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Obituary

# The trade unionist Manuel Graça has died (1953-2020)

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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**On Saturday, 14 March, the trade unionist Manuel Graça died. A member of the LCI and the PSR, and a founder of Bloco de Esquerda, Graça was for two decades the Coordinator of the Union of Shoemakers, Bag makers and Associated Trades in the Aveiro district.**

Manuel Graça was born in 1953, in Oliveira de Azeméis, in the district of Aveiro, the son of glass industry workers. Faced with economic needs and the sacking of his father, he started work at the age of ten in a shoe factory. When he was about 17, he began to take part in cultural activities, especially in the ARCA association, dedicating himself to cinema and poetry; it was here that he came across literature related to the opposition to the fascist regime of the time. He got to know left-wing activists and became a member of the local branch of the Internationalist Communist League. He did his military service in 1974-75 in the Lisbon region and in the Soldiers United Will Win Movement. As a member of the Armed Forces Movement, he played an active role in the organization of soldiers, an experience that left a deep mark on his trade union activity. In 1976 he returned to work in the shoe industry and from the end of the 1970s became a member of the Shoeworkers' Union leadership in the district of Aveiro.

In the long and victorious struggle for the 40 working week in the sector, he faced one of the most backward employers in the country. He was even imprisoned, as part of series of serious aggressions, whose mastermind, a local industrialist, was eventually condemned in court. At a time of countless fraudulent bankruptcies, which left thousands of workers with unpaid back pay and no employers contributions to social security, he led occupations and pickets of companies, to prevent the removal of machinery and raw materials and ensure compliance with the rights of workers. In a highly feminised sector, the defence of women's conditions and wage equality have always been priorities for the Shoemakers' Union.

As a member of the National Council of the CGTP union confederation, Manuel Graça was the voice of a critical and combative trade unionism, and intervened in the debates on democracy in the workers' movement. In 1995, in the pages of Combate magazine, he intervened in the polemic between Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Álvaro Cunhal over renewal and unity in the union struggle. Manuel Graça wrote: "What is eating away at the unions is corruption [the great fraud in the UGT with European funds was still recent], the lack of combativity, the absence of internal democracy, the lack of social authority, the control exercised by parties, and even the struggles between cliques. The unions must either change or die. Either they represent the workers in all their diversity or they will shrivel."

A lifelong militant, Manuel Graça was an example of courage and sensitivity. Suffering from a degenerative illness, Manuel Graça had withdrawn from political activity for almost a decade.

Depending on the measures to combat Covid-19, the funeral ceremonies are reserved for Manuel Graça's family.

14 March, 2020

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**The sociologist, Elã-sio Estanque, author of the book *Entre a Fábrica e a Comunidade - subjectividades e práticas de classe no operariado do calçado* (Between Factory and Community - class practice and subjectivity among shoe workers), (Afrontamento, 2002), published in 2008 a long interview with Manuel Graça about his life, included in the book *As Vozes do Mundo* (Voices of the World), (Afrontamento, 2008). Here is an excerpt:**

**Q - But, in spite of everything, isn't it a bit frustrating, for those who believe that it is possible to work and**

**intervene in a systematic and continuous way to develop workers' awareness, only to find, after a number of years, that there are still few signs of that awareness? What are the current challenges and problems?**

**Manuel Graça** - For me it is not frustrating! I will explain: first of all because of the conception I have of developing trade unionism, the struggle in social movements, and finally the political struggle. When decisions are taken to fight, to go forward or to go backwards, often there is a decision to call a fight and then it doesn't even take place, right? For various reasons, either because the company has moved to give more money to one group and less to another, to divide and rule, right? I try to understand this in a critical way, so that the message can be passed on to other people. Because companies have their strategies, of bonuses, of promoting foremen, of brutal repression, of creating small businesses to benefit everyone, and people let themselves be convinced by that. So that is normal. And we are in a period of political retreat, but at the same time we are restarting a new period of debates, of projects for the workers' movement.

These problems are worldwide, not just of one region or one union. We do not live in an oasis, we are suffering the consequences of this new period. So how are we going to resist? This is the discussion, for those of us who took part in the period of 25 April, when there was a huge build up of new forces, massive levels of popular participation with important social gains. All that wounded the lion, but it didn't kill the beast, right? Now, the people who lived through that, who had that experience, have to resist. We have to try to resist all this, don't we? There's repression, there are layoffs, there are enticements from the employers and those in power. So these are periods when we have to discuss new ways of resisting and reorganizing...

**Q - But what is your vision then, let's say, in the long term, of the alternatives to the system? What makes you believe that it's worth continuing to work, to fight, to have patience, as you said? How can you see, on the one hand, an alternative to the system, and, on the other hand, how can your role and the activity carried out by the trade union fit into that alternative, that strategy for an alternative to the social system?**

**Manuel Graça** - Well, this would not be the first experience we've had in terms of revolutions. Nothing can be done without permanent work of discussion, organisation and action, whether at local or global level, to try to "put a spanner in the works...", to try to change things. I am not just talking about the trade union level, but about the political level, about NGOs linked to ecology, women's rights, minorities, the poor, the homeless, the landless. There has to be an articulation of all these movements, which doesn't exist now. Because these movements have been destroyed and broken up, both in Portugal and on a global level. In other words, nothing can happen unless there is a profound work of mobilisation, organisation and reflection, so that together we can put a "spanner in the works", and try to create stronger and more powerful movements, in Portugal and at the European and planetary levels. There are millions of people in the world who are acting now! They are acting, like that peasant leader [José Bovet] in France, who invaded McDonald's. That was not banditry, that was an action against this system of standardization, of globalization, that excludes everyone, fires everyone, puts everyone out of work, and that favours the big economic groups, and the brutal accumulation of large fortunes, right? That action aroused the sympathy of millions of people. Now what is needed is to combine these forces in all areas.

**Q - But do you believe that from this kind of example it is possible for a worldwide anti-capitalist movement to emerge, is that it?**

**Manuel Graça** - Of course! Alternatives to this system must be created. If we take environmentalist measures to an extreme, it is clear that the movement must be anti-capitalist, in the strict sense of the capitalist system, which is only by accumulation, because they do not aim to serve the human being. Because today the human being, with the knowledge of technologies, as we know, is at a level that it was not necessary to have so much poverty... Only this system is made to create that poverty and that wealth.

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