

Mass teachers strikes erupt across Portugal

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Barely a year after the Socialist Party (PS) won a majority in the Portuguese parliament, strikes and protests are erupting across the country. Workers are mobilizing as rampant inflation slashes real wages after years of austerity, amid a global economic crisis intensified by the pandemic and NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine. It is part of a mass strike movement drawing in millions of workers from across Europe.

Inflation last year stood at 7.8 percent, the highest in 30 years in Portugal. Food prices have increased by a staggering 20 percent. Sleeping under a roof is also becoming increasingly impossible. In 2022 housing prices rose 18.7 percent, while rent in cities like Lisbon rose by up to 36.9 percent.

Wage increases have fallen far behind inflation. In the private sector, wages rose 2.3 percent last year and are forecast to rise 2.8 percent this year. This is below the voluntary wage increase benchmark agreed between big business, the government and the General Labor Union (UGT) bureaucracy of 5 percent—which, again, was below inflation. The average wage increase for civil servants was only 3.6 percent. Retirees will also see their pensions' value fall, with increases of a mere 4 percent—more than 3 percent below inflation.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese capitalist class is massively enriching itself from inflation. Fifteen large companies listed on the Lisbon stock exchange paid out €2.5 billion in dividends to their owners, the highest ever.

Opposition is mounting, however. Portuguese teachers have been at the forefront of strikes, which are at a ten-year high. For over two months, they have been striking over wages and working conditions. As in other countries, they are demanding salary increases in line with inflation, payment of overtime and improvements to the promotion system, which currently makes it difficult to obtain a permanent job.

Their anger erupted in the mass march on February

11, which brought 150,000 people to the streets of Lisbon. It was even larger than the two previous ones in January attended by more than 100,000 demonstrators—marches already considered the largest since the Carnation Revolution toppled the far-right Salazar regime in 1974.

Antonio Costa's PS government is reacting to growing opposition by imposing draconian minimum service requirements targeting teachers' strikes. Teachers who are striking—some of them since December—must provide a minimum of three hours of lessons per day, even when they are on strike.

The union bureaucracy is trying to force teachers to comply with these requirements. The National Federation of Teachers called the minimum service requirement “illegal” and pledged to challenge it in court, but called on its members to obey the government's order in the meantime.

The PS is terrified that concessions to the teachers will galvanise the rest of the working class, as it diverts billions to the military and to pay the debt. Finance Minister Fernando Medina said: “When we talk about the teachers and their demands, we must take into account the general situation in the country: not only the teachers, but also the nurses and doctors.”

Meanwhile, the union bureaucracies are blocking a broader struggle, preventing united action by teachers and other layers of workers, and cutting them off from millions of workers striking and protesting across Europe—from Britain, to the Netherlands, France and Germany.

Portugal's nine education unions are calling strikes on different days and in different districts in order to divide this powerful movement as much as possible. Last week, schools in districts north of Coimbra were paralysed on Thursday; the next day was the south—that is, from Leiria to the Algarve.

The STOP union has continued the indefinite strike

but refuses to broaden the struggle. This split-off union emerged after decades of union collaboration with successive governments to impose education cuts. Created in 2018, STOP calls itself an “apolitical”, “non-sectarian, non-partisan and truly democratic union,” committed to “never signing important commitments-agreements with the government without democratically listening to the teaching class first.”

STOP, however, is not an alternative to the old union bureaucracies. Like them, it does not link the strike to the necessary struggle against the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. It has also isolated teachers, rejecting unifying their struggles with recent strikes by doctors, nurses, autoworkers at Volkswagen’s Autoeuropa plant, railworkers, port workers and cabin crew at state-owned airline TAP into a struggle against the PS government.

The strike movement is continuing to grow. Last week, workers at state-owned rail company Comboios de Portugal (CP) began a three-day strike against a below-inflation pay offer. During the same week, workers at the public rail infrastructure company Infraestruturas de Portugal also walked out for three days over pay. The strike cancelled a large majority of rail services. This week, Portugal’s National Federation of Doctors (FNAM) called its members to strike after what it called an “unacceptable step backwards in negotiations with the government.”

The strikes demonstrate the determination of masses of workers to fight back against big business and the PS government that is funnelling money to the major corporations, the super-rich and the military machine. Workers must be warned, however: the union bureaucracies and their political allies, the petty-bourgeois Left Bloc (BE) and the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) have a long history of working with the PS to strangle workers struggles.

These forces are working to channel growing opposition to the PS government into one-day protests without any perspective. On February 25, several thousand people marched in Lisbon in a protest against rising living costs under the slogan “Por uma Vida Justa” (For a Fair Life), organised by PCP and BE. The aim of the march, which received widespread live coverage by mainstream media and the press, was to appeal to the PS government for better wages.

Similarly, these forces are also campaigning for a

referendum on housing in Lisbon, aiming to limit how many buildings are dedicated to tourist accommodation, with the prospect of holding a larger rally on April 1.

Workers cannot fight the financial markets and the PS government under the political control of the PCP or BE, or on an apolitical, trade-union basis, like STOP. Significantly, in 2019, the PCP and BE backed the PS government’s deployment of the army to break a nationwide truckers strike, as fuel stations ran dry. BE leader Catarina Martins backed the crackdown, stating: “In certain fundamental sectors, it is understandable that there are minimum levels of service... The government will have to do whatever is essential for the country to function.”

In the autumn of 2021, the PCP and BE reacted to mass strikes—by rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, nurses, firefighters and civil servants—not by seeking to mobilize workers against the minority PS government, which they were supporting in parliament. Instead, they sought to prop up the PS by forcing new elections.

They suddenly voted against the PS budget, which they had previously supported—as they had loyally supported all PS austerity budgets since the PS took power in 2015. Their vote against the PS budget triggered a government crisis and new elections, in which the PS won an absolute majority. The support for the PS has now sunk to 27 percent, from 41 percent a year ago.

To mount a successful fightback, workers must coordinate their struggles independently of and in a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left groups like PCP and BE. To facilitate this, the International Committee of the Fourth International calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and schools, and to form the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This is essential to organize the working class for the necessary international struggle against austerity, war and the capitalist system.



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