

Portugal Government falls amidst mass protests

Danny Byrne

The collapse of the Portuguese 'Socialist Party' government of prime minister Jose Socrates came during a period of intense economic and social turmoil. Mass protests and strikes have given a picture of anger and unrest in the face of the austerity measures which the outgoing government, in collusion with the capitalist opposition has imposed, at the behest of the vultures of the financial markets.

The fall of the minority government came after 'PEC IV', a fourth austerity package, failed to pass through parliament in a vote on 23 March. The conservative PSD opposition party, after over a year of faithful support from the opposition benches for the first three 'PECs', voted against the measures, leading to the prime minister's resignation.

Attacks on workers

This move by the PSD was wholly opportunist. This party, along with its prospective coalition partners, the Christian Democrats, shares the same fundamental political approach, that of attacking working people to pay for the crisis.

However, their voting against the bill has another significance, being the result of the massive pressure exerted by the opinions and actions of the vast majority in Portugal, who have had enough of these savage policies. In the ten days immediately preceding the vote on PEC IV, a combined 400,000 people hit the



The general strike in November 2010.

streets on two Saturdays of mass protest. (Out of a population of 11.8 million).

On 12 March, 300,000 people (including 200,000 in Lisbon) joined the protests organised around "desolate generation", a loose campaigning group on a Facebook page, which demands an end to the precarious exploitative conditions forced on workers, and to massive youth unemployment.

Then, 19 March saw 100,000 demonstrate in Lisbon, called by the CGTP trade union federation. A wave of national strikes, of transport, postal and education workers

among others, accompanied this period of mass action.

These protest actions show both the massive opposition to Portuguese capitalism's agenda, but also the immense potential power of the masses when organised, and the organised workers' movement in particular.

On 24 November 2010 a one-day general strike paralysed the economy when over 85% of workers downed tools. It is this opposition and potential power of the working class that made the capitalist opposition fearful of voting for yet another PEC. This is something which should be registered by work-

ing people and socialists in Portugal and internationally: the Portuguese government has essentially been overthrown by the pressure of workers and youth in struggle.

And this is despite the limited strategy of the trade union leaders, who have effectively taken the path of demobilisation since the general strike. Imagine what would be possible with a really effective strategy, armed also with a working class political alternative.

The next likely government will not satisfy the demands of the majority. European Union/International Monetary Fund intervention

beckons, as Portugal looks set to follow Greece and Ireland in accepting 'bailout' packages, to facilitate the continued paying off of the bad debts of European bankers and speculators out of workers' taxes.

Such a package will be attached to brutal austerity as a condition, including the decisive elements of the PEC IV, but also with many more vicious measures included over a long period.

Socialismo Revolucionario (CWI* in Portugal) is opposed to any EU/IMF intervention, and calls for not a cent of public money to be spent repaying the debts of the super-rich. The nationalisation of the banks, resources and key sectors of the economy under democratic control, would allow massive investment to improve people's lives, instead of endless cuts.

The CWI calls for the left parties (Left Bloc and Communist Party - which in Portugal command over 20% of the vote combined) to put forward a united front based on such policies in the upcoming elections.

With Portugal the probable third bankrupt state to emerge from the chaos of the crisis in Europe, the disaster of the bosses' European Union is being further exposed. The only alternative is a socialist Europe based upon workers' solidarity.

*Committee for a Workers' International - the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party in England and Wales is affiliated.

University and college staff strike and call for joint action

University and College Union (UCU) members were on strike against attacks on pay and pensions, in a rolling week-long programme of action, ending on 24 March. These are extracts from some of the picket line reports which are also available on www.socialistparty.org.uk

There was an enthusiastic mood on most UCU pickets at Manchester University on 22 March. But UCU needs to name the dates for further strikes.

We should coordinate with other public sector workers if and when they go on strike, and there should be a public sector strike.

James Naish, Manchester university UCU, personal capacity

Leeds University lecturers were out in force. At Leeds Met, the link with the students was shown by the wall of pledges of support on the entrance to the library.

As well as large pickets around the city campus, over 30 picketed the Headingley campus.

At Leeds Trinity, 25 pickets were joined by members of the Socialist Students-led Leeds Trinity Students Against Cuts.

Leeds City College saw picket lines mounted at Horsforth, Thomas Danby, Park Lane and Technology campuses, whilst the Art College was also picketed.

A small but determined picket was mounted at Joseph Priestley College's Morley campus. At the Beeston campus, ten pickets stood outside the main entrance which was festooned with placards.

A 300 strong rally included workers from Wakefield, Hull and Skipton colleges as well as some from



Katrine Williams speaking at the Welsh rally photo SP Wales

Bradford University. Socialist Students members Ian Pattison and Alicia Blackett addressed the crowd. They highlighted the mood that now exists over the government's attacks on pensions that could be united in a public sector general strike that could topple this rotten Con-Dem coalition and their failed austerity attacks.

Iain Dalton, Yorkshire Socialist Students organiser

Scores of picket lines took place around the pre-1992 London universities on 22 March on the 'English leg' of the UCU Higher Education rolling strikes.

Socialist Party members offered our support to striking lecturers across the capital, from Brunel university in West London, to Queen Marys in East London, and Goldsmiths in the south.

Paula Mitchell, London Socialist Party

On 23 March students at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London demonstrated practical solidarity with our lecturers in support of the UCU strike. Around 30 students occupied the Faber building, shutting down human resources and other admin departments on the second day of the strike.

Management were taken completely by surprise. Security staff were ordered to keep one door closed and guarded while students wandered in freely through another door round the corner!

The occupation endorsed lecturers' demands and linked these to the wider attacks on the education sector. Occupiers received a message of 'massive thanks' from SOAS UCU for our efforts.

A SOAS student

Ian McCann, the UCU branch secretary at Southampton City College told the Socialist: "For a full time



Strikers demonstrate in Newcastle photo Elaine Brunskill

qualified teacher the proposed changes would mean paying an extra £80-£100 a month and then getting less back when you retire. There will also be a big effect from introducing career averages instead of final salary as well as the change in inflation figures from RPI to CPI cutting pensions by up to a third. We've also had a 64% vote on the pay issue. There has to be joint action across the public sector. UCU has set a lead, I expect the Hutton report to be implemented in full. If we don't all strike now it will be too late."

Lincoln saw three of its major education establishments shaken by strike action - the University of Lincoln, Lincoln College and Bishop Grosseteste University College.

The picketing staff welcomed Socialist Party members - I managed to sell a paper to every person on one of the larger picket lines.

Alex Moore

For more reports, workplace news and analysis go to www.socialistparty.org.uk

Katrine Williams, PCS Wales Chair, was one of the speakers who addressed the UCU rally outside the Wales Assembly building.

She got the best response when she called for united public sector strike action and explained PCS's position of no cuts whatsoever.

Sarah Mayo, UCU Coleg Glan Hafren

There are reports from the picket lines in Swansea, Newport, Cardiff on the Socialist Party Wales website:

www.socialistpartywales.org.uk