

# General strike brings Portugal to a standstill

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The general strike that brought Portugal to a standstill on December 11 marks a decisive escalation in the confrontation between the working class and the minority right-wing Democratic Alliance (AD) government of Prime Minister Luís Montenegro.

Its immediate trigger was the AD's sweeping attack on what remains of workers' rights established after the 1974 Carnation Revolution. The *Trabalho XXI* package is presented by the government as a "profound reform" of the Labour Code, revising more than 100 articles and aiming to "flexibilise, to value and grow." It includes easier dismissals, expanded employer control over working hours and outsourcing, weakened collective bargaining, and attacks on maternity protections. The government also seeks to broaden minimum service obligations during strikes, extending them to more sectors and further limiting their impact.

On the eve of the strike, Montenegro insisted the government would not retreat, declaring, "The government respects the right to strike... but it is a government with a reformist spirit and will not give up on being reformist and transformative." Despite his public refusal to "make a deal with Chega," he will require the fascist party's votes to pass the reforms in parliament.

Portugal's first general strike in twelve years, jointly called by the Socialist Party (PS) aligned UGT and the Communist Party (PCP) aligned CGTP, shook the country, extending the wave of escalating class struggle across Europe. The action follows general strikes in Greece and Belgium, and in Italy where workers in the main CGIL union federation are striking today to oppose the budget of Georgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy government.

By dawn on December 11, the scale of the walkout was unmistakable. Train services ground to a halt nationwide as rail workers joined the strike, leaving stations deserted and long-distance and suburban lines paralysed. Lisbon's metro—whose workers were among the first to walk out overnight—shut down almost entirely, operating only the minimal services enforced by the government.

Hospitals remained open for emergencies, but most surgeries and appointments were postponed as nurses and other health sector staff joined the walkout. Schools closed or operated with skeleton staffing, while municipal services, postal operations, and administrative offices were severely disrupted. Urban waste collection was almost universally halted, and major sanitation and water treatment companies shut down.

Air travel was similarly affected. TAP Air Portugal operated only one third of its usual 250 daily flights, with hundreds of cancellations across Lisbon, Porto, and Faro. Lisbon Airport—normally one of Europe's busiest—was almost deserted. All 17 major fishing ports, operated by Docapesca, ceased activity—an extremely rare occurrence.

One of the most politically significant features of the strike was the unprecedented participation of private sector workers, long burdened by precarious contracts, low wages, high turnover, and fear of dismissal. For more than a decade, strikes had been dismissed as the actions of "privileged" public sector employees.

The December 11 walkout shattered that narrative. The strike extended into banking, insurance, industry, communications, and the cultural sector, with some companies reporting participation rates of 50 to 100 percent. Goods drivers and truckers joined the stoppage, disrupting deliveries and fuel logistics. The Volkswagen Autoeuropa plant—Portugal's largest industrial exporter—was effectively shut down, with production halted and its supply chain paralysed.

Even workers unable to strike voiced their anger. João Silva, a 32-year-old stationery worker, told Reuters, "I don't have a permanent contract. I can't go on strike... They want to fire older people so they can hire younger people with lower salaries. Why do labour changes always have to be in favour of company profits?"

Commenting on the day's actions, UGT General Secretary Mário Mourão declared, "I believe this is one of the best strikes ever carried out in Portugal," adding, "I hope the Government pays attention to the signals... in this clear rejection of the labour package." CGTP General

Secretary Tiago Oliveira agreed, saying the mobilisation “shows how far this Government is from the reality of the country... and from the world of work.”

PS leaders also condemned the government’s approach as a “civilizational regression.” They called the strike a “great success” and a “great defeat for the Government,” accusing it of breaking social peace—something they insisted only the PS could guarantee.

PCP General Secretary Paulo Raimundo declared, “We are witnessing a historic participation in the general strike,” while an official PCP statement added that “the large and expressive scale of the General Strike is a huge affirmation of the strength and unity of the workers and a powerful expression of rejection of a labour package serving capital.”

Left Bloc (BE) coordinator José Manuel Pureza called the strike a national turning point, praising the unity of the two union confederations and insisting that “the left must abandon sectarianism and begin a dialogue to confront the current right wing majority.” Jorge Pinto, MP and 2026 presidential candidate for the eco republican Livre party, argued, “The Government wants to further reduce workers’ rights in a country that is already the second highest in Europe for precarious employment.”

These comments highlight the broader political tensions surrounding the strike. But the labour and trade union bureaucracy are seeking to rein in social and political opposition by focussing on appeals to a government openly hostile to workers and reliant on far-right support, rather than advocating an independent mobilisation of the working class. This agenda excludes any effort to unify the struggle by Portuguese workers with those of their European brothers and sisters facing a common offensive by the ruling elite.

The unions act as industrial police, disarming workers as Europe undergoes a long-term restructuring driven by stagnation, deindustrialisation, and declining global competitiveness. To restore profitability, governments across the continent have imposed austerity, labour market deregulation, wage suppression, and attacks on social protections.

Public services are being cut to fund rearmament and military expansion, as European states prepare for potential confrontation with Russia and, eventually, China.

The continent is undergoing its most rapid militarisation since the 1930s. Portugal is sharply increasing military spending, raising the 2026 defence budget by 23 percent—one of the largest jumps in decades. The

government aims to reach NATO’s 2 percent of GDP target for the first time since 1982 and NATO’s new 5 percent guideline by 2035.

The far-right’s integration into government—and its use as a tool to suppress working-class opposition, justify militarism, and shift political discourse further to the right—is the political consequence of the betrayals of the unions, social democracy, Stalinism, and the pseudo-left.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the unions accepted the Troika’s austerity framework and restricted resistance to symbolic, one-day protests. Throughout the austerity decade, workers repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to fight, but the unions intervened to limit the struggle, isolate strikes, and subordinate workers to the PS, which was kept in power by the parliamentary support of the PCP and BE.

They integrated themselves into “social dialogue” institutions enforcing austerity and blocked the development of independent rank-and-file organisation. Whenever workers attempted wildcat strikes, cross-sector coordination, or independent committees, the unions intervened to restore bureaucratic control.

This refusal to mount a sustained struggle created the political vacuum in which Chega thrives. Now the second largest party in parliament, its rise reflects the breakdown of the post-1974 political order and the rightward shift of the entire capitalist class.

The strike in Portugal is a turning point. It shows the working class is prepared to fight, but also that the existing organisations—the unions, the PS, PCP, and BE—are obstacles, not instruments, of struggle.

The decisive challenge is for workers to reject symbolic protests and build independent rank-and-file committees, linking struggles across sectors and borders, developing a political movement aimed not at pressuring the capitalist state, but at replacing it. Political expression must be given to the immense social power of the working class through the adoption of a socialist internationalist perspective and the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Portugal.



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