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Portugal

Forty years later: the grandeur and the limits of the Portuguese Revolution

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On April 25, Portugal will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the “Carnation Revolution”. The last example of a popular and radical uprising in western Europe, it brought down the oldest dictatorship on the continent and deepened to the point of threatening the power of the bourgeoisie. At a time when the capitalist offensive is accelerating throughout Europe, particularly in the countries of southern Europe, this is a very cumbersome spectre for the Portuguese ruling class and the Troika (European Commission, ECB and IMF), which fears nothing so much as the eruption of the popular classes onto the political and social stage.

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From April 1974 to November 1975, the Portuguese working class sought to break the state apparatus inherited from the Salazar regime and to invent roads towards a democratic socialism in the conditions of economic backwardness and political repression bequeathed by a dictatorship that had held power for over forty years. Rooted partly on the terrain of contradictions specific to Portuguese colonialism, the revolution began on April 25, 1974 by a revolt of captains organized in the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), before becoming radicalized by leaps and bounds - through increasing self-organization in the workplaces and the neighborhoods, among the soldiers and the peasants - in response to the successive attempts of the ruling class to stop its forward march.

It took all the counter-revolutionary determination of the bourgeoisie, based on conservative factions of the army and on the ideological power of the Church, to push back popular militancy and the rise of a broad anti-capitalist consciousness. The responsibility also lies with the two major parties of the Portuguese Left, each in its own way: whereas the Socialist Party (PSP) fully assumed the task of managing loyally the interests of the bourgeoisie and maintaining the structures of the capitalist state, the Communist Party (PCP) devoted much of its energy to diverting the proletariat from any autonomous political action and to limiting the objectives of the struggle, seeking to undermine the growing audience of the far-left groups (Maoists and Trotskyists).

A revolution with deep roots

A revolution is never a flash of lightning in a clear blue sky; it announces its coming through multiple warning signs that most often only become legible as such after the fact, once the popular uprising has begun.

This difficulty in interpreting the silent modification of the balance of forces and the convulsions of popular anger explains why genuinely revolutionary organizations rarely take the initiative during the early stages of a revolution and may have the greatest difficulty in conquering influence within mass movements, especially when they are faced with more structured parties that have superior financial resources, regular access to the mainstream media and an audience that has been won over many years.

The Portuguese Revolution plunged its roots in the crisis of the Salazar regime. A fascist dictatorship based on a reactionary ideology which would serve as inspiration for the Vichy regime, the *Estado novo* (“New State”) presents original features in comparison with the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, features that help to explain both its longevity and its weakness at the moment of its crisis in the early 1970s.

If the regime founded in 1933 by Salazar [1] lasted so long, it is because it succeeded in uniting the various factions of the Portuguese ruling class around a political project based on the repression of any trade-union and political

opposition [2], ensuring the super-exploitation of the proletariat and the defence of big landed property, but also on the continuation of a particularly brutal colonial rule.

Nevertheless, unlike the dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler, the advent and the installation of this dictatorship was not the product of a political radicalization of the petty bourgeoisie or a fraction of the bourgeoisie, expressed in mass fascist parties fighting the organizations of the working class. It was only once the state apparatus had been put in place by Salazar that he deemed it appropriate to develop a single party - the National Union, which later became the National People's Action - which never had the vigour and the autonomy of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in Germany.

Not only did the regime not really succeed in inspiring mass support for its policies, but the bourgeoisie remained incapable of structuring itself in an autonomous way in the political sphere. This partly explains its stupefaction in the period following April 25, 1974, unable as it was to find a capitalist solution to the political crisis triggered by the revolt of the captains.

But it was essentially the colonial wars, which began in 1961, that were going to upset the internal equilibriums of the *Estado novo*, by becoming intertwined with the crisis of the regime opened up by the candidacy of General Humberto Delgado in the presidential election of 1958. Delgado succeeded in uniting around his name the antifascist opposition, restructured and revitalized after the Second World War, but the election was characterized by massive electoral fraud and was followed by the assassination of Delgado in 1965.

At that point the regime revealed itself to everyone in its true light: a violent dictatorship, repressing by murder, imprisonment or exile any hint of opposition or autonomy. In relation to the size of the country, the wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau would cost in lives and money twice as much as did the Vietnam War for the United States, [3], reflecting the unprecedented violence of a regime clinging to its colonial possessions.

The dictatorship and its contradictions

Not only was the Portuguese army beginning to suffer defeats by national liberation movements, pushing the *Estado novo* to increase significantly its military spending (and limiting de facto government investment at home). These wars eventually led to great war-weariness: in the army, on the part of the soldiers and of the officers who made up the intermediate hierarchy, but also in the population. Adding to the prevailing poverty and repression, the refusal to go and fight to defend the colonies caused a huge movement of emigration in the early 1970s; nearly a quarter of the Portuguese population moved to other countries.

From September 1973, captains organized to formulate their demands; to start with they were strictly professional and corporate, but they rapidly took on a broader character, going so far as to question the continued existence of the fascist dictatorship. The MFA was thus the product of the failures of the colonial war and of the social frustration of these "middle cadres" of the army, but also of the pressure that the struggles of workers, peasants and students began to exert in Portugal.

By this time headed by Marcelo Caetano [4], the system was characterized in the early 1970s by a high level of economic imbalances and social tensions. Having become dependent on foreign capital due to the colonial wars and its integration in 1960 into the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) [5], which preceded a free trade agreement with the EEC signed in 1973, Portugal occupied a subordinate position in the international division of labour, and could only claim as a "comparative advantage" for imperialist capital the violent repression of the working class that made it possible to artificially lower wages.

There was the development of an export industry, which coexisted with maintaining a largely archaic agriculture, based - especially in the Alentejo - on huge estates owned by landowners who maintained law and order in the countryside. Portugal experienced a real industrial development: the secondary sector employed, in 1969, 35.5 per cent of the working population, against 26.5 per cent in 1950. Similarly, the percentage of waged workers - including manual workers, technicians, etc. - went from 53.6 to 74.7 per cent of the working population, reaching 82.3 per cent in Porto and 86.5 per cent in Lisbon.

The capitalist modernization of the Portuguese economy thus favoured the emergence of an urban working class which, in the course of its struggles, became aware of its strength and organized itself (in 1970 the Intersyndicale trade-union confederation organized two million workers). The years 1968-1969 were the scene of large-scale protest movements in the main sectors where the working class was concentrated: urban transport, TAP (airline) Lisnave (shipyards), metallurgy, the car industry, canning, etc. Struggles broke out among youth but also among the peasants of the Alentejo, who in 1962 had managed to win the 8-hour day thanks to the mobilization of 300,000 agricultural workers.

April 25, 1974: military action and popular outbreak

It was in this context that the MFA was created clandestinely in March 1974, in relative independence with respect to the military high command. Composed mostly of junior officers and traversed by all the currents of the anti-fascist opposition (from liberal democrats to the far left, passing by social democracy and the Communist Party) it was the organization that would prepare and execute successfully the military initiative of April 25.

At 25 minutes after midnight, the famous song "Grand-Á-la, Vila Morena" - banned by the regime - was broadcast on Radio Renaissance to announce the launching of the action. Around 3 a.m., the premises of the main radio stations were occupied, which made it possible to broadcast a series of communiqués in the following hours, as well as the airports of Lisbon and Porto. The headquarters of the military regions of the two cities, but also the ministries, the offices of the police (PSP) and the Bank of Portugal were besieged by the troops led by the MFA.

An ultimatum was addressed to Caetano who, having taken refuge in the Carmo barracks in the centre of Lisbon, only agreed to resign at 4.30 in the afternoon, demanding to hand over the leadership of the country to a superior officer, who was not part of the MFA, so that power "did not fall into the street": Antonio de Spínola, a general who had been dismissed two months previously because of his (very measured) opposition to the regime's policy in the colonies.

However, we cannot reduce April 25 to a mere putsch, in which some saw the hand of the CIA or the Bilderberg group, nor even to a well-conducted series of military operations. Because the Portuguese population spontaneously took to the streets at dawn to support the action of the MFA (going so far as to offer carnations to the soldiers), to celebrate the end of the dictatorship and to ensure that this victory was not stolen from them, contradicting the communiqués of the MFA inviting them to "stay calm and go home."

Moreover, a captain of the MFA, Maia de Santarem, said afterwards: "We came to the conclusion that something had to be done, because if we did not do it, it would be the people who would. We had the feeling that we were walking towards an abyss and that this abyss would lead to a civil war in which the people would take up arms." Even if that probably does not reflect the very broad range of views within the MFA, it seems clear that it had not foreseen the extent of street protests or desired such a popular outbreak.

The military insurgents could not do without the Portuguese people, who immediately showed great initiative in seeking to bring down the repressive apparatus of the regime, which was as hated as it was imposing [6]. Thus there emerged an "April 25 from below" [7]: in Lisbon demonstrators gathered in front of the barracks of the GNR (National Republican Guard) where Caetano had taken refuge, besieged the headquarters of the PIDE secret police (who fired into the crowd) and the offices of the ruling party, invaded and sacked the building of the censorship authorities, encircled the Caxias prison until they had obtained the release of all political prisoners (including those that Spínola wanted to keep locked up because of the attacks they had committed) .

Almost everywhere in the country the same scenes of jubilation were to be seen, reflecting the euphoria of finally seeing the dictatorship fall, but also the popular vigilance against a transition that would just exchange one set of leaders for another, while maintaining intact the instruments of repression and censorship. The people of Lisbon did not, however, manage to stop Caetano from quietly escaping, escorted by officers of the MFA, and from leaving power in the hands of General Spínola.

Class struggles in the Portuguese revolution

Spínola was then the leader on whom the Portuguese bourgeoisie was counting: his personal trajectory reassured all those who aspired to a refurbishing of the system and a better integration of Portuguese capital in the global market; in short, a revolution without revolution. Spínola had fought as a volunteer on the Francoist side during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and then with the Nazi troops on the Eastern Front during the battle of Stalingrad. He had been a loyal servant of the *Estado novo* in its colonial wars (which ensured him the support of the upper layers of the military hierarchy). He was also close to Portuguese financial circles, having frequented the salons of the rich capitalist Champalimaud family. So he appeared to the ruling class as the only solution for the maintenance of calm in the country.

And in fact the "monocled general" did make every effort to limit the popular combativeness which manifested itself in the days following April 25 (especially during the May 1st demonstration, which assembled between 300,000 and 500,000 people). Not only did Spínola fail, but his attempts to increase his power in order to prevent decolonization and suppress the strikes that multiplied during the months of May-June 1974, led to mass movements of increasing magnitude. On 16 May and 28 September 1974 and on 11 March 1975, the ruling classes suffered resounding defeats that eventually compelled Spínola to flee to Spain, where he founded a far-right organization whose objective was to impose an authoritarian regime.

On March 11, the attempted putsch was defeated by the population, which formed pickets in front of the barracks, by the soldiers of the left wing of the MFA who organized to repel the attacks of the putschists and by the workers who went on strike throughout the country, at the call of the Intersindicale (which furthermore organized very large demonstrations in the evening). This popular victory represented a turning point in the revolution: not only did the failure of Spínolism leave the bourgeoisie without a political solution or a strategic perspective (at least temporarily), but the Portuguese workers gained in confidence and became politicized.

From April 1974 to November 1975, the Portuguese workers would thus reconnect with the fighting traditions of a militant workers' movement which, under the First Republic (1910-1926), had organized no less than 158 general strikes (almost ten per year!) before being brutally suppressed after the military coup of 1926. Even though the rise of an anticapitalist consciousness remained very uneven from one sector to another and from one region to another, self-organization undeniably progressed.

From May 1974 occupations of empty houses or apartments by poor families were organized, prior to the

development of commissions of residents (*moradores*) in the cities. In the countryside, especially in the Alentejo, farm workers organized to win a genuine agrarian reform. In the workplaces, strikes and occupations were accompanied by the formation of workers' commissions. Finally, we witnessed the emergence in August 1975 of the SUV ("Soldiers united will win") committees, which sought to promote the self-organization and the politicization of soldiers.

These initiatives remained limited to a minority and were not structured nationally, so that we cannot speak of a situation of "dual power" without indulging in wishful thinking. Could they have been the expression of an embryonic popular power? Probably, at least if they had not been weakened by the sectarianism of some Maoist movements and the hostility of the reformist organizations, especially the PCP, which enjoyed by far the strongest presence in the working class and in the unions, only consenting to participate in the workers' commissions from fear of losing ground to the far left, whose audience was growing.

It remains true that the committees of workers, residents and soldiers not only reflected the radicalization of mass movements in response to the counter-revolutionary intentions of the ruling classes, but was a reminder that the confrontation with the bourgeoisie and its state can only be undertaken in favourable conditions if the class of the exploited and oppressed succeeds in developing, in the very course of the revolutionary crisis, democratic instruments of struggle which can be transformed into organs of an alternative power to the capitalist state, from the local to the national level.

The ruling classes take things back in hand

Once Spínola had been taken out of the equation by the victory of March 11, it was largely within the MFA - whose prestige, resulting from April 25, remained very high throughout 1975 - that the social and political contradictions that emerged from the revolutionary process would find expression, and it was there that the question of power would be posed. In fact, the MFA laid claim to the leadership of the revolutionary process: in March this was institutionalized through the creation of the Council of the Revolution and the MFA made a turn to the left.

Under the pressure of the workers, the Council of Ministers decided to implement an agrarian reform (which remained very incomplete but would be accompanied by an increase in land occupations) and decreed, between March and August 1975, a series of nationalizations in key sectors of the Portuguese economy (banking, insurance, electricity, transport, steel, oil companies, tobacco, cement, etc.), without, however, posing the questions that were decisive, from the revolutionary point of view: the compensation of the former owners and workers' control over the management of the nationalized enterprises.

It would take too long to go over again the months between this left turn in the revolution and the putsch on 25 and 26 November 1975, led by the right and far-right fractions of the military hierarchy and the MFA, in association with the Socialist Party, the bourgeois parties and President Costa Gomes. The move came after an acceleration of workers' struggles, which were beginning to escape the control of the reformist apparatuses.

In particular, on 12 November, a demonstration of construction workers surrounded the National Assembly, sequestering the members of parliament for 36 hours until they accepted their demands. On 16 November, a demonstration called by the workers' commissions and supported by the FUR (Revolutionary United Front) and the PCP mobilized 100,000 people in Lisbon. The bourgeoisie understood that only a decisive initiative could enable it to change the balance of forces in its favour, thus taking preventive action against a possible popular insurrection.

Without the shilly-shallying of the MFA left, which however enjoyed a large military superiority, and without the refusal

of the PCP to launch a working-class counter-offensive, the putsch would probably not have succeeded or would have led to a situation of military and political confrontation. From November 25, a state of siege was decreed and the publication of the press was forbidden: the putschists occupied some strategic points but failed to take the barracks of the military police (which was dominated by the far left).

Rather than accepting the fight and launching their forces into action, the leaders of the MFA left went to the presidential palace to negotiate their own surrender. The Portuguese revolution would not recover from such a setback: the bourgeoisie regained confidence in its own strength, relying on the PSP to ensure the process of normalization and to put an end to the embryos of popular power that had emerged in the preceding months.

"The carnations have been cut"

[8]

Ultimately, it is probably in both the advances made and the limitations of the forms of self-organization that we should look for the reasons for the success of the counter-offensive by the ruling classes. The rank-and-file commissions (and the far-left parties) were too weak to do what the PCP did not want to do, that is to know how to resist an offensive aimed at restoring the full authority of the state, but were too developed not to frighten the bourgeoisie, the parties of the reformist left (PSP and PCP) and the left wing of the MFA, which remained attached to the military hierarchy and was frontally opposed to any movement of self-organization of soldiers.

Nothing illustrates this better than the declaration of Mario Soares, the principal leader of the PSP, which is worth quoting at length in order to measure the fear, the contempt and the violent hostility shown by the reformist leaders towards workers when they sought to organize themselves and to do without the professional politicians:

In the towns and cities, [...] people stopped producing for a yes or a no, an assembly, a discussion or a "demo" (...) In the countryside - in the Alentejo essentially - they confused agrarian reform and anarchy, everywhere they occupied land that should not have been occupied (...). It was time to restore order before others took the responsibility of doing so under the leadership of a providential Pinochet. (...) So what was the meaning of this monstrous disorder, this lack of discipline, this generalized subversion? What were these soviets of soldiers and sailors, straight out of the garrisons of Petrograd and Kronstadt, doing in the Portugal of 1975 (...)? Where was this anarchy taking us? How could we not see, not understand the rage of most of the officers faced with scruffy soldiers who saluted with a clenched fist? [9].

The regression following the decisive days of November 1975 was as rapid as it was profound. Not only were the achievements of the revolution being challenged, but the Right returned to power in 1979 in the person of Sa Carneiro, who had distinguished himself before the revolution by his membership of the ruling party, the only recognized one, which led to his being elected to parliament under Caetano.

Worse, General Spínola was rehabilitated in 1978, elevated to the title of marshal and appointed chairman of the commission responsible for organizing the official commemoration of the 10th anniversary of a popular revolution that he had never wanted. In contrast, the man who had led the military action of 25 April 1974 and was subsequently the principal figure of the MFA left, Otelo de Carvalho, was sentenced in 1987 to 15 years in prison for his alleged involvement in a clandestine armed organization (the Popular Forces of 25 April).

The contrasting destinies of these two prominent figures of the Portuguese Revolution suffice to cast full light on the Thermidorian reaction that followed the coup of 26 November 1975, a reaction whose magnitude was a measure of a revolution which frightened the Portuguese ruling class and shook Europe for a year and a half.

Forty years later: the grandeur and the limits of the Portuguese Revolution

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[1] Salazar was first of all appointed Minister of Finance in 1929, following the military coup of 1926. He became Prime Minister in 1932, a position he held until 1968.

[2] Whereas the Portuguese CGT - headed at the time by anarchists - claimed to have 120,000 members at the beginning of the twentieth century, it had only 15,000 members in 1940. In the political field, the Socialist Party - established in 1875 - was reduced to nothing; as for the Communist Party it numbered only 29 members in 1929, according to Alvaro Cunhal, its general secretary from 1961 to 1992.

[3] Francisco Louça, "Il y a dix ans, le 25 avril, 1974, la chute de la dictature," *Inprecor*, No. 172, April 1984, page 17.

[4] In 1968 Caetano had succeeded Salazar, who was seriously ill, as Prime Minister.

[5] EFTA was a free trade zone composed of Britain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Austria and Switzerland.

[6] The political police (PIDE) was composed of 22,000 officers and 200,000 informants, representing about one in forty Portuguese.

[7] On this point, see the very well-documented book - whose political orientation is however debatable – by Gerard Filoche (then a leading member of the LCR), *Printemps Portugais*, Paris, Actéon, 1984.

[8] This is a reference to the excellent book by Charles Reeve (whose real name is Jorge Valadas), a Portuguese libertarian activist: *Les oeillettes sont coupés. Chroniques portugaises*, Paris, Editions Paris-Méditerranée, 1999.

[9] Mario Soares, *Portugal: quelle révolution? Entretiens avec Dominique Pouchin*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1976, pp. 183-185.