

Strike wave erupts in Portugal against inflation and soaring poverty

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26 March 2023

A powerful explosion of the class struggle is emerging in Portugal. Workers in one sector after another are springing into action with multiple calls for strikes.

The strikes take place against the backdrop of a wave of strikes against austerity and inflation by millions of workers across Europe. In France, the current epicentre of the struggle, a revolutionary confrontation is developing between the working class and the government of President Emmanuel Macron. In Germany, hundreds of thousands are participating in public sector warning strikes and are demanding a full strike that the trade unions desperately seek to prevent. In Belgium, on March 10, public sector workers went on a nationwide strike. In the Netherlands, hardly any week since January has passed without Dutch workers entering into a struggle for better wages, working and living conditions, the latest 200,000 health care workers went on strike.

In Portugal, strikes by teachers have been taking place since November over wages and working conditions. Their anger erupted in the mass march on February 11, which brought 150,000 people to the streets of Lisbon, following the January protest that gathered 100,000 demonstrators—marches already considered the largest since the Carnation Revolution toppled the far-right Salazar regime in 1974.

In February and March, Comboios de Portugal railway workers paralyzed hundreds of trains. They will continue striking throughout the month of April. Since February 15, an ongoing strike by civil servants at the judiciary has forced the delay of more than 21,000 trials and legal proceedings.

On April 6, workers at Infrastructure of Portugal, which manages the railway and road infrastructure, will go on strike over wages after previous strikes on February 29 and March 2. Tax workers are also on intermittent strikes, covering the first three hours and the last three of the working day.

The airway industry is also rocked by strikes. Cabin crew staff at British low-cost carrier EasyJet will go on a three-day strike to call for higher wages to compensate for the high cost of living. The SNPVAC union said that strike action was supported by 277 votes in favor and only 1 against. TAP Air Portugal pilots have also called a strike during the Easter break, between 7 and 10 April, to restore working conditions withdrawn in 2021 by the PS government. The prior notice of the strike was approved by the pilots with 515 votes in favour (87 percent).

The magnitude of this new strike wave was confirmed by the data released by the Directorate General for Employment, which indicates that in January the number of strike notices quadrupled that of the same month the previous year (204 to 51).

The Portuguese government of the Socialist Party (PS) is increasingly facing a situation like France. Amid this context, like Macron, PS Prime Minister Antonio Costa is resorting to mass repression against strikes. It is imposing minimum services obligations or threatening to outlaw altogether some strikes, such as the indefinite one called by teachers by the STOP union or the justice union that the advisory council of the Attorney General's Office has already described as illegal.

Last week, the government announced a battery of measures worth 2.5 billion euros that will do little to help workers cope with soaring inflation and high interest rates. The measures include scrapping value added tax (VAT) on essential food products still to be discussed with large retail chains, 140 million euros in support for farmers, as well as a ridiculous paltry additional monthly subsidy of 30 euros to low-income households and plus 15 euros per child. It will also increase civil servants' wages by 1 percent, whose wages rose by an average of 3.6 percent last year, still way below inflation levels 8.2 percent.

The root cause of the strike wave coincides with what is

happening across Europe and internationally as a response to the collapse of living conditions. Everywhere, the ruling class is claiming that they cannot make any concessions while funding bank bailouts and vast military budgets to fuel the war that NATO is waging against Russia in Ukraine.

The union bureaucracies, however, offer no alternative. In Portugal, both the social democratic Union General de Trabalhadores (UGT) and the General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers (CGTP), the largest union and linked to the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), are strangling mounting opposition.

They are calling one-day strikes in an uncoordinated way, or calling them by region, sector or even hourly stoppages, avoiding at all costs to paralyse the economy and bring down the PS government. Systematically, they rapidly call off strikes as was done with the strike of the television TVI workers forced to accept a 5.3 percent wage increase when inflation in February stood at 8.3 percent.

To release pressure, the CGTP called a demonstration on March 18 that brought together tens of thousands of workers in Lisbon calling for measures to limit the prices of basic products and contain inflation. This is a strategy of the union bureaucracies to exhaust workers in one-day strikes and protests. The Stalinist PCP and the petty-bourgeois Bloco de Esquerdas, who supported this call, also collaborate with them.

Its leaders made an exercise in hypocrisy during the demonstration. PCP general secretary Paulo Raimundo said that employment must be accompanied by rights and salaries “which is what the bills are paid with.” BE leader Catarina Martins impotently complained that the government is not fulfilling its commitments, because “respect for those who work is to update wages and freeze prices.”

Omitted is the fact that these forces applied the same austerity policies for years for which they now criticize the PS government. In 2015, they supported the Socialist Party into power until the January 2022 elections, when the PS obtained an absolute majority. During those years, together with the PS, they applied an agenda of right-wing and austerity policies, in line with the one previously carried out by the right-wing PSD. In 2019, while the PS enjoyed the support of the PCP and BE, the PS government mobilized the army to break a nationwide truckers strike.

The government kept the labour laws imposed by the European Union (EU), as the vast majority of jobs created

were precarious and real wages continued to decline. Workers in Portugal now face mass poverty. Half of workers received less than 1,000 euros per month in 2022, a percentage that rises to 65 percent among youth under 30. Health and education continue to deteriorate due to cuts, while hospitals and schools are threatened with ruin because of nurses and teachers shortages. Even before the strike, many students were without classes due to a lack of educators to teach the subjects.

Economic recovery was largely based on tourism, which has fuelled a real estate bubble. In cities like Lisbon, it is impossible to find even a room for less than 600 euros per month.

The right-wing policies of the PCP and the BE impoverished workers while enriching large corporations that are making record profits. Fifteen large companies listed on the Lisbon stock exchange recently paid 2.5 billion euros in dividends to their owners, a historical record.

These forces also intervened to denounce workers struggles opposing the PS government. In 2019 when strikes began to break out against the PS government, the leader of the Bloco Catarina Martins defended the adoption of anti-strike measures, declaring that “In certain fundamental sectors, it is It is understandable that there are minimum levels of service.” The leaders of the PCP criticized strikes such as those in transportation, justifying the PS’ military repression of the truckers’ strike.

PCP and Bloco represent the same right-wing and reactionary path as other pseudo-leftist groups in Europe such as Die Linke in Germany, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France in France, Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece. The way forward for workers is to break with these petty-bourgeois forces and the union bureaucracies, building democratically elected rank-and-file committees in each workplace—that can unify strikes and protests not only in Portugal but across Europe and internationally.



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