

1974: The Portuguese revolution

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In April 1974 rebel army units, under the leadership of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), overthrew the 44 year old Portuguese fascist dictatorship. The fascist regime of Caetano had few friends left, and as the rebel tanks moved through the streets they met little resistance. The workers of Lisbon welcomed the soldiers as liberators, placing carnations in the muzzles of their rifles.

Portuguese capitalism was facing a fundamental crisis. At home, its economy was chronically uncompetitive and in decline. The fascists had resisted industrialisation, rightly fearing the creation of a concentrated and powerful proletariat. Foreign investment had been flooding into the country since the early 1960s, attracted by the low wages and repression of trade union organisation. But domestic capital was weak and dominated by the banks. Exclusion from the EEC compounded this and threatened future foreign investment.

Discontent

In these circumstances, Portugal's colonial empire was a costly anachronism. Half of Portugal's GNP was eaten up fighting wars against national liberation movements in Africa and South East Asia. Discontent was rife throughout the army's ranks. Demands for a negotiated neo-colonial 'solution' in Portugal's favour led to the formation of the MFA. It was backed by Portugal's major capitalists.

When 100,000 workers took to the streets of Lisbon to celebrate May Day a week after the rebel coup, it was clear that discontent was not limited to the army commanders. In the first month 200,000 workers took strike action in 158 different workplaces.

The workers demanded better wages and a saneamento (purging) of fascist spies and bosses. In the absence of real trade unions, strikes and occupations were organised by factory, land and shanty town commissions. Many workers found themselves in control of their factories or farms after the bosses had fled. Others found they could veto every management decision. Over the next 18 months, this form of 'dual power' in the workplace spread.

The government first tried to restore order by granting a 30% pay increase, and by sacking 1,000 of the most visible fascists from industry. When this failed to stem the wave of strikes, the ruling junta brought the Communist Party (PCP) and Socialist Party (PSP) into the government. At the same time they tried to impose an anti-union law forbidding solidarity and political strikes. They simultaneously attempted to curb the freedom of the press, outlawing the reporting of workers' struggles.

Intact

The PCP was the main party of the industrial and rural working class. The PCP had organised the major acts of resistance during fascist rule, and had kept its clandestine party structures intact. The PCP consequently recruited massively in the workplaces during the first few months.

But despite its history of resistance to the fascists, the PCP was a Stalinist party, and did not represent the

interests of the working class against capitalism. The PCP leaders wanted to use their mass base and influence amongst the workers and soldiers to bargain for positions inside the capitalist state machine. This led the PCP to denounce strikes and support their suppression by the state.

As a result many militants turned to the recently formed PSP which was cynically supporting strikes in order to undercut the PCP. Other workers developed anti-party sentiments alongside illusions in the left wing of the MFA. The opportunities for a revolutionary party to be built in this period were immense.

The anti-union laws were introduced on 29th August 1974. Within days they were a dead letter. 5,000 helmeted workers from Lisnave ship yards, a PCP stronghold, downed tools and confronted the Continental Operations Command (COPCON), a section of the army which had been made responsible for internal order after the forced destruction of the fascist PIDE. The soldiers refused to fire on the workers. Discipline in the armed forces was beginning to crack as this report from one of the rank and file soldiers testifies:

"The commander soon saw that we were not going to follow orders, so he shut up . . . The following day in the barracks, things were more lively. Before morning assembly many comrades [soldiers] were up and shouting the slogans of the demo: 'The soldiers are the sons of the workers?', 'Down with capitalist exploitation?'"

Pressure

The Portuguese ruling class found itself in a deep crisis. They had not counted on the militant and creative resistance of the working class. Twice in the following months, on 28 September and 11 March 1975, the right wing of the MFA attempted coups in a desperate bid to restore order. Both times the workers mobilised to pressure the army rank and file to disobey their orders. The 11 March coup was defeated in the most devastating manner. Workers across Portugal, fearing a coup similar to the one by Pinochet in Chile, brought the country to a standstill blocking all the major roads, railways and airports. They set up checkpoints to track down the fascist organisers of the 'March of the Silent Majority', which had been intended to be the trigger for a counter-revolution.

From March 1975 onwards, an even more militant phase of the Portuguese revolution opened up. Elections to a Constituent Assembly on the anniversary of the MFA coup returned 58% of the vote for the parties of the working class, with the PSP gaining 38% support. The MFA's call for a blank ballot paper received an overwhelming rebuff as 93% of the population exercised their democratic right.

70% of industry was nationalised overnight as a result of militant strike action by the bankworkers. Many TV and radio stations and news papers came under workers' control in retaliation against the anti-working class line of the proprietors. Strikes, occupations, land and housing seizures mushroomed, as did the workers' commissions which organised and increasingly co-ordinated the action. In the army, a rank and file organisation, 'Soldiers United Will Win' (SUV), organised demonstrations of up to 100,000 in support of demands for better pay and an end to officers' privileges and petty rules.

Throughout 1975 successive provisional governments collapsed as they failed to find a 'solution' to the crisis. The tactics of the major parties shifted dramatically as a result.

The MFA's dream of a controlled democratisation and neo-colonial foreign policy was in tatters. Spínola fled the country. The MFA itself effectively split, its right wing adopting a Nasserite strategy copied from the liberation movements in Africa, based on a state capitalist project of stabilisation. The left wing, led by COPCON commander Otelo de Carvalho, attempted to build a base amongst the anti-party militants in the commissions and toyed with the idea of a Castroite solution--a 'left' military dictatorship.

The PCP decided that since it could not dampen down the workers' struggles, it should use them to bargain for more influence in the government, army and state bureaucracy. The Stalinists supported and led many of the strikes and occupations, but carefully kept control of the unions and stamped on all attempts to link up the commissions. In August the PCP attempted to tie the revolutionary left to a Popular United Front which declared its support for the anti-working class 5th Provisional Government.

Mario Soares' PSP was being squeezed by these tactics. Its preferred solution--a coalition civilian government with the openly bourgeois PPD--was blocked by the intense unpopularity of the latter. In the summer, the PSP launched a vicious anti-Communist campaign, collaborating with the fascists and their peasant base in the north. Over 60 PCP and trade union offices were attacked during this campaign to "save democracy".

Portugal was clearly heading for a confrontation. It came on 24th November 1975. The right wing in the army, in collaboration with the PSP, had slowly been regaining control of the armed forces. Sensing that De Carvalho was becoming isolated they ordered his removal from the command of the COPCON. The following day, the left wing paratroop regiment was detained in its barracks. Militants, led by building workers, surrounded the barracks, pleading for guns. But even the Lisnave workers only had 60 weapons between them. Eventually, the "left" Carvalho appeared with the prime minister to appeal for "calm". The workers were confused and paid the price for their illusions in left militarism. Soares declared that "democracy" had been saved:

"In one blow November 25th wiped out the suicidal inclinations of the far left and cut the ground from under the far right. Democracy emerged from the test victorious and strengthened."

In reality the counter-revolution had triumphed. Was this outcome avoidable? Was socialist revolution seriously on the order of the day in Western Europe in the 1970s?

The answer to both questions has to be yes.

The ruling class were divided and unable to continue to rule in the old way. The workers, in the cities and the countryside, were unwilling to carry on suffering in the old way. Effective "dual power" existed in many workplaces and to a certain extent in the state forces themselves. Far left groups, both Maoist and "Trotskyist", grew dramatically throughout 1975. But none of them were able to guide the struggle for workers' control towards the seizure of state power.

Correct

In particular, this would have involved the correct use of transitional demands and the united front tactic. The limits of workers' control in the workplaces was summed up by one shipyard activist:

"Even at Setenave we don't have workers' control. How can we if we don't control the banks? Our attitude is we want to know everything . . . We want to control decisions but we do not take responsibility. We don't believe we can have workers' control alone."

Demands for a state control of industry and the banks, under the control of the workers' commissions, should have been placed on the PCP and PSP. Despite their reactionary nature, these two reformist parties still held the allegiance of the vast majority of the working class. They should have been called on and pressured to form an anti-capitalist workers' and peasants' government based on, and accountable to, organisations of armed workers, soldiers and peasants. Such demands would have received enormous support from the mass working class base of these parties, and a revolutionary party could have grown rapidly as the reformist leaders failed to meet their promises.

Our task, and the only way to pay real homage to the revolutionary workers of 1974-75, is to ensure that a revolutionary communist international is built, so that when European bosses next cower in fear of the working class we can take that struggle to its conclusion--working class power!

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