

Fuel tanker drivers threaten new strike in Portugal

Paul Mitchell
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Portuguese fuel tanker drivers have threatened further action, less than two weeks after a three-day strike over low wages and poor working conditions brought the country to a virtual standstill. Half of the country's petrol stations ran dry, factories halted production, public transport routes were suspended and flights cancelled.

On Monday, following a meeting with the National Association of Freight Carriers (ANTRAM), Pedro Parda Henriques, the vice president of the Union of Dangerous Goods Drivers (SNMMP)—formed just over a year ago—declared that a new strike is “most likely.” ANTRAM had been given a deadline of one week to “concretely pronounce on two main issues ... official recognition of the category of driver of dangerous substances and that the basic salary of these people should be equal to twice the national minimum wage.” Minimum wage is €700 (\$780) a month.

“At the end of this week we will see what forms of fighting we will use,” Henriques added.

ANTRAM President Pedro Polónio, retorted, “ANTRAM does not work with threats of strike” and that it would stick to the “calendar of negotiations [that] had been established until the end this year.”

The calendar was one of the Socialist Party (PS) government's “civil requisition” measures, which also allowed it to impose minimum service operations, call in scab trucking companies and mobilise military personnel and security forces to secure supplies.

PS Prime Minister António Costa, seeking to justify the emergency power, declared, “The great lesson we have to draw is that, in the face of social conflicts, any kind of political exploitation is absolutely intolerable.

“I also give a strong thanks to the security forces who were absolutely extraordinary, both in ensuring peace and tranquillity in all of this conflict, in the performance of the missions entrusted to them, and also in the replacement of civilians.”

The fuel tankers dispute is the latest manifestation in Portugal of the eruption of the class struggle internationally. This year has seen an intensification of the strike wave that

erupted last year, protesting the PS's failure to reverse 12 years of austerity that saw wages and pensions cut, careers frozen and a huge increase in precarious working. The number of pre-strike warnings issued in 2018 totalled 733, up 120 on 2017 and 245 on 2016.

Virtually all areas of the public sector have been involved, including nurses, teachers, firefighters, postal workers, court officials, judges, prison guards, oil refinery workers and dockers.

Half of all strikes have taken place in private sector companies including the Efacec Group, the Navigator paper mill in Setúbal, Beral Tin and Wolfram mines and Cerealto Sintra Foods, Petrogal Ferreira da Silva, Volvo's Auto-Sueco subsidiary, Cinca, Hanon, Schmitt + Sohn, Randstad, Bosch, Delphi, Visteon, Meo and Carl Zeiss.

On May 1, workers from Portugal's largest supermarket chain Pingo Doce went on strike.

Many of the strikes have been called by newly created unions such as the SNMMP, formed in response to the betrayals of the PS aligned General Workers Union (UGT) federation and the PCP-led General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP). Since the beginning of 2017, 24 new unions have appeared, with only two joining the UGT and none the CGTP.

Last year dockworkers organised in the Stevedoring and Logistics Activity Union (SEAL) at Setúbal went on strike for a month in protest at the large number of casual workers. They paralyzed the port and prevented export of cars from the huge Volkswagen Autoeuropa plant. The Portuguese Association of Nurses (ASPE) has organised a series of militant strikes over the last two years over poor pay and job recognition.

The UGT attacked the new “aggressive and uncontrolled” unions. On May 1, UGT Secretary General Carlos Silva warned, “It is necessary that the emergence of these more aggressive and uncontrolled processes make employers aware of the need to value traditional unions, which seek negotiation and dialogue. Let's hope that these new developments do not overwhelm parliament to restrict the

rights of workers.”

He warned the government, “If in the last years the economic climate was of growth and recovery of confidence, and there was no condescension on the part of the government, what can we expect in the future in the face of a tendency for the economy to cool down?”

In its commentary on the continuing strike wave, Portugal’s leading financial paper *O Jornal Económico* noted the duplicitous role of the Left Bloc (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which “support the Socialist government [but] now have to distance themselves from it in order to capitalise on all the discontent at the ballot box.”

Following the 2015 general election, the BE and PCP channelled mass disaffection—expressed in a record low 57 percent turnout and the ousting of the pro-austerity right-wing coalition—behind the PS and its claims that it would “reverse austerity.” Four years later, few of the promises have come to fruition.

Last month, the *Financial Times* questioned the claims, parroted by sections of the pseudo-left, that the PS government has created an alternative progressive economic model. In “Portugal: a European path out of austerity?” former Italian trade minister Ivan Scalfarotto, told the FT, “Public spending has stayed under control, unit labour costs have been reduced, hence they have been able to attract more foreign direct investment and increase their exports.” He added, “Costa, also, is a good communicator: he stressed the idea that ‘sacrifice was over’ and has been effective at keeping his left-wing coalition together.”

Antonio Barroso, a director at risk analysts Teneo Intelligence, said, “While Costa’s political acumen cannot be denied, it should not be forgotten that his government has faced very favourable macroeconomic conditions over the past three years,” referring to “the tide of a global recovery, falling oil prices, a tourism boom and a sharp fall in the cost of servicing one of Europe’s heaviest debt burdens” through the Central Bank’s government bond-buying scheme.

The FT quotes PS Finance Minister Mário 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, who “himself admits that the degree to which the PS has overturned austerity is ‘not dramatic.’”

Economic growth in late 2015 was “very poor” and “decelerating,” Centeno continued. “A change had to be implemented, [but] not a big change,” before attributing the cut in the deficit to a sharp fall in the interest Portugal pays on its debt.

Elsewhere, Lisbon journalist Ricardo Cabral Fernandes explained that the alliance of the PS with the PCP and BE,

dubbed the *geringonça* (“odd contraption”) was “basically an exclusively tactical turn of the Socialist Party.”

“What happened was that the, so to speak, the socialist/left wing of PS very quickly learnt the lessons of PASOK [the social democrats] in Greece. So it turned its compass. And António Costa was that compass. Yes, he broke the governance arc, made a parliamentary alliance with the Bloco and the PCP, but for all else, in policy terms, it keeps the same politics,” Fernandes concluded.

Portugal’s economy has slowed down more than expected in 2019. The deficit has reached €1.4 billion, three times Centeno’s estimate of €409 million. The country has the third highest government debt in the European Union, hitting €245 billion or 121.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Public investment is the lowest of all advanced economies, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Portugal’s monthly median wage is less than €900 per month, compared to more than €2,000 for the whole EU. Some 40 percent of workers are paid no more than 25 percent above the €700 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.

The proliferation of new unions expresses the initial recognition by workers that, under conditions of the globalisation of capitalist production, organisations created in a different era that are wedded to a pro-capitalist nationalist perspective are incapable of defending their basic interests. They have been transformed into direct agencies of the corporate-financial elite and the state, with both the PCP and CGTP calling for a “patriotic” left aimed at “the sovereign development of our country,” directly articulating the interests of the Portuguese ruling elite.

But the experience of the militant Matamoros strike in Mexico demonstrates the bankruptcy of union forms of organisations and the danger of accepting the political bonafides of organisations claiming to be independent without examining their programme and origins.

It is necessary for workers to build new, genuinely popular and democratic rank-and-file organisations of struggle. But these must be an essential component of a conscious turn to 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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