Republic.

At the end of the war, only 130,000 out of Portugal's population of 6 million worked in industry, mainly in small workshops. As in Russia, the working class was extremely radical, carrying out a general strike in 1917 and provoking two states of siege. In 1921, the Portuguese Communist Party was formed.

Instability and the threat of a revolutionary movement of the working class led to the right-wing coup of May 28, 1926. Two years later, António de Oliveira Salazar, an economics lecturer, was appointed finance minister and then prime minister. In direct response to continuing working class struggles that peaked in a five-day insurrection in 1934, Salazar declared his “Estado Novo” corporate state.

Only the official fascist party was legal—the National Union (UN—União Nacional) later renamed the National Popular Action Party (ANP—Acção Nacional Popular).

Independent trade unions and strikes were outlawed, and workers were forced into state company unions or “*sindicatos*.” Salazar established strict censorship and created a secret police, the PIDE (Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado), which would arrest or kill opponents.

The most important function of Salazar's regime for Portugal's ruling elite was to prevent any struggle by the working class crystallising at home and opposition developing in the colonies. However, the restricted national nature of Salazar's proscription could not insulate the country from the world economy. Much of its production depended on world demand, and it had to import many of its finished goods. During the 1960s, foreign investment in Portugal trebled, mainly from the United States, but it resulted in an extreme concentration of wealth.

By 1973, there were some 42,000 companies in Portugal—one third of them employing fewer than 10 workers—but about 150 companies dominated the entire economy. Most were related to foreign capital, but headed by a few very wealthy Portuguese families (Espirito Santo, de Melo, de Brito, Champalimaud). The de Melos' monopoly company Companhia União Fabril (CUF), for example, owned large parts of Guinea-Bissau and produced 10 percent of the gross national product.

Despite this industrialisation, a third of the population still worked as agricultural labourers, many in large estates or *latifundia*. An estimated 150,000 people were living in shanty towns concentrated around the capital, Lisbon. Food shortages and economic hardship—wages were the lowest in Europe at US\$10 a week in the 1960s—led to the mass emigration of nearly 1 million people to other

European countries, Brazil and the colonies.

The 1960s also saw the emergence of liberation movements in the Portuguese African colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. Fighting three guerrilla movements for more than a decade drained the Portuguese economy and labour force. Nearly half the budget was spent on maintaining more than 150,000 troops in Africa. Compulsory military service lasting for four years, combined with poor military pay and conditions, laid the basis for grievances and the development of oppositional movements amongst the troops. These conscripts became the basis for the emergence of an underground movement known as the “Movement of the Captains.”

The continuing economic drain caused by the military campaigns in Africa was exacerbated by the world economic crisis that developed in the late 1960s.

Through the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, US imperialism had been forced to rescue its European and Japanese rivals from collapse out of fear that this would produce a social revolution.

Under American auspices and backed by US economic and military might, a number of agencies were set up such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), through which the economy was pump-primed by massive injections of capital in the form of loans.

The cornerstone of the monetary system that represented this international order was the fact that the dollar was fixed at a guaranteed rate of US\$35 to one ounce of gold. However, in the long term, the US could not sustain the role of financing the world economy. The US balance of payments deficit increased, exacerbated by the war in Vietnam, whilst gold reserves declined. Unable to maintain the convertibility into gold, President Richard Nixon withdrew the dollar from the gold standard on August 15, 1971. The breakdown of the Bretton Woods Agreement produced spiralling inflation followed by the most severe recession, in 1973-1975, that the world had seen since the 1930s, as well as an enormous development of the class struggle in country after country.

The revolution in Portugal should have developed as part of a general European and world struggle for socialism by the working class. But instead, the survival of capitalism was ensured by the treachery of social democracy and Stalinism, aided and abetted by petty-bourgeois radicalism.

Faced with uprisings in the colonies and a wave of strikes in Portugal, the military chiefs moved to safeguard capitalism and stop the offensive by the working class and peasants.

In February 1974, General António de Spínola, the army’s second in command and a director of two of Portugal’s leading monopolies, including CUF, published *Portugal and the Future*. The book criticised the African policy of Salazar’s successor, Marcello Caetano, and called for cultivating a moderate black elite who could be split away from the nationalists. Caetano banned the book and dismissed Spínola and the commander of the army, General Costa Gomes, who had authorised its publication.

That same month, an abortive revolt took place at Caldas da Rainha in the north. A manifesto from the Movement of the Captains dated March 18 congratulated Spínola and Gomes and expressed full support to the troops at Caldas da Rainha, saying, “Their cause is our cause.”

The leaders of the Movement of the Captains discussed the manifesto with Spínola and Gomes and planned a coup for April 25, 1974.

On that day, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA—Movimento das Forças Armadas), as the Movement of the Captains was now known,

announced it had decided to “interpret the wishes of the people” and overthrow Caetano. In fact, Caetano himself asked Spínola to prevent the country from “falling into the hands of the mob.” The result was the formation of the National Salvation Council (JSN—Junta da Salvação Nacional), composed entirely of high-ranking military officers, with Spínola as president.

Spínola intended to limit the coup to a simple *renovação* (renovation), but the coup immediately brought the masses onto the streets demanding further change. Angry crowds demanded *saneamento* (reckoning) with officials and supporters of the old regime, and several members of the PIDE were killed. Workers began taking over factories, offices and shops, and peasants occupied farmlands. Half a million marched through 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.

Previously banned parties emerged from underground or exile, including the PCP led by Álvaro Cunhal and the PSP led by Mário Soares. The more far-sighted members of the ruling elite knew the vital role these parties would be required to play to prevent the development of revolution.

One of the most important questions of the revolution concerned the nature of the MFA and its “armed intervention” unit, the Continental Operations Command (COPCON—Comando Operacional do Continente), composed of 5,000 elite troops, with Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho as its commander.

The MFA cultivated the concept of the “alliance of the MFA and the people.” The PSP, PCP and radical groups never challenged this gross lie. Instead, the PCP declared the MFA was a “guarantor of democracy” and developed close relations with Carvalho, General Vasco Gonçalves and other members of the Junta.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Portuguese supporters, the League for the Construction of the Revolutionary Party (LCRP), called for the PCP and PSP to break from the bourgeois parties, the state machine and MFA. It demanded the dissolution of the army and the creation of workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ soviets in opposition to the MFA and its proposals for a Constituent Assembly.

To be continued



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