

Obituary: Alvaro Cunhal—leading betrayer of Portugal’s 1974 revolution

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Last month saw the death at age 91 of Alvaro Cunhal, leader of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) for more than 30 years, from 1961 to 1992. This long-serving Stalinist functionary played a crucial role in helping to save Portuguese capitalism from the revolutionary upheaval known as the “Carnation Revolution” that followed the collapse of the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship in 1974.

During the revolutionary upheaval, Cunhal acted as minister without portfolio in several provisional governments and continued as a deputy in the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic until 1987.

The death of Cunhal evoked gushing praise from Portuguese and international leaders who recognised the threat posed to international capitalism by the 1974-1975 revolution. Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio, announcing a national day of mourning for Cunhal, called him “a great man whose life is connected with the history of the twentieth century. He has his place among us in the fight against the authoritarian regime, in the revolution and the consolidation of Portuguese democracy.”

Cunhal was born November 10, 1913, in Coimbra, northern Portugal, during a period of great political and social crisis. The period of the First Republic between 1910 and 1926 witnessed eight presidents and 45 governments. A radical working class carried out a general strike in 1917 and provoked two states of siege.

In Russia, the Bolsheviks provided the leadership for a successful revolution in October 1917. It was a powerful vindication of Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. In opposition to the Menshevik conception that Russia was too economically backward for socialism, Trotsky insisted that the real dynamics of Russian development could be understood only within the context of the world economy. Consequently, the democratic tasks once associated with the bourgeois revolution could only be completed under the leadership of the working class, drawing behind it the rural masses, as a component part of a socialist revolution that must be completed on the global arena.

The Bolshevik leaders knew that the construction of socialism in impoverished and war-ravaged Russia was dependent on successful workers’ revolutions in Germany and other more highly industrialised countries. It was on this basis and with the help of the Communist International (Comintern) that the PCP was formed in 1921.

But the subsequent evolution of the PCP and all the world’s communist parties was shaped by the rise to power of a bureaucratic caste within the USSR under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. The orientation of the Comintern changed radically after Lenin’s death. The unveiling of the theory of “socialism in one country” by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924 provided the ideological foundation for the abandonment of the programme of world socialist revolution and the increasing subordination of the international workers’ movement to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s defence of its own material interests. This produced massive defeats for the working class: most catastrophic of all was Hitler’s accession to power in Germany in 1933, following which Trotsky concluded that the Soviet Communist Party and its satellite parties in the Comintern could

not be reformed and called for the founding of the Fourth International to carry forward the struggle for world socialist revolution.

Stalinism’s political disarming of the working class was also to prove disastrous in Portugal. Economic instability and an insurgent working class had produced a right-wing coup in 1926, and by 1933, influenced by Mussolini’s fascism in Italy, the formal declaration of an authoritarian “New State” by Prime Minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. The fascist National Union (UN) party was made the only legal party, and independent trade unions and strikes were outlawed. Salazar established strict censorship and created a vicious secret police force.

The PCP was outlawed and its leadership imprisoned or driven into exile. The party had been purged in 1929, following the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, and Bento Gonçalves, who had only joined the organisation the previous year, installed as General Secretary.

Cunhal joined the PCP in 1931 whilst studying law at university and left for the Soviet Union to attend a congress of Communist youth in September 1935. It was at this time that the Stalinist bureaucracy begun to advance its policy of building “popular fronts” with “democratic” bourgeois governments and liberal-reformist elements worldwide supposedly to combat fascism and defend the USSR.

Cunhal, who came to epitomise the policy of popular frontism in Portugal, became leader of the youth organisation and joined the Central Committee of the PCP in 1936 at the age of 22.

That year marked a crucial turning point in European history. In June, mass strikes brought France to the brink of revolution. In Spain, in July, fascist military officers led by General Franco attempted a coup, sparking a workers’ uprising and precipitating civil war. By imposing the popular front policy and opposing the independent political mobilisation of the working class against all factions of the bourgeoisie, the Comintern played a critical role in defending Spanish capitalism, liquidating the Spanish revolution and making possible the victory of Franco’s fascist forces.

The Portuguese Communist Party adopted the same political line, helping to block the possibility of the Portuguese workers challenging the Salazar regime, which was able to survive the Second World War and plagued the country for another three decades.

Despite the suppression of the PCP—Cunhal spent a total of 15 years in jail—the party maintained its slavish adherence to the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution. According to this false and disastrous conception, during the “first stage” of the revolution, which had a national-bourgeois character, the working class had to subordinate itself and its class interests to supposedly progressive bourgeois forces. The “second stage,” the socialist revolution, was put off to an ever-more-distant future.

In 1945, as a means of defending his rule in the face of increasing social agitation, Salazar introduced an amnesty for political prisoners and a limited relaxation of censorship. In the parliamentary election that year, the PCP joined the Movement of Democratic Unity (MUD), a coalition of bourgeois forces from across the political spectrum (including the extreme right). When the MUD withdrew, claiming the elections were rigged, its

leadership was arrested.

In 1958, the PCP supported General Humberto Delgado, a prominent leader in the “New State,” when he contested the presidency in opposition to the official National Union candidate who won the election after widespread ballot rigging. Salazar altered the constitution in order to prevent further direct elections to the presidency.

Cunhal became secretary general of the PCP in 1961 and three years later formed the Patriotic Front for National Liberation (FPLN) with the Socialist Party and liberal bourgeois figures such as Delgado.

In 1970, Cunhal reiterated the Stalinist two-stage theory. He wrote that “at each stage of the revolution the proletariat must have a corresponding system of alliances with different classes and layers of the population.... The proletariat’s allies for the socialist revolution are not the same as for the national democratic revolution.”

This was a wholesale repudiation of Marxism and the critical lessons of the twentieth century, including, above all, the Russian Revolution. It was also a forewarning of the role the PCP would play in the revolution that erupted a few years later.

The early 1970s witnessed a huge international crisis of the capitalist system. US President Richard Nixon withdrew the dollar from the gold standard and ended the Bretton Woods agreement that had underpinned the world economy since 1944, helping precipitate a severe recession.

Although the Salazar regime had done everything in its power to keep Portugal backward and isolated, the country could not be insulated from the world economy. During the 1960s, foreign investment in Portugal trebled, mainly from the United States. By 1973, 150 companies dominated the entire economy headed by a few very wealthy Portuguese families.

In the 1970s, the Portuguese ruling elite confronted a massive strike wave at home and uprisings in the colonies. Nearly one half of the national budget was spent keeping 150,000 troops abroad fighting the national liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. Compulsory military service combined with low pay to intensify grievances in the army and stimulated an oppositional movement amongst the troops known as the “Movement of the Captains,” which later developed into the Armed Forces Movement (MFA).

On April 25, 1974, the MFA overthrew Salazar’s successor Marcello Caetano, claiming it was “interpreting the wishes of the people.” A National Salvation Council or Junta was formed, composed entirely of high-ranking military officers, with General Antonio de Spínola, the army’s second in command and a director of two of Portugal’s leading monopolies, as president.

Spínola intended to limit the coup to a simple “renovation,” but it immediately brought the masses onto the streets demanding further change. Workers began taking over factories, offices and shops, and peasants occupied farmlands. The revolutionary atmosphere spread throughout 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 and the Portuguese Socialist Party (PSP) led by Mario Soares. The more far-sighted members of the ruling elite knew the vital role these parties would be called upon to play in preventing the development of social revolution. Cunhal was brought back from exile in Moscow and given a military welcome at the airport. He was given the second most important ministerial post in the government, a chauffeur and a bodyguard, and the PCP was given a five-storey building.

One of the critical questions posed by the revolution concerned the nature of the officers’ movement, the MFA, which had adopted the slogan of “the alliance of the MFA and the people”—a slogan never challenged by the PCP, PSP and various “left” groups. Instead, Cunhal reached a de facto agreement with the MFA, declaring it “is the motive force and guarantee of our revolution.... [T]he 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.” The PCP newspaper *Avante* condemned those who called for a government of “socialist option” as “completely unrealistic.”

The MFA, while it postured demagogically, represented the armed might of the capitalist state and, potentially at least, represented the threat of a new dictatorship. It was intent on suppressing any independent political activity by the working class—particularly when this threatened to undermine the power of the army. It declared, “No political military organisations outside the AFM [MFA] will be permitted in the armed forces, whether they represent parties or not, since all military personnel must be integrated into their own movement.”

At the time, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Portuguese supporters, the League for the Construction of the Revolutionary Party, demanded that the PCP and PSP break with the bourgeois parties, the state machinery and MFA, and fight for the dissolution of the army and the creation of workers, peasants and soldiers soviets.

Instead, the PCP’s Avelino Gonçalves joined Cunhal in the First Provisional Government as minister of labour to enforce labour discipline and implement the austerity programme in the MFA’s “battle for production.” The PCP exhorted workers to “Save the National Economy” and condemned any manifestation of independent activity by the working class.

Subsequent provisional governments, which included Cunhal, introduced anti-strike laws, and 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 Stalinists gave reaction a second wind and led to two further coup attempts in September 1974 and March 1975.

The government then approved an economic plan endorsed by the MFA that excluded “the social-democratic control of the management of capitalism,” but called for partial nationalisations, the takeover of some large and badly managed estates, and increased foreign investment.

The PCP dutifully declared that business had been “nationalised in the service of the people,” but the capitalist nationalisation proposed differed little from that carried out in many Western countries after World War II, which left economic and state power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Nationalisation was also a method of installing state-appointed managers in enterprises that had been occupied by workers.

Elections were held on April 25, 1975, in which the PSP won nearly 38 percent of the vote, the semi-fascist Popular Democratic Party (PPD) took 26.4 percent and the PCP 13 percent. But with no sign of the promised agrarian reforms, landless agricultural workers joined the urban insurrectionary movement, seized the large farming estates and started developing them collectively. The PCP called the occupations “anarchistic” and proposed that all future occupations be controlled by the unions (which it in turn controlled).

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

The MFA and PCP convened a Front of Revolutionary Unity (FUR) to “institutionalise” the “pact” between the MFA and the people. FUR was a popular front set-up to betray the revolution at the most critical moment and received the support of most of the left groups who claimed its so-called “popular assemblies” were “autonomous organs of popular power” that provided “a way forward for the revolutionary process.”

These popular assemblies, in fact, functioned to destroy the independent character of the workers’ committees that had emerged and prevent

moves towards dual power and the creation of soviets or workers' councils. The assemblies were vetted by the MFA and subject to military control at all levels to ensure their "independence from all parties." No political organisations were to be permitted in the armed forces except the MFA itself.

When these measures proved unable to contain working class resistance, the PCP-dominated fifth provisional government resigned in order to avoid a direct revolutionary challenge to bourgeois rule, along with Prime Minister General Vasco Gonçalves, a leading member of the MFA and a figure closely associated with the PCP. The PCP, along with the PSP and PPD, joined a sixth provisional government—headed by Admiral Jose Baptista Pinheiro de Azevedo—which immediately circulated plans for austerity and repression.

The crisis reached fever pitch. The sixth government and the Council of the Revolution were opposed by so many sections of society that a situation of dual power existed. But within days, the army moved in to dismantle barricades and disarm workers and soldiers with scarcely a shot being fired. "Rank-and-file" military organisations, which in the previous weeks had mobilised tens of thousands in demonstrations, dissolved in the face of some 200 commandos.

A new constitution was proclaimed on April 2, 1976, and elections for a new parliament, the Assembly of the Republic, led to a PSP victory. Almost immediately, Soares turned to the International Monetary Fund and implemented a structural adjustment programme at the behest of big business.

The Portuguese bourgeoisie weathered the revolution thanks to the betrayal of Cunhal's PCP and its left hangers-on, who tied the working class to the bourgeois parties, the state machine and the MFA. Had the Portuguese revolution triumphed, it would have been a mighty blow to international capital and inspired social movements developing throughout the world in the 1970s. A *New York Times* editorial on February 17, 1975, gives some indication of the crisis at the time, declaring "a communist takeover of Portugal might encourage a similar trend in Italy and France, create problems in Greece and Turkey, affect the succession in Spain and Yugoslavia and send tremors throughout Western Europe."

However, neither Cunhal nor the PCP had any intention of mounting a "communist takeover." Cunhal's political conceptions, which were essentially those of a Portuguese petit-bourgeois nationalist, were made plain in an interview he gave to *Quaderni Comunisti* in 1995. He absolved Stalinism and himself for the betrayals of the working class in the twentieth century. He thought that "capitalism's potentialities were underestimated and socialism's potentialities overestimated" and that "the way ahead may not lie in attempts to define a world-wide strategy for communists." He blamed Mikhail Gorbachev "as the number one culprit for that great historic disaster which was the USSR's collapse and disintegration." He attacked the European Union from the right saying, "The major consequences of European integration for Portugal are very serious. With a policy of national capitulation, the right wing government sacrifices Portuguese interests to foreign interests."

Today, the PCP retains its influence within the largest Portuguese trade union federation, the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, which has played an invaluable role in imposing austerity measures promulgated by one government after another. Such is Cunhal's real legacy.



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