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Portugal

A million-strong revolt in the streets

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The international media have largely ignored the huge popular mobilization that shook the political life of Portugal on Saturday, September 15, 2012: a million protesters across the country, including at least 500,000 in the capital (10 per cent of the population). The biggest demonstration since May 1, 1974, after the fall of the dictatorship of Salazar.

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Resignation, a characteristic of the Portuguese people?

In recent years, apart from some minority demonstrations of social organizations and movements, the Portuguese population has endured the austerity measures in a spirit of resignation.

This resignation is not the product of a “national (or cultural) characteristic”, any more than it results from congenital stupidity. No, it comes from decades of massive propaganda campaigns which have led Portuguese workers, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, to give credit to the most dreadful tales. As a result of campaigns to make the population believe it is responsible for the government deficit or for public debt and that its salvation depends on that of banks and financial speculators, that there is no money to pay for public services or the workers who run them, the population accepted the intervention of the Troika.

This gullibility comes in a country where the minimum monthly net wage has been in recent years less than 400 euros (this figure should be compared with those of Spain, Greece and other European countries), which gives rise to two conclusions:

1. It is easier to dominate a people accustomed to poverty for generations.
2. In the course of the last thirty years, capital and the parties that have alternated in government (PS, PSD and CDS - PP) have concentrated most of their forces and their resources on hiring communication consultants and on absolute control of the media.

There is a limit to all resignation

However, from time to time discontent and revolt have made themselves felt in some sectors. Since March 12, 2011, there have been two general strikes and several big demonstrations. On September 15, we saw massive demonstrations of angry people. It is estimated that these demonstrations mobilized more than a million people across the country.

The slogans of the call for the demonstration summarized in an exemplary way all the reasons for the present revolt: “Out with the Troika!”; “We want our lives!”; “We have to do something extraordinary!” Everything is implied in these three sentences: the urgency of bringing down the government, putting an end to the policy of austerity, reconnecting

with the social functions of the state, suspending the payment of the illegitimate debt that benefits capital and dispossesses workers.

On the eve of the demonstration, several representatives of the police and of sergeants of the armed forces sent a clear message: the Portuguese people have good reasons to rebel against this state of affairs and political leaders will not be able to count on them to repress the people that they swear to defend.

What can a million people signify in the present context?

The present governing coalition (CDS -PP + PSD) obtained the support of 29 per cent of registered voters on 5 June 2011. But that was:

- before workers lost between one and three months of salary per year;
- before the implementation of the cancellation of collective bargaining agreements;
- before the increase in the hourly, weekly and annual workload;
- before workers were obliged to work unpaid additional hours (and even days);
- before the increase in VAT;
- before the cuts in the spheres of sickness and disability, health care, education, culture, of unemployment and minimum income benefits;
- before the massive dismissal of teachers;
- before the dismissal, an express reform and the re-hiring on a precarious basis of doctors and nurses in the national health system;
- before the drastic reduction in the number of beds available in public hospitals;
- before the reinforcement of educational measures aimed at transforming children into workers accustomed to be reduced to slavery from the age of five;
- before some police brigades came to kill people in the poor neighbourhoods on the edge of urban centres;
- before more than a hundred protesters were taken to court for protesting peacefully against the violent and illegal actions of the municipal authorities;
- before the closure of websites that announced demonstrations and rallies;
- before activists who were trying to help the people in the shanty towns were severely beaten by plainclothes police officers;
- before indignant unemployed people were arrested and taken to court for attempting to enter an employment agency in order to seek employment and distribute leaflets;
- before the abrupt increase in the hourly workload of teachers;
- before the Minister of Education announced that classes will now have a maximum of 30 students, against 24 two years ago;
- before patients on dialysis in the countryside who had no money were abandoned to certain death, which can already be considered to be a new massacre of modern times;
- before the government decreed the closure of the largest maternity hospital in the country, which was also a centre of education for the sector;
- before a cut of 100 per cent in the culture budget...

It should be known that this demonstration saw the participation of tens of thousands of activists and supporters of political organizations, parties and unions whose organizations had begun by condemning the demonstration. It should be known that throughout the preceding week and up until two hours before people began to assemble, the media campaigned intensively to dissuade the population from demonstrating, citing possible police attacks, infiltrated agents provocateurs or masked extremists with bad intentions, thereby contributing to prevent hundreds of

thousands more people from being involved in the demonstrations. Under a veil of apparent neutrality, the media did their best to demobilize potential protesters.

Sudden and unpredictable, the last straw that broke the camel's back

With an obvious lack of a sense of timing, two days after the calling of the demonstration, the Prime Minister announced the most offensive measures that workers could remember: an increase of 7 per cent in the social contributions paid by workers accompanied by a cut of 5.75 per cent in employers' contributions and additional cuts in the social functions of the state. This measure comes on top of the previous austerity measures and involves a new wage reduction of at least 8.5 per cent.

A large number of demonstrators (perhaps the majority) have no other weapon of struggle - because many are temporary workers who are unable to have the "luxury" of distributing of leaflets or going on strike, on pain of immediate dismissal and of being put on the blacklist of the employment agencies. Today, a large number of people are afraid to appear in a demonstration, to be photographed and recognized publicly, and of losing their jobs as a result. We live in a climate of fear similar to that prevailing under the dictatorship.

For these reasons, more than for the number of demonstrators, this demonstration on September 15, 2012 was a clear illustration of the spirit of revolt which is shaking the country. In strict terms of numbers, the only demonstration of this magnitude that we can remember was May 1, 1974 when a million people came out into the streets of Lisbon (which had almost twice as many inhabitants then as compared to today). However, there is a significant difference between the two dates. On May 1, 1974, when a million people invaded the streets of Lisbon, what was striking was the way people laughed and hugged each other, after the fall of the Salazar dictatorship, which had taken place on 25 April with the Carnation Revolution. On September 15, 2012, it was this joy that was missing in the streets of Lisbon and Porto.

This mass mobilization cannot be an accident in the desert

Of course, it is not enough to take to the streets and say "enough!" A change in the political relationship of forces is always the result of more than good intentions or slogans. Harder forms of struggle are needed to force the government to retreat. In this sense, faced with the great potential shown in the country on September 15, the unions and organizations of the Left have an even greater responsibility in the organization of the struggles against austerity and the established power. They can no longer justify their lukewarm attitude by expressing doubts about the state of mind of the workers - independently of the political views of individuals, it is clear that there is an awareness and a willingness to put an end to austerity measures and to put an end to the government and the interference of the Troika.

From now any action of trade-union or political organizations that does not clearly take this demonstration into account and that tries to calm things down and abandon commitments could only be regarded as an execrable act of treason.

Lisbon, September 16, 2012

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