

Unions isolate Portuguese dockworkers' struggle against European port restructuring

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Since August, Portuguese dockworkers have carried out strikes in Lisbon, Aveiro, Setúbal, Figueira da Foz, and smaller ports against restructuring plans of the right-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD)-Popular Party (PP) coalition government. On November 29, dockworkers demonstrated outside parliament as the plans were voted into law with the support of the opposition Socialist Party (PSP).

Dock unions have formed a Common Front under the banner, “We will never walk alone again.” But this is exactly what is happening. The dockworkers have been isolated by the unions in Portugal and those claiming to represent them in Europe and internationally.

The port restructuring proposals include cutting labour costs by up to 30 percent and fundamentally changing job descriptions. Currently port work includes the entire jurisdiction of a port, but the new law excludes service entrances, warehouses and truck driving operations, opening them up to lower-paid agency workers. The main aim is to break up the labour pool system, which has provided some measure of protection against casual work that bedevilled the industry in the twentieth century.

During the Parliamentary debate, Economy Minister Álvaro Santos Pereira declared that the reforms in this “key sector” were aimed at “preparing the economy for the future” by making it more competitive. The reforms were a key demand of the “troika” (European Commission, International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank) in exchange for the €78 billion (US\$101 billion) bailout package to Portugal last year. In a recent interview, IMF mission chief for Portugal Abebe Aemro Selassie praised the restructuring: “A landmark port work reform is near completion, with substantial positive effects on labour costs and efficiency.”

The strikes have affected Portugal’s import and

export trade to the tune of €1.2 billion (\$1.6 billion). The Portuguese Industrial Association (AIP) is demanding the government impose a “civil requisition order” on the dockworkers, which would force them to work or face jail. Such an order is issued during national emergencies, such as a war or natural disaster, and requires presidential approval.

The media are denouncing “overpaid” dockers. But the basic starting salary in the port of Lisbon is €873 a month, rising to €1,939 for the highest-paid job as a superintendent.

The Portuguese port reforms are part of a decade-long attempt by the European Union to restructure ports across the continent. In September European Commission Vice-President and Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas warned a European Ports Policy Review conference that sweeping reforms were “crucial if ports are to be properly efficient and compete globally against rival ports in North Africa or in Asia—particularly China” and important for building “a single joined-up” Trans-European Transport Network.

Other speakers pointed out that big ships will stop at only four or five destinations in Europe, meaning increased competition between ports. Portugal is particularly vulnerable, as it is on the periphery of Europe and now trades with European countries mainly overland, rather than overseas. Portugal handles about 65 million tonnes of cargo a year, compared to the 550 million or so tonnes handled each by the UK and Netherlands.

Kallas said he wanted to end the previous Commission’s “soft law” approach and adopt a more “hard law approach”. New proposals for further deregulation would be produced during 2013.

The unions, which have planned and negotiated the

cuts, are simply demanding more “consultation” on how the cuts will proceed. Over the last twenty years, Portuguese unions have overseen the de-nationalisation of ports and increased casualization, to the point where some ports employ only casual workers. Shifts of 14, 20 or more hours are not uncommon.

In September the government agreed the restructuring proposals with nine of the 11 unions, including the PSP-aligned General Workers Union (UGT) representing about 20 percent of dockworkers. This not only helped the government get the legislation through parliament, but allowed other Portuguese ports to poach the trade from strike-bound ports.

In October, the port of Lisbon lost 28 percent of the total cargo handled compared with October 2011, while the non-striking ports of Leixões showed an increase of 14.8 percent and Sines grew by 23.2 percent.

Common Front leader Victor Dias has vowed to continue to fight the new restructuring law “via legal, political and union means,” to “empty out some of the more negative aspects” and its unconstitutionality.

The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF) and the International Dockworkers Council have issued calls of support to the Portuguese dockworkers and sent small delegations of officials to demonstrations and picket lines. In September, during the European Ports Policy Review conference a one hour work stoppage was organised in Europe “in solidarity” against the new port reform.

The chair of the ETF dockworkers’ section, Terje Samuelsen, declared, “Portugal can be considered as a laboratory for the European ports policy. Several measures put forward by the Portuguese government correspond perfectly to the proposals that can be expected across Europe. We have seen this before in port packages one and two. We defeated it then and we will defeat it now”.

Behind Samuelsen’s demagoguery, however, the ETF official response to the Policy Review reveals: “The ETF looks forward to a more constructive discussion on future EU ports policy than the process of review undertaken by the Commission to date. In particular, the ETF looks forward to discussing the concerns raised in this report with the Commission and other stakeholders... including the opportunity for ETF affiliates to review the study of port labour

arrangements, safety and health, training and qualifications.” The IDC is calling “on port operators’ organisations, shipping companies and port authorities to embrace social dialogue as the best method for improving productivity and competitiveness in ports, particularly as they affect dockworkers’ labour.”

Throughout the last year, port restructuring has led to several strikes and protests—in the UK, Sweden, Italy and Spain. The unions have made no attempts to unite these struggles or mount a pan-European offensive. At Greece’s largest port, Piraeus, the container terminals were handed over to the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) in 2010 on a 35-year lease. Dockworkers at the port responded with a series of strikes. The ETF issued the ritual calls for support and solidarity, the obligatory dispatch of officials to demonstrations and a 2-hour strike “to demand decent labour conditions” at Cosco.

Today, unions and collective bargaining are now banned among the operation’s 500-plus workers, who are largely employed on a temporary basis with no benefits. A sacked Cosco worker told reporters how he was paid half the previous salary—€600 a month, or about €50 for an eight-hour shift with no meal or toilet breaks. He had no fixed work patterns and was kept on 24-hour call for nine months.

The worker said, “I think their actions are breaking the law...The rights are to have something to eat around 12 o’clock [and] to have our breaks, and not work like a dog straight [through] from morning till afternoon.”



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