

Strikes erupt across Portugal as government fails to adopt budget

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28 October 2021

Prime Minister António Costa's seven-year minority Socialist Party (PS) government collapsed on Wednesday, as parliament voted its budget down. The pseudo-left Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and Left Bloc (BE), which, since 2015 have backed Costa from outside his government, suddenly opposed the budget. It is the first time since the 1974 Carnation Revolution toppled fascist dictator António Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime that a Portuguese budget has been rejected.

As President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa schedules a week of talks with the leading parties to prepare snap elections, the ruling elite is clearly terrified of an eruption of the class struggle.

In the capital, Lisbon, *Metro de Lisboa* workers have been holding strikes for a week for wage rises, better living and working conditions, and career advancement plans. All stations were shut yesterday morning as workers massively joined the strike. Amid broad anger among metro workers at a long-running wage freeze, further strikes are planned next week. Earlier this month, 90 percent of railway workers at state-owned Comboios de Portugal struck for higher pay and more hiring.

Today, Portuguese National Health Service pharmacists are to go on strike today until November 2 to demand wage increases and greater opportunities for career advancement. They are joined by workers at the beer and alcohol distributor Novadis, who will strike and protest at the Sagres de Vialonga bottling plant. Novadis workers are demanding wage increases, suppression of wage inequalities between workers in Lisbon and other parts of Portugal, and the use of the "bank of hours" scheme to impose flexible work schedules and limit overtime pay.

Next week, nurses are set to strike on November 3-4.

They are demanding the permanent hiring of temp nurses working for the Public Health System, the hiring of more staff, and increasing bonuses paid to health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On November 5, teachers are set to strike to protest the low pay increase, well below the 5 percent official inflation rate that was set in the now-failed PS budget. Teachers had already organized work stoppages in September as the school year started. Now, they are also set to join a nationwide one-day protest strike by civil servants scheduled for November 12.

Civil servants will strike against the 0.9 percent salary increase proposed by the PS, which would mean a cut in real wages of over 4 percent. On November 11-12, firefighters and prison guards will strike. Firefighters are demanding wage increases and the granting of a risk bonus equivalent to that paid to the security forces. The Tax Workers Union has also announced a strike for December 5.

EU austerity policies imposed since the 2008 Wall Street crash, and continued under Costa, have devastated the working class. Portugal is one of the most unequal EU countries. Official 2020 data showed that 2 million people face poverty and social exclusion, as 16 percent of Portuguese (1.6 million people) live on incomes below the poverty line, including 10 percent of employed workers. Working class opposition erupted in 2019, as a wave of strikes and "yellow vest" protests against social inequality modelled on those in France, spread across Portugal.

While the initial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily halted the eruption of the class struggle in Portugal, it is now returning in full force. Workers are outraged as the PS negotiates a multi-billion-euro EU pandemic bailout payoff with Brussels, while trying to slash real wages for working people and hand over

massive sums to the super-rich.

Moreover, it comes amid an international eruption of strikes by US auto, health and food workers, rail and transport strikes in Germany and France, strikes by UK bus and university workers, and nationwide work stoppages called in South Korea and Sri Lanka. The critical issue, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has explained, is the independent organization and international unification of the working class. The ICFI is fighting to build an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Workers in Portugal face union bureaucracies that cut them off from their class brothers and sisters internationally, and reactionary bourgeois parties like the PS and its pseudo-left satellites, the PCP and BE. These parties have not only imposed EU austerity and real wage cuts for years on working people, but implemented the EU's deadly policy of "living with the virus" during the pandemic. Over 1 million people have contracted COVID-19 and 18,000 have died in a country of barely 10 million, and daily infection numbers are now climbing back toward 1,000.

The violent hostility of the PCP and BE to the class struggle emerged in the 2019 truckers strike, when the PS called out the army to break the strike and force truckers back to work at gunpoint. The PCP, the BE and the union bureaucracy isolated the strike, blocking solidarity action by broader layers of workers to halt the military onslaught against the truckers. The budget talks have again utterly exposed these bankrupt, pseudo-left organizations of the affluent middle class.

Signs that the PS might fail to ram through its austerity budget mounted this month. On October 18, as anger increased among teachers at the budget, the BE published a "public clarification" desperately denying the PS government's claim that the BE would, as usual, support its budget. The BE vaguely declared it was still looking for a "convergence" with the PS, to "make the state budget viable," thus "promoting a social and economic relaunch."

Last weekend, PCP secretary Jerónimo de Sousa issued a statement on the PCP's central committee meeting. "Portugal does not need a budget, but a response to existing problems," he wrote, adding: "The country's situation and the problems it faces due to decades of right-wing policies aggravated by the

pandemic demand a response and a solution that cannot wait." Issuing a few demands for wage increases and social programs, he pledged to act "always with the same coherence and decisive action, always on the side of the workers and the people."

This is a pack of lies by a pretentious bureaucrat who has spent years helping impose the same right-wing policies that he is now denouncing. To maintain the false pretence that they oppose austerity, however, the BE and PCP felt compelled to oppose the budget in the October 27 vote in parliament, leading to its immediate failure.

President de Sousa is now moving to dissolve the government and call snap elections, having declared: "My position is very simple; either there is a budget or there will be a dissolution." De Sousa clearly aims to defuse mounting class struggles by distracting workers with an election campaign, and then assemble a new, reactionary government that will continue imposing EU austerity and murderous pandemic policies on the working class.

Yesterday, EU Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis demanded Portugal continue austerity, declaring: "There will be no payments unless targets are met." He threatened to withhold the next €1.3 billion EU bailout payment to Portugal. That is, there is plenty of money—so long as it all goes to the super-rich, and none of it goes to working people, who are to be bled white with falling real wages, social cuts, and the economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is nothing to negotiate with Costa and Sousa or the EU and Dombrovskis. The critical task for workers is to take the struggle out of the hands of the national union bureaucracies and forge a powerful international movement that can mobilize the vast opposition that exists in the working class to the military and financial threats of Portuguese and EU authorities. Within this movement, the ICFI fights to build a political movement to raise consciousness among workers of the need to transfer political power to the working class and build the United Socialist States of Europe.



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