

Strike wave grows in Portugal despite trade unions' attempt to strangle it

Santiago Guillen
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The beginning of 2023 has seen an escalation of class struggles against the Socialist Party (PS) government in Portugal. Amid the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, the PS is trying to impose austerity and the costs of a war economy on the backs of the working class with the assistance of the union bureaucracies.

The struggle of Portuguese workers is driven by the same international crisis that has propelled millions of workers across Europe to protest against soaring prices and plunging wages. In France, this led to a direct confrontation between the working class against the Macron government.

In Portugal, strikes have spread across the entire country and to virtually all sectors of the working class. In the first quarter of the year, strikes rose by 148.1 percent in the private sector and 112.9 percent in the public sector compared to 2022. They are continuing in the second quarter, as the union bureaucracies scramble to shut off one strike after another.

Portuguese hospital technicians and assistants walked out on May 19, demanding improved working conditions and recognition of their specific expertise in the career progression system. The unions reported that more than 90 percent of the 30,000 workers in the sector joined the strike, not counting those on whom the PS government imposed a reactionary minimum service requirement.

The Portuguese Nurses' Union submitted to the minimum services requirement. It is now trying to disperse the struggle, announcing two more strike dates, June 28 and 30, over a month after the first strike day.

Portugal's public-sector pharmacists will strike on June 22, 27 and 30 against low wages and precarious working conditions.

Civil servants in the judicial sector massively followed a strike call, paralysing over 10,000 legal proceedings. Last month, 100 percent of cabin crew from Easyjet also went on strike. Over 380 flights were cancelled.

On Wednesday, railway workers will go on strike in support of increased pay and working conditions. The rail network operator Comboios de Portugal (CP) warned of "severe disturbances" in rail traffic between May 30 and June 1 due to the strike.

Walkouts are multiplying in the transport sector across Europe, showing the immense power of this section of the working class. This includes a ground handling strike at Italian airports on June 4, after the 24-hour general strike on May 26, which affected bus, tram services and metro lines; flight and train strikes in France, as in the June 6 protest against Macron's pension cuts; French air traffic controllers striking since March; security staff at Glasgow airport in Britain; and Spanish pilots on May 29-30 then again on June 1-2.

The Union of Investigation, Inspection and Borders Inspectors (SIIF) called off the strike by the inspectors of the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF) after the successful May 22 strike at Lisbon's Humberto Delgado airport was joined by 100 percent of workers.

The SIIF tried to dissipate the impact of the strike that could have paralysed all Portuguese airports and border posts, including maritime ones. It scheduled strikes on different days in May and June, and at different airports across the country.

José Luís Carneiro, minister of internal administration of Portugal, thanked the unions, stating that the lifting of the strike "was the result of a lot of work within the government, but also of a deep dialogue with the representative structures of SEF workers." However, he warned: "This long and arduous path has not yet come to an end."

The explosion of strikes is driven by the increasingly difficult conditions facing Portuguese workers. Inflation in 2022 exceeded records with a rise of 7.8 percent and the forecast for this year stands at 5.4 percent, numbers not seen in the last 30 years. The situation is much worse

for working people, as food prices increased 20 percent over the past year, while house prices rose 18.7 percent. Rents increased by more than 20 percent, and 35 percent in major cities like Lisbon and Porto.

The fundamental issue workers face is the role of the union bureaucracies, including the PS-linked General Union of Workers (UGT) and the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP), linked to the Communist Party (PCP). They are suppressing a unified industrial and political offensive of the working class against the PS government and the Portuguese capitalist state.

Last year, the UGT signed an agreement with big business and the PS government for raises of at most 3.6 percent for the public sector and 5 percent in the private sector—i.e., well below inflation. The CGTP did not sign this agreement, but despite leading most of the strikes it has done everything it can to isolate them, calling them in different sectors and on different dates, to prevent a unified struggle.

CGTP has now called partial strikes for June 28, a measure aiming to let off steam and then stop the mobilizations during the summer period, hoping that they will evaporate by autumn.

Discontent with these unions was reflected in the creation in 2018 of the STOP teachers union, which has been involved in teachers strikes since November. Although it defines itself as “truly democratic” and opposing signing agreements “without first democratically listening to teachers,” it has not proposed escalating the teachers’ struggle or a unified action with others industries.

Discontent over the role of the unions is leading teachers to seek to organize outside of them, highlighting the objective need for the formation of rank-and-file committees.

One 23-year-old teacher said he has “never experienced anything like this ... it was a very democratic moment. We feel that, this time, the fight is in the hands of the teachers and not the unions.” Another teacher commented, “There was a compromise not with a union but among all, because the discontent is real, people feel that the demands are fair and, therefore, we will not stop fighting.”

Terrified of rising militancy, the pseudo-left Bloco de Esquerdas (BE) and the Stalinist PCP are working to drive the movement into the dead end of pressuring the PS government. They have set up the “Just Life” movement, presenting it as an independent citizen platform, calling the PS government to address soaring inflation.

These forces, however, are widely discredited. Its first “Just Life” demonstration on February 25 gathered a few thousand, despite the great media publicity. This is far from the 150,000-strong protest in defence of teachers during the same dates.

The reasons are not hard to find. From 2015 to 2021, they supported the austerity measures of the PS government, while simultaneously working together with the unions to block any working class response. In the 2022 elections, both saw their electoral support collapse. The latest polls give them historically low percentages of the vote, at barely 5 percent each.

The threat exists that under these conditions the far right is profiting from the discrediting of the organizations falsely promoted by the capitalist media as the “left.” The neo-fascist Chega, funded by sections of the Portuguese ruling class, is polling 13 percent, exceeding the combined vote of Bloco and PCP.

The austerity measures and corruption scandals have seen the popularity of the PS government crumble, opening the way to snap elections and the possibility that the fascists enter a right-wing-led PSD government. This would be the first time the far right would return to power after Portugal’s Estado Novo dictatorship was brought down in the 1974 Carnation Revolution.

The main lesson of the European-wide strike wave is that to mount a successful fightback workers must coordinate their struggles independently of and in a political rebellion against the corporatist union bureaucracy. To facilitate this development, workers need to establish rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace, organisationally and politically independent of the union apparatus. This is the only way to mobilise the working class in a broader struggle against the war economy, austerity and fascistic, police-state rule.



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