Snap elections called in Portugal after government falls amid mass strikes

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Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has called snap elections on January 30 after Prime Minister António Costa's seven-year minority Socialist Party (PS) government collapsed amid mass strikes. Parliament had voted down the PS' 2022 budget last week. It is the first time since the 1974 Carnation Revolution toppled the *Estado Novo* regime established by fascistic dictator António Salazar that a Portuguese budget has been rejected.

In a televised address, Sousa said the PS budget defeat "has totally reduced the government's support base," and 2022 will be "a decisive year for a sustainable exit from the pandemic and the social crisis that has hit us." He added, "In moments like this there is always a solution in democracy … to give the word back to the people."

Costa refused to resign as interim prime minister, promising to lead the PS campaign for a "reinforced, stable and lasting majority." The PS held only 108 seats in Portugal's 230-seat parliament, depending on support from the Stalinist Communist Party of Portugal (PCP) and the petty-bourgeois Left Bloc (BE). To maintain the pretense that they oppose austerity despite supporting the PS for six years, the BE and PCP felt compelled to oppose the budget in the October 27 vote in parliament, leading to its immediate failure.

The ruling elite is terrified of an eruption of the class struggle. The snap elections are deeply unpopular; indeed, 54 percent of the respondents in one recent poll opposed the calling of snap elections. It is widely seen as a filthy maneuver, using nationalism and pseudo-democratic rhetoric to try to smother an upsurge of the class struggle. It comes as the unions, under mounting pressure, are desperately trying to divide, call off and defuse a wave of strikes.

In recent weeks, strikes involving tens of thousands of workers across multiple industries have erupted throughout the country. In September and October, rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, pre-hospital emergency technicians, tax office workers and prison guards all went on strike.

On Thursday, as Sousa announced the elections, Metropolitano de Lisboa (ML) workers went on the latest in a series of 24-hour strikes against wage freezes and lack of career advancement.

Last week, the National Union of Professional Firefighters called off a strike for higher wages scheduled for November 11-12, arguing that the budget failure and the "predictable fall of the Government decided in the next few days are factors that justify the withdrawal of the strike." It claimed it would present its demands "in due course to the new elected executive."

The leader of the Public Administration Union Front, José Abraão, then suspended this week's strike for salary increases for civil servants, saying: "Without the State Budget, there is a set of measures that are impossible … in what concerns our problems … we suspended all forms of struggle in the expectation that, in the shortest period of time, we can have a budget."

The FNAM, the federation of doctors, also announced the suspension of the strike scheduled for November 23-25. It stated, "After careful evaluation of the current political crisis, conditioned by the non-approval of the State Budget for 2022," it was calling off the strike. It concluded by calling for "urgent" negotiations with the new government.

The trade unions, the PS government and the Stalinist PCP and Left Bloc are terrified of mounting working-class anger, notably against the European Union pandemic bailouts. The new government will be mandated to ram through EU austerity measures to pay back the €45 billion the EU is handing over to

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Portugal's financial aristocracy in the coming years as part of the bailout fund. It will also be faced with cutting the huge public debt of 133 percent of the GDP.

While the EU and the Portuguese government hand over billions to the wealthy, they plan to strictly limit wages and pursue a "herd immunity" policy of mass COVID-19 infection. Thousands are expected to die in the country, part of the 500,000 more COVID-19 deaths expected in Europe in the next three months, according to statements by World Health Organisation (WHO) Director for Europe Hans Kluge.

The criminal policies of the PS government in Portugal have led to mass deaths. Since March 2020, 18,167 people have died, and 1,091,142 cases of infection have been recorded—10 percent of the population, according to data from the Directorate-General for Health.

Recent opinion polls suggest that the Socialist Party will win re-election but will again fall short of a parliamentary majority. It would obtain 36 percent of the vote. PS leader and interim Prime Minister Costa's pro-austerity policies, however, face increasing opposition, even according to official opinion polls. He has gone from 45 percent in support and 34 percent against in a poll last July to 34 percent in favor and 38 percent against today.

Fearful that the elections will deepen the political crisis, the PCP and BE, who have seen their support dwindle after having supported Costa for six years and supported the brutal crackdown of the truck drivers strike in 2019, as the PS government called out the army to force the truckers back to work.

The PCP and BE would have preferred that Costa make nominal concessions during the budget debate. Their demands during the budget negotiations, such as increasing the monthly minimum wage to a meagre 805 euros and compensation for collective layoffs; strengthening the hands of the unions in collective bargaining to suppress workers struggles; and slight increases in pensions and public investment in the national health service (SNS), would have done very little to reverse the brutal austerity implemented by both conservative and BE and PCP-backed PS governments.

Reacting to the snap elections announcement, Left Bloc's parliamentary leader Pedro Filipe Soares began by defending this saying this outcome "does not [mean] it was an inevitability." He continued, "On the part of the Left Bloc, we did not want elections, and we always wanted to guarantee a budget that the country would not lack at this fundamental moment."

The PCP leader Jerónimo de Sousa reacted on Friday, cynically stating, "The country does not have a budget because the PS did not want to affront the interests of capital to be free to serve the interests that it has always served."

In fact, the PCP and Left Bloc, by backing the reactionary policies of the PS, have opened the door to the far-right Chega party to posture as the sole opposition party. It is expected to become the third largest force in parliament, going from one seat in the year of its founding to as many as 20 seats, according some polls. Chega is the first far-right party to win a significant share of the national vote since the toppling of the Salazar dictatorship.

That Chega is on the rise and is taking place as the capitalist class in Europe and internationally pursues a policy of austerity and mass COVID-19 infections is the most serious warning.

In order for the emerging strike movement in Portugal to reach its aims, it must be linked to the expanding international movement in the working class against wage austerity, war and the fascistic "herd immunity" policies of the ruling elite on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The task is now the building of a politically independent movement of the working class, fighting for an eradication strategy against the pandemic and for socialism. This means fighting to build a Portuguese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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