

New year sees continuing strike wave in Portugal

By Paul Mitchell
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The year 2019 is seeing a continuing strike wave in Portugal protesting the policies of the Socialist Party (PS) government.

The minority government of Prime Minister António Costa is being hit by multiple strikes protesting low wages and poor working conditions. In 2018, over 600 stoppages, some lasting weeks, were recorded, double the previous year.

Portugal's leading financial paper, *Jornal Económico*, has warned that the "increased social unrest" that marked the end of 2018 will continue this year "because the problems that inflamed workers in more than 20 sectors persist."

The paper noted that while Costa had "whistled in the air and said there was no reason for social alarm," in her Christmas message Health Minister Marta Temido declared that "all the instruments under the law" would be used, including "civil requisitions," in order "to ensure citizens do not become hostages to workers' demands."

Temido's outburst is proof of the anti-working-class nature of the PS government that the pseudo-left Left Bloc (BE) and Stalinist Communist Party (PCP) put in power.

So far this year strike action has taken place or has been notified in the judicial system, dockyards, oil refineries and food industry and amongst teachers and nurses.

On Monday, workers began a series of rolling strikes in courts and other offices of the judicial system that will continue until the end of the month. They are demanding the unfreezing of 1,400 job vacancies—a third of the total number of jobs in the Ministry of Justice—and renegotiation of the salary scale, promotion system and the retirement scheme.

The action has been called by the Union of Judicial

Officials (SFJ) and follows on from partial strikes between November 5 and December 31. The SFJ has also announced new strikes in February, March and April and a national strike April 29 to May 3 if there is "no positive response" from the government. The lack of jobs has delayed trials and led to a backlog of 100,000 applications for citizenship.

The Portuguese Union of Judges has announced that strikes which began last November will be extended until October this year. The Independent Union of Prison Guards Corps (SICGP) has announced that there will be a new strike period between January 16 and February 3 and further strikes during the year demanding salary increases, new shift allowances, a change of working hours and more jobs.

Workers at the state-owned Petrogal oil refineries at Sines and Oporto are on strike until January 31. Hélder Guerreiro from the Sines Refinery Workers' Commission stated that the workers "do not accept the withdrawal of rights" and the "reduction of wages."

"The situation of the company is good, every year it records profits and this year will be no exception, according to forecasts ... workers should have better working conditions and better salaries, not the other way around," Guerreiro said.

In Oporto, Fiequimetal union leader José Santos said that 85 percent of workers at the refinery were taking part in the strike and that "No vessel has docked or been refuelled, tanker trucks are still waiting unable to take supplies for distribution, maintenance services are completely paralyzed and production is only at the minimum service level imposed [by the government]."

Teachers, nurses and dockworkers are threatening to resume their militant strikes from last year if the PS government continues to renege on its anti-austerity promises.

The National Federation of Teachers (Fenprof) and other unions are meeting this week to discuss action if the government refuses to fully recompense teachers for the loss of wages that were frozen for over nine years after the 2008 financial crisis.

The Portuguese Nurses Trade Union (ASPE) is threatening to resume strike action scheduled for January 14 to February 28 if the government does not agree a proper career structure that recognises the role of specialist nurses and reduces the retirement age. The union is in talks with the government after it cancelled this week's strike.

The Stevedoring and Logistics Activity Union (SEAL) has given notice of new strike action in Portugal's ports from January 16 until July 1. Union president António Mariano has condemned "the growing proliferation of anti-union practices" in the ports, especially at Caniçal (Madeira) and Praia da Vitória (Azores), which includes "harassment, from persecution to coercion, from bribery to discrimination, from threats of dismissal to blackmail."

Last November, dockworkers at Setúbal went on strike for a month, paralyzing the port and preventing export of cars from the huge Volkswagen Autoeuropa plant in protest at the large number of casual workers.

In its commentary on the continuing strike wave, *Jornal Económico* also noted the duplicitous role of the BE and PCP, which "support the Socialist government [but] now have to distance themselves from it in order to capitalise on all the discontent at the ballot box."

Following the 2015 general election, the BE and PCP channelled mass disaffection that was expressed in a record low 57 percent turnout and the ousting of the pro-austerity right-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD) and People's Party (CSD-PP) coalition behind the PS and its claims that it would "reverse austerity."

The BE was an enthusiastic partner, giving Costa its support merely "on the condition that he give up some of his programme's more neoliberal policies."

All the BE's pre-election rhetoric about repudiating Portugal's debt and breaking with the European Union (EU) was abandoned overnight. Instead the PS has fixated on early repayment of the several billions remaining of the 2011 €78 billion (US\$101 billion) bank bailout package provided by the "troika" (European Commission, International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank).

This is all money that could have been used to increase wages and improve Portugal's crumbling public services.

After four years of demobilising working-class opposition, the BE and PCP are now using the strike wave to launch campaigns to present themselves as anti-austerity in advance of EU elections in May and a general election in October so they can continue to do so.

BE leader Catarina Martins, in her New Year's message, declared that there is "much still to be done" to deal with the "injustices and difficulties that persist" and that 2019 will be "a year of decisions." She claimed that the limited social measures that the PS has passed (although not fulfilled as the current strike wave proves), including the "recovery of pensions," "increase of minimum wage," "effective contracts for thousands of victims of precariousness" and a "moratorium on evictions," were the result of BE pressure on the PS.

Many of these measures were promised by the PS and even the PSD/CSD-PP in their 2014 election manifestos because they wanted to stimulate consumption and dampen social opposition. The PS was quite prepared to concede some measures in order to introduce others, including the debt repayment. What took place was a pragmatic and unprincipled trade-off with the BE that did not fundamentally affect capitalist relations.

In a similar vein, PCP General Secretary Jerónimo de Sousa declared in his New Year's message, "2019 will be a time of choices in which the Portuguese people will be confronted with decisive options regarding their future." He called for party members to be mobilised to build the PCP as a "great national force in defence of national sovereignty" and to make sure "the PS does not have a majority government to implement its own programme."

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