

Portugal: Left Bloc leader resigns over property speculation fortune

Paul Mitchell
7 August 2018

Ricardo Robles, the Left Bloc representative on the Portuguese capital of Lisbon's 17-member municipal council, resigned last week after revelations that he made a fortune from property speculation.

Robles and his brother took part in the get-rich-quick stampede to gentrify the capital's oldest and poorest district, Alfama. They bought a prime run-down state-owned historic property for a paltry €350,000 in 2014 and then this year put it on the market for a whopping €5.7 million.

At first, Robles tried to ride out the criticisms, holding a press conference on July 27 at the Left Bloc's headquarters where he declared: "There is nothing deplorable in my conduct." Property speculator Robles was defended by the head of the Left Bloc, Catarina Martins, who insisted he had done "nothing illegal" and that he was victim of "a journalistic and political witch-hunt." He was given a vote of confidence by the party's leadership.

By July 29 and amidst mounting pressure, Robles was forced to resign. He made a pathetic attempt to explain that the huge profit he had accrued "revealed a real political problem" and "created a huge constraint" to his "work as a councillor." He claimed that he had not evicted anyone and had maintained a low-income tenant. He then announced that he was withdrawing from the sale of his property and that he would take control of how it was rented.

The following Tuesday, Martins told reporters the Left Bloc leadership had made an "error of analysis" by backing Robles, claiming "the contradiction was very great" and created "a daily obstacle" between his business interests and his party work. The fact that Martins admitted, without batting an eye, that Robles's real estate deal was "never a topic of conversation" between them speaks volumes about the opportunism

of the Left Bloc.

The whole episode surrounding Robles stinks and reveals, once again, the hypocritical self-seeking nature of the upper middle class constituency that forms the social basis of the pseudo-left.

At the time of writing, the front page of the Left Bloc's *esquerda.net* website was still promoting its fraudulent campaign, "Stop Evictions, Change the Law, Fight Speculation" (*Parar os Despejos, Mudar a Lei, Combater a Especulação*) on its front page. It claims the party "is on the streets with proposals to stop evictions, to make the law of fairer tenancy and combating real estate speculation." Whilst he was busy nurturing his property portfolio, Robles was regularly contributing to *esquerda.net*.

Robles wasn't just some lowly official tempted by a quick buck; he was a Left Bloc spokesperson and a Lisbon mayoral candidate. His speciality was railing against the eviction of the working class from central Lisbon in order to pave the way for gentrification.

Demonstrating Robles's cynicism, in October 2015 he complained on *esquerda.net* about Lisbon's housing crisis and the role of the then-Socialist Party (PS) mayor, António Costa, who is now prime minister of a PS minority government being kept in power courtesy of the Left Bloc and Communist Party/Green Party Unitary Democratic Coalition. As mayor, Costa set about deregulating and privatising the city's administration for the benefit of capitalist entrepreneurs, the tourist trade and what was called "the global creative class."

Robles said at the time: "In the last 30 years Lisbon lost 260,000 inhabitants. There are 50,000 vacant houses in the city. Enticing these people back to the city has been the priority of priorities. The strategy followed was precisely the opposite and failed. António

Costa looked at the city as a financial asset. ... No respect for those who live and work here and all respect for capital.”

On April 6, 2016, Robles returned to the subject, declaring: “The expulsion of residents from the city centre, whilst not being recent, has accelerated in recent years. The strategy of urban regeneration sustained by speculation and exploitation of tourism has consequences. The price of homes in the historic centre rose by 22% in 2015. The expulsion of tenants, mostly elderly and economically unprotected, for the installation of hotels has been the rule. ... The process of gentrification of the city is spreading in the historic centre.”

Then, once again on April 15, 2017, he wrote “ten years of urban deregulation, a monoculture of hotels and record sales of municipal heritage” had become, “in terms of housing...a lost decade.”

According to António Machado, president of the Rental Association in Lisbon—a city of half a million residents that saw 6 million visitors last year: “We have seen a transformation of housing from residences for families to short-term rentals...private houses rented out for tourism that, in some areas, caused rent price to rise by 30-40% over the last few years, which is practically unbearable for local Portuguese people.” The phenomenon has led to the term “terramotourism” or tourism earthquake.

The growth of Airbnb rentals has been explosive, with one street in Alfama hosting 230 lets. The average daily rate of €85 is far more profitable than traditional, long-term rental solutions, which have also risen inexorably in price. The average monthly rent in Lisbon is around €900, or almost equal to the average gross salary.

The huge growth in real estate values also forces less well-off sections of the population to become part of the “gentrifier” process, as they seek to find a place for themselves in the face of rapidly rising rents and house prices. The young, flocking to the cities for work, also become part of this trend.

Gentrification or, more correctly, social cleansing, reflects the relentless growth of inequality. President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa was forced to admit as much earlier this year, declaring that poverty is the “national shame” of Portugal and that it is one of the “most unequal countries in Europe.” He trotted out the regular

mantra that what was needed was an “autonomous national strategy to combat poverty once and for all.”

The current social cleansing of cities across Europe, the US and globally has accelerated in the years since the 2008 crash. This process has been aggravated by the vast sums of money that have been pumped into the financial markets by the central banks as part of “quantitative easing,” which has made cheap money available for speculation in real estate.

Growing inequality and social cleansing is inevitable as long as housing remains a market commodity rather than a social right. The right to a decent and affordable place to live can only be met through a socialist programme.

The role of the Left Bloc is to attempt to prevent the working class and youth adopting such a perspective. It has sought to channel mass disaffection that erupted after the 2008 economic crash—and expressed in the record-low 57 percent turnout in the 2015 general election—behind the discredited Socialist Party, while integrating its petty-bourgeois social base into official and, as the Robles case shows, lucrative bourgeois politics.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)