

Nationwide public sector strike hits Portugal

By Will Morrow
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Tens of thousands of teachers, nurses, garbage collection workers and other public sector employees took part in a nationwide strike in Portugal yesterday. They are fighting against wage cuts and austerity demanded by the European Union and imposed by the Socialist Party government of Prime Minister Antonio Costa.

The 24-hour strike was called by the major public sector trade unions, which support the Socialist Party government and its austerity policies, but are maneuvering to maintain control of a growing movement among nurses and other sections of workers that is increasingly developing outside of their control.

The strike in Portugal follows a 24-hour public-sector strike in Belgium on Wednesday, a strike of 70,000 teachers and public sector workers in Berlin the same day and mass protests of Italian workers opposing austerity and unemployment in Rome over the weekend. It takes place as tens of thousands of workers in France are due to take part today in the fourteenth weekly Yellow Vest protest against social inequality.

According to the National Teachers Federation, 90 percent of teachers and other school employees took part in the strike in Portugal, closing schools across the country. Roughly the same proportion of garbage collection workers struck.

The Common Front public sector union federation reported that more than two dozen hospitals had recorded a strike participation rate of between 75 and 100 percent in their Friday night shift, including at the Sao Jose and Santa Maria hospitals in Lisbon, and at the Sao Francisco Xavier, Santo Antonio and Pedro Hispano hospitals in Oporto.

Public sector workers have not received a wage increase for ten years. Their wages have been frozen every year by successive governments, and the Costa government announced last month that the freeze would be continued for another year. Only one group

of public employees will receive a wage increase—those whose current wage of 580 euros per month is below the legal minimum wage of 600 euros.

A decade of austerity has led to a breakdown of schools and hospitals. Many teachers are hired to work for 3.5 hours per day but are expected to work the entire day, and are laid off at the conclusion of the school year for three months.

In contrast to the determination of workers to wage a struggle, the main union federations are motivated by entirely different concerns. Yesterday morning, Ana Avoila of the Common Front union declared that they “will not give up fighting until the elections,” which are due to be held in October. This points to the unions’ role in demobilizing opposition and channeling workers behind the re-election of a Socialist Party government.

The main UGT and CGTP union federations have called repeated one-day general strikes over the past five years, most recently last October, as a means of letting off steam among workers, as the unions have continued to negotiate further austerity. The latest strike is aimed at maintaining their control over and suppressing a movement among nurses in particular.

Beginning last November, tens of thousands of nurses supported calls for a strike that developed outside of the unions’ control on social media, particularly on WhatsApp groups. A statement published by a group of nurses called for a “surgical strike,” which would involve strikes of only a minority of workers at any one time, but enough to enforce the postponement of operations. The call was supported by Sindepor, the nurses’ union which is allied to the main Socialist Party UGT union federation, in order to prevent the strike from developing independently of the unions.

More than 14,000 workers, most of them nurses, donated money online via a crowd-funding page to provide a 42 euro daily wage to workers who strike. In

the space of two months, the fund has raised over 600,000 euros. The strikes were first carried out between November 22 and December 31, forcing the postponement of 7,500 operations, and resumed on January 31 to continue until the end of February. According to government figures, it had caused the postponement of 2,657 operations in the week to February 8.

On February 7, the Costa government announced a legal injunction to shut down the nurses' strike on the grounds that nurses—and not successive governments that have starved hospitals of funds in order to hand over billions of euros to billionaire hedge fund holders of Portuguese government bonds—are responsible for a reduction of services below a minimum required level. The Sindepor union has challenged the decision in the Supreme Court.

As part of an increasingly repressive crackdown against workers, the government has ordered that PPL, the private crowd-funding website, hand over the personal information, including IP addresses, of every worker who donated to the fund.

The trade unions have made clear that their real opponent in this situation is not the government, but workers themselves.

The president of the Portuguese Trade Union of Nurses, Lucia Leite, reacted to the president's injunction announcement by warning of “more uncontrollable” forms of struggle by workers not supported by the unions themselves. “But I have a clear conscience,” she told *Lula*, because “I warned the Minister of Health about this risk.”

In an interview with RTP on January 30, UGT Secretary General Carlos Silva warned that any legal injunction against the nurses' strike could trigger explosive opposition that the union could not control. “It's not the attitude we expect from a leftist government,” he said. He asked if the government wanted to “maintain the climate of social conflict and wear out the unions”, and added: “And then negotiate with whom? The yellow vests, the social media networks, the inorganic movements? The government has to decide what it wants to do.”

Meanwhile, *Publico* magazine published a report yesterday, under the heading, “Hot Winter,” warning that the number of union strike warnings had reached 112 in the first month and a half of the year, compared

to 260 in the whole of 2018, a roughly three-fold increase from the three previous years. The publication warned of signs of “contagion” of the nurses' struggle among teachers.

Silva's warning of Yellow Vest protests and “inorganic movements” expresses the real fears of the unions in Portugal and internationally—that workers, who are angered by the collaboration of the unions with continuous austerity, will take the struggle into their own hands and break out of the control of these pro-business apparatuses.

But that is exactly what is required. To take forward their struggle, nurses and other public sector workers should form their own independent organizations, networks of rank-and-file workplace committees—democratically controlled by workers themselves—in every hospital, school and workplace. Such committees would provide a means for workers to reach out and organize a joint struggle with their counterparts across national borders and overcome the continuous sabotage by the union apparatuses.

Such a fight must be coupled with a new political perspective. The anti-working class and pro-business policies of the Socialist Party government demonstrate the bankruptcy of all those forces who have worked to promote it, including not only the unions, but the pseudo-left Left Bloc party.

The answer to the program of capitalist austerity defended by all these parties is the taking of political power by the working class in Portugal and across Europe, and the reorganization of economic life on a socialist basis, according to social need, rather than private profit. Billions of dollars must be poured into healthcare, education and providing decent jobs for all workers, through the transformation of the banks and major corporations into public utilities under workers' control.

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