

Fascist vote surges as conservatives win Portuguese presidential election

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Sunday's presidential election in Portugal saw a victory for right-wing incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and a surge in votes for the fascistic Chega (Enough) party.

The election took place as coronavirus deaths continue to explode in Portugal. Deaths have more than doubled since the beginning of the year to a record of 275 on Sunday, bringing the total toll to 10,194 in this country of just 10.2 million people.

Fear of the virus and the absence of postal or electronic voting were partially responsible for the record low turnout of 39.5 percent. However, turnout has steadily declined over decades—from 84.4 percent, after the toppling of Antonio Salazar's fascist dictatorship in the 1974 Carnation Revolution, to 51.3 percent in 2016—as disaffection mounted with the political establishment. The 2019 parliamentary elections saw just 48.6 percent of voters take part.

This year, de Sousa, the candidate of the conservative Social-Democratic Party (PSD), won a second term with 60.7 percent of the vote. He received unofficial support from social-democratic Socialist Party (PS) Prime Minister António Costa and other PS leaders. PS official Carlos César congratulated Rebelo de Sousa on his re-election, saying it was “good news” for the PS, as it allows close “institutional cooperation” between the government and the president to continue.

The primary preoccupation of the PS and its pseudo-left allies was to stifle the mounting anger at social inequality and the pandemic in the working class and block a turn to the left. The PS, working desperately to bolster the right-winger de Sousa, did not field its own candidate. Ana Gomes, a Maoist-turned-PS member of the European Parliament who stood as an independent, won just 13 percent.

The other parties allied to the PS polled badly. The

Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) candidate, João Ferreira, received 4.3 percent, and Marisa Matias of the pseudo-left Left Bloc (BE) collapsed to 4 percent—down from 10.1 percent in 2016. Both parties have for years worked in a de-facto coalition with the PS.

Chega, a party set up in 2019, polled 11.9 percent. This marked a large increase in its support: in October 2019, when its leader André Ventura was the first fascistic candidate since the 1974 revolution to win election, it won 1.3 percent. This month, Marine le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally party in France, was guest of honour on Ventura's campaign trail.

On election night, Ventura declared the election “historic,” adding that he had crushed “the extreme left in Portugal,” by which he meant the PCP and the BE. He claimed that Chega had “managed to break through the usual blockade in Portugal to create an overwhelming anti-system force.”

Like other fascist demagogues, Ventura viciously blames socialism, the “corrupt political establishment” and the most oppressed sections of society for the economic and social crisis. He attacks Roma “gypsies” and workers forced to rely on welfare, declaring that “socialism and corruption are killing our nation.” He wants to scrap the post-dictatorship Constitution, which calls on paper for “a socialist society” and the abolition of imperialism, colonialism and “all other forms of aggression.”

Fascist sentiment is rising in the ruling class. After Ventura met last year with Portuguese businessmen to discuss his law-and-order, pro-business program, João Maria Bravo, owner of the Sodarca group, a major defence contractor to the Portuguese Armed Forces, told reporters: “Since 1974, the country has sunk, and this is already the most expensive government ever.

André is the only one who puts his finger on the wound and talks about what we want to hear. He makes honest proposals, intends to put the country in order, fight impunity and make the economy flourish.”

He added, “As you can imagine, I have excellent contacts in the police and military forces, and I guarantee that he has a lot of support. There are no more declared supporters in these areas at the moment because they cannot manifest themselves.”

The rise of a fascist candidate in Portugal, only weeks after former US President Donald Trump attempted a fascist coup on the Capitol in Washington, is a warning to workers internationally. The response of the bourgeoisie to growing working class anger at murderous “herd immunity” policies on COVID-19 and toxic levels of social inequality is to turn towards fascism. Parties like Chega in Portugal and Vox in Spain—in countries where fascist regimes fell only in the 1970s and are still well within living memory—are rising amid an insoluble, international crisis of capitalism.

The forces principally responsible for the rise of Chega are the anti-worker, pseudo-left parties that Ventura falsely called the “extreme left.”

In 2015, the BE along with the PCP and Green Party (PEV) supported Costa’s new pro-austerity, pro-European Union (EU) minority PS government. It rescued the PS, which had been discredited for imposing austerity while in power from 2005 to 2011 and faced the prospect of disintegrating like its sister PASOK party in Greece.

The BE enthusiastically gave Costa its support merely “on the condition that he give up some of his programme’s more neo-liberal policies.” All its pre-election rhetoric about repudiating Portugal’s debt and breaking with the European Union was jettisoned. The pact with the PS became the route through which BE’s petty-bourgeois base was thoroughly integrated into the machinery of EU austerity. This created a social disaster for the working class.

After years of a BE-backed PS government, Portugal is among the most socially unequal countries in the EU. One in five workers in Portugal are on the minimum monthly wage of €635 (\$700), the lowest in western Europe. Portugal’s monthly median wage is less than €900 per month, compared to more than €2,000 for the whole EU. At the same time, the super-rich have gotten

richer. According to Statista.com, “By 2022 it is estimated the number of individuals in Portugal with a net worth of over five million US dollars will reach 5,650, an expected increase of nearly 1,100 from 2017.”

Last year, amid the disaster caused by the pandemic, the BE admitted that the PS governments it had supported pursued “a strategy of transferring resources to the private sector.” Now, Portugal’s public health system is on the verge of collapse as hospitals run out of intensive care beds. “We are already treating patients beyond our installed capacity...and we are not the only hospital where this is happening,” said Daniel Ferro, director of Lisbon’s biggest hospital, Santa Maria.

When workers mobilized against the PS government, the pseudo-left were violently hostile. When Portuguese workers struck and “yellow vest” protests spread in Portugal following those in France, BE leader Francisco Louçã denounced them as fascists: “This is a far-right operation. They are using social media to whip up aggressive politicization in far-right terms.” In 2019, BE and the Portuguese unions isolated a nationwide trucking strike as the PS government called out the army to force the truckers back to work.

The rise of Chega as the capitalist class in Europe and internationally pursues a murderous, fascistic “herd immunity” policy is the most serious warning. The task of building a politically independent movement in the working class, fighting against “herd immunity” policies and for socialism based on a Marxist-internationalist critique of the pseudo-left groups, is urgent. This means fighting to build a Portuguese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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