

Portugal's social-democratic government calls out army against truckers' strike

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On Monday, as an indefinite truckers strike began in Portugal, Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister António Costa's cabinet met for an emergency session. With 35 percent of gas stations across the country already running dry, it voted to call up the army in order to break the strike and issue civil requisition orders to force strikers back to work. Yesterday, hundreds of soldiers drove tanker trucks to supply Lisbon International Airport, police stations and other facilities with fuel.

Last night, the PS government also threatened to charge 14 truck drivers who defied the civil requisition orders, including three it could not find to serve them their requisition papers.

These moves are a sign that the financial aristocracy will not tolerate truckers' demands—shared by workers in Portugal and across Europe—for a dramatic improvement in wages and working conditions, proper rest times, and a fundamental change in social conditions.

Faced with an international resurgence of the class struggle, the ruling class is turning to military-police repression. The last year has seen a national teachers' strike in Poland, the first since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in 1989, teachers' strikes across the United States, as well as a wave of strikes against European Union (EU) austerity in Germany, Belgium, and across Europe. Costa, who hailed French President Emmanuel Macron during the EU elections as he cracked down on "yellow vest" protests, is moving rapidly towards a confrontation with the working class.

The National Union of Dangerous Materials Drivers (SNMMP) was forced to call the truckers strike after selling out a previous strike in April for a €70 increase in monthly base pay. It doubtless feared that, after last year's Portuguese nurses' strike and "yellow vest"

protests in Portugal and in France—all organized independently via social media—truckers might strike independently if the SNMMP did not. It is calling for a €100 monthly base pay increase to €800 in 2020 and €900 in 2021, for a 20 percent rise in average overall pay from €1,400 this year to €1,715 monthly by 2021.

Workers' demands go far beyond these proposals, however. Even though dangerous materials drivers are often required to work 18- or 20-hour days, the retirement age is set at 65; moreover, the PS tried in 2017 to increase the retirement age to 67 by decree. The SNMMP has, however, left truckers' demands to retire earlier out of its negotiating agenda with the PS and the employers.

More broadly, the strike expresses rising anger among workers in Portugal and internationally against conditions enforced by the EU and the capitalist system. In the first half of the year, the Portuguese unions worked might and main to shut down a powerful wave of strikes against the PS. Port, refinery, education, and state administration workers struck to demand wage increases amid an economic upturn after a decade of social austerity and EU-dictated wage freezes following the 2008 Wall Street crash and global economic crisis.

The union itself is making clear to the political establishment that is trying to keep control of explosive social and political opposition among its members. Pedro Pardo Henriques, an SNMMP lawyer acting as the union's spokesman, told the press: "There is much more to this than simply the salaries. It is a question of the rights of the workers, of why their wages have not been raised for 20 years. It's not just the base salary and the strike. We have to ask how it is that we got here."

TSF public radio alluded to the fear in ruling circles

at the extent of political anger among workers: “No one escapes the truckers strike—not the employers, not the government, not EU policy.”

The task of defending truckers targeted by the Portuguese state and army is posed to workers in Portugal and internationally. The strike has to be taken out of the hands of the unions and waged as a political struggle against the PS government and the EU. In this, the essential ally of the Portuguese truckers is the entire working class in Portugal, Europe and beyond, mobilized on a perspective of a revolutionary struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

The main advantage the PS has in this situation is that there is no revolutionary party in Portugal fighting to mobilize the working class against its military threats. It is acting on the well-founded belief, based on years of experience, that the unions will isolate the strike and refuse to carry out any solidarity action. As for the right-wing, middle-class organizations orbiting the PS that have been promoted for decades as the Portuguese “left,” they are signaling the ruling class that they will accommodate themselves to the PS government’s measures against the strikers.

Last year, Left Bloc (BE) leader Francisco Louçã spoke for this entire layer when he slandered “yellow vest” workers protesting social inequality as fascists, declaring: “This is a far-right operation. They are using social media to whip up aggressive politicization in far-right terms.” Now, however, when the capitalist state is mobilizing the army in a genuinely fascistic assault on workers’ right to strike, the BE has a markedly calmer response.

Last week, as preparations for the truckers’ strike went ahead, Left Bloc (BE) spokeswoman Catarina Martins indicated that she accepted the PS rationale for breaking the strike—namely, that it must be allowed to decide what minimum level of services to impose in key economic sectors.

“In certain fundamental sectors, it is understandable that there are minimum levels of service, in other sectors it is not understandable,” Martins said. About fuel availability, she added, “The government will have to do whatever is essential for the country to function. I understand that there are key measures that need to be taken in such a sensitive sector, but I must also say that I see some measures that seem to be clearly exaggerated compared to what is required.”

As for the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), after issuing a mealy-mouthed criticism of the PS action as “limiting the right to strike,” it attacked the strikers in classic Stalinist fashion: “An indefinite strike is proceeding based on arguments that, while exploiting real problems and dissatisfaction among drivers, reflect personal ambitions and obscure political objectives that seek to reach the population more than the employers. The promoters of this action are happy for the government to use them to limit the right to strike.”

This was an indirect reference to the role of Pardal Henriques, who is running in the October 6 legislative elections for the right-wing Republican Democratic Party (PDR). The PDR is affiliated in the European parliament to Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) party. The right-wing *Diario de Noticias* has mounted a campaign in response to the strike denouncing Pardal Henriques and alleging he has ties to the Freemasonry—specifically, the Grand Orient of Lusitania lodge.

Workers can place no confidence in the unions, or any politician affiliated to Macron’s violent repression of working-class opposition. However, the PCP’s criticism—blaming union officials for state repression unleashed against union members by the PS, with which the PCP has decades-long political ties—is cynical and reactionary. If right-wing figures are able to emerge to lead strikes, this is above all because organizations like the PCP have worked for decades to suppress left-wing opposition in the working class and tie it to the PS.

The decision of the PS to crack down on the strike the very day is a warning that a very rapid shift to the right is underway in the European ruling class. A political break to the left with the petty-bourgeois milieu represented by the BE and the PCP, and the building of independent organs of the working class, are tasks urgently posed by the escalation of the class struggle.



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