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Portugal

One of the biggest strikes ever

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The week of struggles in Portugal began on November 12th, with the arrival of Angela Merkel in Lisbon. Two demonstrations in Lisbon - one organized by the CGTP trade union confederation and another by the movements that organized the civic demonstration on September 15 – brought together thousands of people to protest against the austerity programme and debt dictatorship that is sinking the country in recession.

The general strike of the 14th was initially called by the CGTP and soon found that the Secretary-General of the UGT was “unavailable”, having signed a social pact with the government and the employers. However, some UGT unions later decided to back the strike, putting the secretary-general in the ridiculous position of having to explain to the press on the eve of the 14th, that he would be striking after all, despite being against it, since his union was one of those that had decided to take part.

The numbers confirm the success of the General Strike. Even though wage cuts made even more difficult the choice of losing another day's pay, more people took part than in the previous one. Transport and public administration were as always the main sectors that gave strength to the shutdown, but the highlight of the day was the level of support in the private sector. For example, in the Lisnave shipyards 96% stopped work, at the Bosch factory it was 90%, and the EDP hydroelectric plant at Sines was shut down. Many factories in the auto industry, the pulp and engineering sectors had well over 60% of their workers joining the strike.

In addition to the strike, 39 demonstrations were held around the country. In Lisbon many thousands of people took part, including trade unionists, students and activists from other social movements. This demonstration ended in front of parliament, where hours later, after the CGTP had already taken down its stage, a group of a dozen young people with their faces covered spent more than an hour throwing stones at the police shields, just a few meters away, without the police trying to stop them. Although they were completely isolated from the rest of the demonstration, just a few minutes before the CGTP leader was due to give a press conference with a balance sheet of the strike, the minister ordered the police to move violently and indiscriminately on thousands of protestors, causing panic and dozens of injured. More than 100 random arrests were made on the streets of Lisbon, with those detained being held for many hours with no access to lawyers or even a phone call. Most were released around midnight, in exchange for signing an identification form with the sections for the time, place and reason for detention left blank.

As expected, the images of violence came to dominate the end of the strike day, but they can not erase the extraordinary mobilization of workers at a time of very severe crisis. As evidence of the significant support in the private sector, both the reasons and the timing for this strike enjoyed the sympathy of a large part of the population, which was not the case in the past. It was called just as the Government was preparing to approve a budget that nobody believes in, including its own supporters. It is a budget that includes a brutal tax increase for those in work and for those who have retired, amounting to a cut equivalent to two minimum wages. It is also a budget that will limit the payment of benefits, by reducing further the amount and duration of severance pay, unemployment benefits and aid to the poor and elderly.

This mobilization will continue with protests by students on the 22nd and by workers on the 27th, when the budget is put to the vote. With a government tied to the troika and Merkel, and an SP with one foot in the memorandum and another in the opposition, it is the trade unions and left political forces that have put forward alternative proposals; proposals to break with the troika's memorandum and to renegotiate the debt, to concentrate resources on supporting employment and the economy and not on paying abusive interest on the debt, which in this budget represent a larger share of total expenditure than spending on education.