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Portugal

40 years after the Carnation Revolution

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On the eve of April 25, Portuguese society was smouldering from contradictions accumulated in half a century of dictatorship. At the heart of these contradictions was a war that lasted thirteen years, to hold on to the African colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe. This conflict conditioned the whole of national life, because of the social suffering caused by the mobilization of two hundred thousand men, a tenth of the working population (a human cost equivalent to twice that of Vietnam), because of the wave of migration driven by hunger and the war, and because of the impossibility of a military solution, the only one contemplated by the regime.

The hegemony of the New State (*Estado Novo*) , which brought together the different expressions of the Portuguese right, as these developed throughout the century, through the civil war in Spain , the Second World War and the liberation struggles of the colonized peoples, was eroded by the effects of the colonial war and political emergence of a sector of the bourgeoisie whose “developmentalism” was less and less in tune with the regime of corporate representation (integrating both the employers’ guilds and the loyal trade unions) with its control over industry that kept an iron grip on all aspects of production. Even the monopoly groups, although still dependent on colonial extraction, from the sixties became increasingly interested in European markets, and pushed for reforms that deepened the cracks in the regime’s political base.

Since the late 1960s, Portugal had experienced a growing wave of struggles. The universities were paralysed or closed; the repression affected hundreds of high school students. Independent forms of union organization took shape and gave birth to the *Intersindical* (later the CGTP). In the last six months alone of the dictatorship, a hundred thousand workers in industry and services took strike action. The order of the Estado Novo had become highly unstable. Those on “top”, like those “below”, felt the end was coming.

The intensification of the war, with the extension of its fronts, led to a huge expansion of the army, which required the promotion to middle officer rank of young people called up under conscription, and coming straight from radicalizing student milieux. These soldiers were to play their part in preparing the 25 April, and in the struggles that followed.

In 1973, the Socialist Party was formed, around Mario Soares, in anticipation of the end of the regime, determined to exploit the possibilities opened up by its relations with foreign powers. The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which of all the CPs in western Europe was the most closely aligned with the USSR, remained the main point of reference for the underground resistance; it was able to bring together a broad range of political sectors, for example around the fronts set up to take part in the dictatorship’s tightly controlled elections. In the last decade of the dictatorship, the PCP found itself facing myriad formations to its left, coming out of the student mobilizations and able to dialogue with the working-class radicalization.

Despite being a “pressure cooker”, in the words of Fernando Rosas, Portugal in 1973 and early 1974 was not experiencing a pre-insurrectionary situation. It would be the military coup that, largely unwittingly, would transform the way the people took part in the process. The last attempts to bolster state authority came from within the regime, resulting in the formation of a federalist political alliance with neo-colonial pretentions, strong relations with the Western powers and a disposition towards European integration. General Spinola was at the centre of this project, which was represented in the dictatorship’s parliament by figures who would later found the parties of the post-25 April right, the CDS and the PSD. The Prime Minister, Marcello Caetano, who had replaced Oliveira Salazar in 1968 with the promise of a political opening, ended up aligning himself with the African colonialist interests and the ultra-right, marginalizing the “liberalizing” sector.

A number of middle-ranking military officers, exhausted by the war effort, organized the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), initially based on essentially corporate demands. On the eve of the coup, they sought political support at the top of the hierarchy and received it – from the Chief of the Armed Forces, Costa Gomes, and his deputy, Antonio Spinola, a former governor of Guinea.

Year One

The military uprising of April 25 encountered no serious resistance – those who did not support it, did not fight against it either (except at the headquarters of the political police, where shots were fired at civilians in the centre of Lisbon). General Spinola was handed power by Marcello Caetano, who went into exile. In the capital, a few hours after the tanks moved into the Lower City, the only movement was that of people celebrating with their carnations; it was the first sign of disobedience towards the new power, which had instructed the population not to leave their homes.

After removing from the MFA's programme the self-determination of the peoples of the colonies, Spinola emphasized in his speech to the nation that the first task of the new power would be "to ensure the survival of the nation and its sovereignty across several continents". However, the first few weeks after the 25 April soon revealed the failure of attempts to keep the apparatus of political repression functioning and assert any kind of stable bourgeois leadership over the political process underway. The new power spoke with many voices; it was divided between the Junta of National Salvation (where Spinola presided over the remains of the old military hierarchy) and the Council of State, which included the officers of the MFA. Spinola made an attempt to maintain social order (with the suppression of the postal strike) and quickly to consolidate his support base (the big bourgeois families formed the Movement for the Development of Enterprise and Society, with a promise to create immediately a hundred thousand jobs). But the new power lacked political coherence and the force of arms it needed to ensure that the weak movements of economic groups could lead to any kind of normality.

This almost total absence of repression and the signs of support from some sectors of the MFA itself for the mass movement opened the floodgates of popular initiative and triggered the Portuguese revolution. In the colonies, fighting ceased and the colonial troops and liberation forces began to fraternize. In the metropolis, new democratic rights were won in practice much more quickly than they could be formally recognized. This was the case with the right to strike, the minimum wage, reduced working hours, holidays and the purging from workplaces of those still loyal to the fallen regime or seeking to sabotage the changes underway. With no state force behind him, and increasingly dependent on the turbulent MFA Assembly, Spinola made his final political gesture with an appeal, in September 1974, to the "silent majority" to mobilize. Its failure only increased popular confidence for the next cycle. The sectors favouring continuity with the old hierarchy and the intervention of the armed forces in the process of class struggle were marginalized. The general with the monocle soon joined Marcello Caetano in Brazil .

Two conflicting paths

The revolution was to last nineteen months, from April 1974 to November 1975, and would leave lasting marks on Portuguese democracy, both in terms of its constitutional shape and its practical exercise of political freedoms.

Two conflicting paths collided, crossed and combined in those months. One, centred on the MFA, involved a permanent attempt to rehabilitate a minimally efficient centre of state power. Throughout almost the entire revolutionary period, the main forces of the left, the PCP and the SP, followed this path, seeking to influence the development of the new power and, in particular, a portion of this. In seeking such institutional respectability, the PCP even tried to demobilize what it considered "wild-cat" strikes, and insisted that leaving NATO was not a political

priority. At the same time, fearing that general elections in a country like Portugal could produce unfavourable results, it emphasised the “institutionalization” of the MFA as a legitimate state body, alongside the still-to-be elected Constituent Assembly. As for the Socialist Party, it prepared for elections, as the key to rebuilding a state power capable of subduing the popular dynamic. Soares combined proclamations of socialism (which were shared right across the political spectrum) with the slogan “Europe is with Us”, banking on integration into the European Common Market, whose most powerful members provided significant support.

The other path was that of real democracy, the direct popular involvement and self-organization of the masses, who confronted their immediate needs and the pressure of the crisis (this was shortly after the oil shock of 1973) by creating their own political culture and structures of intervention. This was a broad torrent that far overflowed the banks of state authority, taking on myriad forms: the squatter movements of those crammed into slums, initiatives by people to build their own neighbourhoods, social services, schools, health centres and community organizations, as well as businesses under workers’ self-management and producer cooperatives on occupied farmlands. Each of these initiatives experienced contradictions, dilemmas and conflicts, as well as achievements of profound and lasting significance. They represented a dramatic awakening of important parts of a backward and depoliticised society, where self -organization of the working class had been practically invisible for four decades; in a matter of days and weeks they learnt to carry out a revolution, taking charge right from the start of the heart of the system - property, be it in land, real estate, or industry.

This sudden change in all dimensions of social life was the great historical trauma that the Portuguese bourgeoisie would never overcome. The climax came after 11 March 1975, the date of a failed military putsch, also involving General Spinola, which led to an acceleration of the revolutionary process. Many business leaders were charged with economic sabotage and imprisoned or sent into exile. Decrees were adopted on land reform and the nationalization of the banks (the latter measure, seen as essential to keep the financial system operating, was passed with the votes of even the PSD, on the right). With the dissolution of several far-right groups, networks of anti-communist terrorists developed across the border in the Spanish state, supported by sectors of the Portuguese Catholic hierarchy; these carried out hundreds of attacks against activists and offices of the PCP and the radical left, and even some murders.

The split in the MFA and the preparation of 25 November

These two paths were to coexist for a whole year, a year that profoundly transformed the country. But it was especially after the elections on 25 April 1975 that the economic and political impasses of the Portuguese revolution opened up the split between two conflicting political camps.

In these first elections, on a very high turnout, the Socialist Party won most votes (38 %). If you take into account the votes for the communist parties (PCP + MDP, 16.5%) and the radical left (4 %), the right-wing parties (PSD + CDS, 34 %) lagged well behind. But the political alignments that developed following the elections took a different form, based primarily on the nature of the state power that for six months was negotiated between the MFA and the parties represented in the Constituent Assembly and the government.

The MFA’s role as intermediary between the weakened authority of the state and the mass movement had reached its limit. The clash between different camps in the class struggle was reflected in the different components of the military movement – the “Spinolistas” (on the right), the “group of nine” (aligned with the SP), the “gonçalvistas” (aligned with the PCP), the Continental Operational Command (COPCON, led by Otelo). The “Hot Summer” of 1975 was one of confrontation between two opposing political camps.

On the one hand, there was the political role of the mobilized sectors of society, which went as far as experimenting with forms of “dual power” (in June 1975, for example, the first popular assembly was held in Lisbon, at the military engineers’ regiment, bringing together more than fifty neighbourhood committees and 26 workers' councils); this accentuated the crisis of command in the military, with the formation of “Soldiers United Will Win” (SUV) groups and because of the action of COPCON itself.

The latter was closely linked to the most advanced mass actions. These reached their climax with the occupation of military installations and a number of demonstrations called by the SUV: on 10 September in Porto, when a march of forty thousand people was headed by two thousand soldiers; on 25 September, when another march about a hundred thousand strong included hundreds of soldiers in uniform from fifteen different units. At the end of the demonstration, dozens of buses were diverted to take the protesters to the Trafaria prison, where they released soldiers who had been imprisoned for belonging to the SUV. But despite its growing momentum, this broad movement was still a long way from producing a revolutionary political leadership able to develop a social and political alliance which enjoyed majority support and expressed the independent initiative of the people.

On the other hand, the ones who did unite and develop alliances were precisely those who, under a variety of banners, sought to preserve and restore that bastion of order, the authority of the State. This was after all the only sector that, as Francisco LouçÃ£ says, “had power and fought for power“ (*Rehearsal for a Revolution*, 1984).

The outcome of this confrontation came on 25 November, the date of the military revolt that brought together the political and military components of the right and the SP under the command of Eanes (“the group of nine”), who would become president with the support of these same sectors. From then on, the PCP would be oil in the wheels of a negotiated democracy. In its texts, the party explains clearly which side it was not on during the critical moments of the Portuguese revolution: “the Central Committee of the PC draws attention to the idealistic illusions that have led some sectors to see in these forms of popular organization the future bodies of State power. It also draws attention to the abstract theorizing about â€˜people’s power’, which creates the illusion of the existence of a popular political power in opposition to the military and governmental power” (*Avante!*, 16/12/1975). Already defeated, this sector based on "idealistic illusions", nonetheless won 16.5% of the votes in the presidential elections of 1976, for its candidate, Lt. Col. Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho (more than double the vote achieved by the PCP’s candidate, Octavio Pato). [1]

The State remakes the Portuguese bourgeoisie

The years following the revolutionary period saw the reorganization of production conditions, within the framework of a balance of forces reshaped during the revolution and the implementation in law of some of the “achievements” of the process. The winds of April would also blow through the field of social rights, with the development of Social Security and the National Health Service, as well as advances in the freedom and social status of women. The nationalizations of 1975 left a public sector made up of more than eighty companies and another 140 with state participation; it included 90% of banking and most of the transport, communications and energy sectors – in all about a quarter of GDP. Land reform, which in 1975 took over 1.2 million hectares and affected over forty thousand agricultural workers (and many more indirectly), lasted for another decade, even though it was concentrated in the southern region of Alentejo. Not until 1977 was the first fall in real wages recorded.

For over a decade and a half, the economy would continue to be characterized by strong state intervention, with a ruling class that remained weak and incapable, politically and financially, of taking possession of the main public companies. The State continued to manage the economic system and assumed its historical role as incubator and protector of the Portuguese bourgeoisie. It was under state direction that the power of the bourgeoisie was rebuilt.

This period of transition came to an end when Portugal joined the European Economic Community in 1986. Throughout the eighties, foreign dependence increased and the model of low wages and specialization in labour-intensive, low-tech sectors was consolidated. This remains true, even with the massive expansion of universities and education in general (illiteracy was 40% in 1974). The rapid economic growth between 1974 and 2004 (3.5% per year) was based mainly on mobilizing more labour, especially that of women.

European integration and absolute majorities for the right (with the governments of Cavaco Silva and the PSD), created the conditions for a new cycle, one of privatizations, with the necessary constitutional amendments to overturn the legally “irreversible” nationalizations. The Right, and later the SP, handed over control of much of the banking system to the old capitalist families of dictatorship (Champalimaud, EspÃ-rito Santo, Mello). This was the key to controlling the subsequent phase of privatizations. The privatized banks became the basis for the huge debts of both old and new economic groups (Sonae, Amorim, Jerónimo Martins, construction) that piled into the major business sectors of the turn of the century: the monopoly income from energy and telecommunications, mass distribution and retail, and real estate.

It was precisely real estate and construction that supported domestic demand during this long period of wage squeeze. The latter was offset by making it easier for households to borrow from private domestic banks, while these borrowed from the European banking system. Between 1991 and 2010, the number of dwellings in Portugal grew at an average of 80,000 new homes a year, the equivalent of a city the size of Coimbra. This whole model hinged on substantial public investment, mainly in infrastructure and inflated spending, for example on football stadiums.

The neoliberal strategy imposed from Europe, reduced the capacity of the Portuguese economy, which became increasingly dependent on capital, with more and more debts and less and less autonomy. The ability to export was compromised by the conditions of accession to the single currency, while foreign investment was limited to assembly lines with little value added. The ruling class sought its comfort zone in an economy that was highly vulnerable to recession, and which collapsed under the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and international speculation in Portuguese public debt.

The rest of the story is well known: the 2011 external intervention triggered a social counter -revolution of unimagined proportions and a process of transfer of wealth unprecedented in the country’s history. The protected sectors of the economy continue to produce growing fortunes, while compared with the situation in 2009, the percentage of population living below the poverty line increased from 18% to 25%. The period of the troika saw the most intense cycle of privatizations since the revolution, handing over to foreign capital the airports, control of the energy system, a third of the insurance market and the post office. And the list of privatizations planned for 2014 extends from air travel to suburban railway lines and the treatment of solid waste in the cities.

The unemployment figures are barely disguised by state initiatives that remove a significant portion of the unemployed from the statistics, and especially by the forced exodus of over one hundred thousand Portuguese per year. At the same time, more than half of those who still had a job received the minimum wage (485 Euros) or suffered pay cuts of 23%. In Portugal there are 5.5 million people able to work. 1.2 million are unemployed or have emigrated. Nearly one million work less than ten hours a week. One million work more than forty hours a week.

“All that is solid” ...

The Portuguese experience over the last 40 years conjures up the bitter memory of the “irreversibility” of the popular conquests included in the 1976 Constitution. The huge fright suffered by the Portuguese oligarchy during that short period was the result of a “hot” democratic transition (unlike the “cold” one in the Spanish state). Within that, after the

masses first erupted on the social and political stage in April and May 1974, there appeared signs of the “old mole” of socialist revolution at work, with forays into private property and control over both territory and businesses. But the order of the State itself was never lost (however many of its parts seemed to have been “lost” at one point or another). Slowly, patiently, absorbing partial victories and historic advances, it was able to restore consensus, that is, the full control of the ruling class.

With the number of people leaving Portugal now back to the level of the sixties (when malnutrition and war forced hundreds of thousands of Portuguese to flee their country), the current Portuguese tragedy finally puts paid to the gradualist illusions of some on the left. Those who thought the pre-revolutionary crisis of 1974-75 might be the beginning of a democratic and social modernization of the country, in line with the PCP’s doctrine of the sixties on the tasks of the democratic, anti-monopolistic revolution, can today see exactly what an “advanced democracy” under the sway of capital looks like.

For those on the left who today struggle for a majority of society to break with the blackmail of the creditors, who advocate nationalizing the banks and the strategic sectors of the economy to achieve economic self-determination and to break with the mechanisms that constrain democracy – like the European treaties and NATO’s militarism - the experience of the pre - revolutionary crisis of 1974-75 continues to be an absolutely fundamental lesson about the nature of the power of the bourgeoisie, and its ability to survive, adapt and restructure.

In those nineteen months that were so unique in Portuguese history, because of the scale of mass involvement in the revolutionary process, the people won a dignity they had never had before, and changed the face of the country. That is why, even in the dark times that workers face today – or especially in these times – the streets of Portugal continue to reverberate with the song that, in the early hours of April 25, gave the signal to the rebels to leave their barracks, José Afonso’s “GrÃ¢ndola, Vila Morena”.

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[1] On the issue of decolonization, which is not dealt with in this text, we repeat a passage from the book, *O Socialismo, a TransiçÃ£o e o Caso PortuguÃªs* (1976), in which Joao Martins Pereira explains why his own analysis gives so little space to the topic: “the problem of decolonization and Portugal’s geo-strategic position were hugely important factors in the â€˜party game’ (...) But how could Portuguese workers understand â€˜the class struggle on a world scale’, when these parties concealed from them what was really going on in the ex-colonies, constrained as they were by what they believed to be (or really were) the U.S., Russian or Chinese strategies for those parts of the world? (In the everyday political turmoil of revolution), who could have realized the part that would be played in preparing the 25 November, by the *returnee*s (half a million Portuguese inhabitants of the former colonies disembarked in Lisbon in the course of 1975), and by the â€˜high-level talks’ on recognition of the MPLA government in Angola.”