

Captain Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho: The suppressor of the 1974 Portuguese Revolution dies—Part 2

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The following is the second and concluding part of a series on the death of Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, the Army captain who organised the military coup on April 25, 1974, that overthrew 48 years of dictatorship in Portugal. Part one was posted on August 24, 2021.

Portugal's first provisional government

The more far-sighted members of the ruling elite knew the PCP would play a similar role in preventing the development of revolution in Portugal. Spínola appointed two PCP (and two PS leaders) as ministers to the first provisional government on May 16, 1974 alongside seven military ministers and two from the semi-fascist Popular Democratic Party (PPD).

The PCP sought to corral the working class behind the Popular Front strategy of the "People-MFA Alliance". To enforce labour discipline and implement the austerity programme in the MFA's "battle for production", PCP leader Alvaro Cunhal was appointed a minister without portfolio and the PCP's Avelino Gonçalves, who was Coordinator of the Secretariat of the PCP controlled Intersindical union federation, became minister of labour. The PCP was to occupy this post in subsequent provisional governments too, exhorting workers to "Save the National Economy" and condemning any manifestation of independent activity by the working class.

The counter-revolution takes shape

Faced with the militant struggles of the working class Spínola launched a coup on September 10, 1974, that was only thwarted after workers took to the streets and began erecting barricades. Spínola was simply allowed to resign.

Throughout the revolution Carvalho and other leaders of COPCON promised they would "eventually" arm the working class, but their role was to prevent any moves towards the creation of militias. The army was repeatedly used to break up strikes and occupations, including at the state airline TAP, the LISNAVE shipyards and the Timex factory.

The increasing insurrectionary mood in early 1975 led all the parties to support the reinforcement of the MFA in the running of the state. Spínola, emboldened by their capitulation and sanctioned by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and US Ambassador Frank Carlucci, launched a second

coup on March 11, 1975. It was again foiled after a general mobilization of workers.

Following the abortive coup, a Council of the Revolution was created on 14 March 1975, to which Carvalho was appointed. In May 1975, he was temporarily promoted to general and, together with vice president and former general Gomes and General Vasco Gonçalves, formed the three-man Directorate to try and bring an end to the continuing crisis. The PCP demanded they come up with solutions to make "the democratic order be respected."

Between May and June 1975, strikes and occupations across the country escalated rapidly. Dozens of large companies were nationalized. There was a growth of neighborhood committees that constituted a situation of dual power.

In the space of a few short weeks, the government was forced to increase the minimum wage, pensions, maternity, sickness, unemployment and invalidity benefits and restrict price increases. Many companies were forced to increase pay and introduce collective contracts, holiday pay and a Christmas bonus.

The more the working class rebelled the more stridently did the PCP seek to impose the People-MFA Alliance. It insisted the MFA was "the motive force and guarantee of our revolution", which had to be limited to a democratic national one and developed closer relations with Carvalho and other members of the Junta.

The PCP and MFA convened a Front of Revolutionary Unity (FUR) to "institutionalise" the "pact" between the MFA and the people. FUR was a popular front, set up to betray the revolution at the most critical time and it was to receive the support of most of the pseudo-left groups.

It sought to consolidate the control of bourgeois military officers, destroy the independent character of the workers' assemblies that had sprung up and prevent moves towards dual power and soviets/workers' councils. The assemblies could only start their work after "an evaluation by the MFA" and would be subject to military control at all levels to preserve their "independence from all parties." No political organisations were to be permitted in the armed forces except the MFA.

The role of the pseudo-left

During the Carnation Revolution the pseudo-left acted as secondary agencies of imperialism hanging onto the coat tails of Stalinism.

The state-capitalist International Socialist (IS) organisation (today's Socialist Workers Party in Britain) represented by the Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat (PRP) gave unconditional support to the MFA and

COPCON. It greeted “the MFA proposal of liaison between the MFA and the people” as a “great victory for those who have fought for months for the building of revolutionary councils.”

Carvalho had no problems supporting the PRP’s call for revolutionary councils because they were to be “non-party” and tied in with his own call for “a military government without parties”. Carvalho said such bodies were “part of the revolutionary process”, but they were “bound to fade out.”

The Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USeC) had two organisations in Portugal—the official International Communist League (LCI) and a “sympathising” section—the Workers Revolutionary Party (PRT). Both supported the MFA and COPCON, calling on them to form “a real and solid unification with the movement of the exploited masses.” The PRT claimed the MFA was introducing “dual power” and the military committees had become “an initiative in soviet power.”

In 1978, the LCI and PRT would fuse into the Revolutionary Socialist Party, which became the main force behind the formation of the Left Bloc in 1999. In 2015 the votes of the Left Bloc and PCP enabled a new minority pro-austerity PS government to take power.

The role of the International Committee of the Fourth International

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its Portuguese supporters, the League for the Construction of the Revolutionary Party (Liga para a Construção do Partido Revolucionário, LCPR), called for the PCP and PS to break from the right-wing parties, the state machine and MFA. It demanded the dissolution of the army and the creation of workers, peasants and soldiers soviets in opposition to the MFA and its proposals for a bogus Constituent Assembly.

The ICFI insisted, “The army remains the instrument of the bourgeois state, which must be broken up by the intervention of the working class. The idea that the army as such can play a revolutionary role is completely reactionary.” (“Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International on Portugal after November 25,” included in *Revisionists & Portugal* by Jack Gale, Labor Publications, November 1975)

“The series of mutinies in the Portuguese army express the symptoms of a deep-seated crisis... Absolutely no confidence can be placed in the so-called left-wing generals like Gonçalves and Carvalho who themselves express the vacillations of the petty bourgeoisie”, (*ibid*).

Above all, this meant the building the ICFI, the only organisation capable of leading the working class and the taking of power.

The fate of the LCPR is unknown, particularly with the destruction of documents during the 1985-86 split with the Workers Revolutionary Party. Some references to the league can be found in archives in Portugal.

November 25, 1975

In the face of continuing unrest during the “hot summer” of 1975, including the large November 12 demonstration called by the civil construction union, which blockaded the deputies inside the parliament for two days, the “Group of Nine” officers around Major Ernesto Melo Antunes on the Revolutionary Council warned of the state “degenerating into anarchy” and went on the offensive. They demanded the implementation of Antunes’ economic plan, which specifically excluded “the social-democratic control of the management of capitalism”.

At the same time Cunhal insisted that the Group of Nine “could be

recovered for the revolutionary process” and that the PCP should not support the “military left”. He attacked the “ultra-left and anarchistic faction which hinders the unity of the progressive forces”.

On November 25, 1975, a state of emergency was declared. The army organised by General António Ramalho Eanes moved in to dismantle barricades and disarm workers and soldiers with scarcely a shot being fired. Carvalho’s COPCON dissolved in the face of just 200 commandos. Carvalho disappeared and remained uncontactable. The PCP refused demands for arms by its members besieging its headquarters and ordered its party and union organisations not to mount any resistance.

Carvalho’s role on November 25

In a revealing interview with the Portuguese state broadcaster RTP in 2015, Carvalho described how he attended the Revolution Council meeting late on November 24, where it was decided to replace him with “Group of Nine” member Vasco Lourenço as commander of the Lisbon Military Region and hence COPCON. According to the interviewer Carvalho had “in his hands... the possibility of quickly neutralizing the main operational force that was under the orders of the Group of Nine,” but instead just went home.

Carvalho tells of having received a “very distressed” phone call from his close collaborator, the commander of the Almada Castle garrison, Rosado da Luz, saying “my General... we have here about 10,000 workers from Setenave and Lisnave (shipyards) saying they want weapons... And I said: Rosado da Luz, don’t you even give a penknife to anyone... If someone climbs the walls, or jumps the barriers, do a warning shot above his head, and if someone wants to jump... fire at him.”

The November 25 counter-revolutionary coup resulted in a de facto alliance between the Group of 9 and the PCP. A new bourgeois constitution was proclaimed on April 2, 1976. Several weeks later elections were held, leading to a PS victory in the new Assembly of the Republic and Eanes becoming president. Almost immediately the new PS Prime Minister Mário Soares declared it necessary to “put socialism in the drawer,” turned to the International Monetary Fund and imposing an austerity programme.

Carvalho after the counter-revolution

In 1976, Carvalho stood as a candidate in the presidential election against Eanes and again in 1980 backed by various pseudo-left groups whose members provided the foot soldiers for his campaigns. In 1976 he polled 800,000 (16.2 percent of the total) but by 1980, his vote had slumped to 86,000 (1.4 percent).

In 1987, Carvalho was sentenced to 15 years in prison for being the “intellectual author” of crimes committed by the underground terrorist group called the Popular Forces of April 25, known as FP-25, which carried out about 20 bomb attacks that killed a dozen people in Portugal between 1980 and 1986. Carvalho always insisted he had “zero involvement” with FP-25. He was released from prison and eventually pardoned by parliament in 1996 at the urging of Soares, now the President of Portugal.

In 2011, in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, Carvalho said, “The increase in unemployment and the cost of living, which leads to increasing difficulty for the people, can also lead to a social outbreak that, being the kind of a popular insurrection without any organization, without any

command, can lead to a disaster.”

He declared that a new military coup in Portugal was a possibility. “For me, the demonstration of the military must be, within limits, to carry out a military operation and overthrow the Government”. He thought it would be even easier to achieve it than in 1974, because “there are fewer barracks, therefore less chance of enemies”. “800 men are enough”, he declared. “A man with Salazar’s intelligence and honesty today,” was needed but without his fascist perspective he told the *Business Journal*.

The bourgeoisie claws back the gains of the revolution

Over the years the bourgeoisie has taken back much of what it was forced to concede in 1974-75 and amended the constitution to remove all bogus references to socialism. But with the intractable economic, social, and political crisis of the world capitalist system the ruling elites internationally have turned, during the past decade, toward authoritarian and fascist methods of rule. Criminal and even psychopathic personalities have risen to power.

In Portugal’s presidential election in January this year the fascist Chega (Enough) party founded in 2019 experienced a surge in votes, showing fascist sentiment is rising in the ruling class.

At the same time, there was a record low turnout of 39.5 percent, indicating mass disaffection with the political system and opposition to the constant attacks on the working class since the global banking crisis of 2008 through European Union imposed austerity programmes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed the bankruptcy of capitalism. Earlier this year Portugal recorded the worst rate of Covid-19 cases in the world, a result of a murderous herd immunity policy imposed under pressure mounted from big business to reopen the economy.

Health experts singled out Portugal as the country most “lagging behind” in the rolling out of vaccines in Europe and spending the least on extra expenditure on health during the pandemic. It suffers from one of the smallest hospital capacities per capita in Europe and promises to implement a National Health Plan have failed to materialise.

The events of 1974-76 demonstrate the revolutionary role of the working class and the need to build the Trotskyist leadership of the ICFI. The lessons from that period, when a successful overthrow of capitalism would have changed world history, are vital for the decade we are living in of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.

Concluded



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