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Portugal

# The Portuguese people are not standing for it

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**The general strike on March 22 in Portugal reinforced the struggle against the Troika and the right-wing PSD-CDS government.**

**On March 22, Portuguese workers were called out in the first general strike of the year. Contrary to the previous one, last November, the strike was called only by the CGTP trade union confederation (close to the Communist Party), the UGT (close to the Socialist Party) having this time decided not to support it. The leadership of the UGT thus signed an agreement with the right-wing government and the employers, involving new attacks against wages and social rights. In disagreement with this orientation, nearly twenty trade unions affiliated to the UGT nevertheless called on workers to take part in the strike.**

Once the strike was called, two months after the congress of the CGTP (during which the general secretary was replaced after 25 years in office), the government and the media did everything to minimize it, characterising it as a symbolic action to affirm the authority of the new leader who had been very recently elected. But its effects were quite real and were felt especially in the port sector and in transport in the big cities. In other sectors, support was not as strong as at the time of the strike in November, but it was sufficient to paralyse several factories and public services.

March 22 was marked by more than thirty demonstrations all over the country and by the violence of the police – the images were seen around the world – against demonstrators and journalists in the centre of Lisbon. The same violence had been seen during the strike in November, and images of demonstrators being beaten by the police force were shown on television. But four months later, there is still no result of the “urgent enquiry” promised by the government.

## Growing austerity

With the highest level of unemployment ever seen, more than two million Portuguese are living below the poverty line. The budget cuts also affect social benefits, further increasing the difficulties of households. A big majority of the unemployed simply do not have access to benefits and with the increase in long-term unemployment the situation is going to get worse. In the public services, the situation is no better. In the hospitals, the personnel are already denouncing the lack of basic material and the abnormal peak of mortality in February, which could not be explained simply by influenza and the cold. The other reason is that the government has introduced new barriers to access to public health, for example an increase in the cost – a few days ago we learned that a 60-year old unemployed worker was asked for 160 euros for a biopsy of the prostate in a public hospital – or the ending of help with transport for consultations, which leaves many poor elderly people who live dozens of kilometres from a hospital without the means of getting there.

As the effects of the cuts intensify and as speculation increases about the imminence of a future loan from the Troika with prohibitive interest rates, which will lead to even more debt and austerity, the consciousness that this vicious circle of impoverishment is not improving the situation is dawning on more and more people. The Prime Minister can no longer go into the streets without being booed and the President of the Republic has already been forced to flee from demonstrations. But there still lacks the perspective of giving a political expression to this dissatisfaction and mobilizing around an alternative. This general strike was a further step in this direction.

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