

Portugal's strike wave intensifies

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January saw an intensification of the strike wave that erupted last year protesting the policies of Portugal's Socialist Party (PS) government.

The PS came to power as a minority government in 2015, promising to reverse austerity. This fraud was promoted by the Left Bloc (BE), Communist Party (PCP) and Green Party (PEV), which claimed that, in return for their support, the PS could be pressured to oppose the “troika”—the European Commission (EC), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB). The PS could, they suggested, be forced to increase wages, unfreeze job vacancies, impose a ban on promotions and reverse the cuts to vital services its conservative predecessors imposed after the 2008 financial crisis.

Four years later, few of the promises have come to fruition. And those that have, such as the increase in the minimum wage, are desperate attempts acceptable to the troika to stimulate consumption.

According to official figures, the number of pre-strike warnings issued in 2018 totalled 733—double those in 2017. In January, more than 50 new strike notices were announced on top of those already taking place. Virtually all areas of the public sector are involved, including nurses, teachers, firefighters, court officials, judges, prison guards, oil refinery workers and dockers.

Last Thursday, Portugal's Criminal Investigation (PJ) police announced strike action next month after three years of talks with the Justice Ministry floundered. Just 120 trainee detectives are to be hired—far short of the 1,400 claimed needed.

Workers in private sector companies have also taken industrial action, including the Efacec Group companies, the Navigator paper mill in Setúbal, Beralt Tin and Wolfram mines and Cerealto Sintra Foods.

The anger among workers is so great that the PCP-led General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP)

and PS-aligned General Union of Workers (UGT) have been forced to call strikes to prevent an independent movement of the working class. They have sought to dissipate united opposition into regional and sectoral strikes directed at pleading with various ministers, parliament and the president to change course.

For several years, the nurses have been attempting to improve their wages, conditions and status with little success. Last month, they again went on strike for four days after the government broke off talks. The unions have limited it to rolling regional action—the first day, January 22, at hospitals and health centres in Lisbon, the Central region on day two, the North on the third day, the South and Azores on the fourth.

Union of Portuguese Nurses (SEP) leader and PCP member José Carlos Martins said that the strike was “to make the Ministry [of Health] and the government see that nurses are not satisfied, are very unhappy that the ministry is not responding to the counting of [seniority] points, to the hiring of more nurses, to valuing and dignifying the profession, and to retirement issues.”

The government is fully aware of the opposition and has made clear its intention to crush it. Health Minister Marta Temido declared that “all the instruments under the law” would be used, including “civil requisitions...to ensure citizens do not become hostages to workers' demands.”

Firefighters are on strike in Lisbon from January 22 until February 5, opposing proposals to cut their basic salary and increase the retirement age by 10 years to 60. The strike has had the 100 percent support of firefighters, many of whom attempted to occupy the Ministry of Labour.

PCP leader António Pascoal, head of the Lisbon Municipal Workers' Union, pleaded, “We are in the mood to negotiate every day and every night. Today there has been negotiation and some progress has been achieved in terms of the status of the job, but in relation

to the matters that most disturb the firefighters not yet. If the government gives a signal to that effect, we are ready to suspend the strike immediately.”

José Correia, leader of the National Union of Workers of Local Administration (STAL), also affiliated to the CGTP, declared, “I am not very optimistic, but hope is the last thing to die. Our obligation is to continue to negotiate with the government and to account for the firefighters’ dissatisfaction.”

The CGTP is now proposing, through its Common Front of the Public Administration, a public sector general strike for February 15. It demands a 4 percent wage increase with a minimum increase of €60 and reinstatement of various benefits, including overtime payment, subsistence allowances and taxes reduced to levels prior to 2009. A Common Front statement proclaims the PS government is “deepening the destruction of the social functions of the state ... paving the way for its privatisation,” is ignoring “more than 600,000 workers, who have no increase” and that precarious work “continues to be a reality, contrary to government claims.”

Despite this, Common Front leader Ana Avoila pleaded, “Striking is always a last resort” and hoped “that the government take note of this.”

Two PS-aligned UGT unions, Fesap and FNE, have belatedly announced their members will join the strike. They are presenting a letter to Finance Minister Mário Centeno on “a great day of struggle that seeks to reverse the trajectory of loss of purchasing power, leading the Government to abandon the policy of low wages, and value and dignify the salaries and careers of all workers.”

The notion that Centeno, rewarded for his efforts in Portugal with the posts of president of the Eurogroup and chairman of the Board of Governors of the European Stability Mechanism, will abandon his and the European ruling elite’s policy is laughable. Only the increased exploitation of the working class has allowed a limited economic recovery and bigger profits.

Under the PS, the Portuguese economy has grown by just over 2 percent a year and the budget deficit cut to the lowest level in more than 40 years. Exports have doubled to 40 percent of GDP since 2008, as manufacturers have set up plants to take advantage of the lowest wages in western Europe and masses of casualised labour.

Portugal’s monthly median wage is less than €900 per month, compared to more than €2,000 for the EU as a whole. Some 40 percent of workers are paid no more than 25 percent above the €635 minimum wage. A recent European Commission study revealed that Portugal (and Ireland) had the largest gaps between wage growth and productivity growth over recent years.

It is no wonder the Portuguese stock exchange has the highest rate of return in Europe, according to the Allianz Global Investors’ Dividend Report 2019.

Definite political conclusions must be drawn. Under conditions of the globalisation of capitalist production, the trade unions, which are wedded to a nationalist perspective, are incapable of defending even the most basic interests of the working class. They have been transformed into direct agencies of the corporate-financial elite and the state. Both the PCP and CGTP, with their call for a “patriotic” left aimed at “the sovereign development of our country,” do not represent the interests of the working class but the Portuguese ruling elite.

It is necessary for workers to break from these outmoded and reactionary organisations and build new, genuinely popular and democratic organisations of struggle.

The strike wave in Portugal is a sign that a new period of revolutionary struggle is emerging. This must be prepared consciously through the building of an international socialist movement of the working class to fight for workers’ power and the reorganisation of economic life along democratic and egalitarian lines.



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