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Protests in Portugal and Catalonia met with police repression amid rising wave of strikes

Thousands of police were mobilised in Portugal and Catalonia to repress protests spanning the Iberian Peninsula.

The scale of the repression is dictated by rising concerns in ruling circles at a wave of industrial militancy and social discontent.

As the year ends, Portugal's Socialist Party (PS) administration, supported by the pseudo-left Left Bloc (BE) and Communist Party (PCP), is being hit by multiple strikes against low wages and poor working conditions. Public sector workers have had their salaries frozen for the last 10 years and career progression stopped.

Labour Minister José António Vieira da Silva admitted the increase in strikes is because people have “now expectations of improvements in their working conditions” after “a long period of restrictions.” Yesterday, relatively small demonstrations, inspired by France's Yellow Vest movement, took place in cities and towns across the country, in another indication of an upsurge in the class struggle outside the control of these parties and the unions.

Since Antonio Costa's PS came to power in 2015, the number of strikes has doubled. This year there have been 173 strike notices in the public sector, compared to 85 in 2015. Nearly 50 strike notices have been issued for the Christmas period and New Year.

For over a year, nurses have been taking strike action and, since November, 5,000 surgeries have been postponed or cancelled. In October, 2,300 judges went on strike and

action at Portuguese rail ticket offices disrupted rail traffic. Doctors and museum workers have also staged nationwide strike action in the past months.

Dockworkers in Setúbal began strikes on November 5 protesting the lack of job security for casual and part-time workers and against enforced overtime at the ports of Lisbon, Sines, Figueira da Foz, Leixões, Caniçal (Madeira), Ponta Delgada and Praia da Vitória (Azores). Exports have been affected. This week, workers employed by the state oil company Galp went on strike for five days protesting the “employer offensive” against collective bargaining arrangements, poor wages and attacks on overtime pay.

Supermarket and department store workers are stopping work on Christmas Eve in protest at “misery wages.” Tax office workers have called a strike from December 26 to 31 demanding the unfreezing of their career progression. Teachers have threatened to boycott the 2019 school year for the same reason. Workers from the National Lottery have begun a two-week hunger strike in support of better working conditions. Firefighters and border guards are also contemplating action.

Most of the strikes have been called by the PCP-led CGTP union to let off steam, kept to individual actions to prevent united action against the PS.

Costa’s government has been lauded by the troika of the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) for reducing Portugal’s budget deficit to virtually zero. Responding to the wave of strikes, Costa declared that the country’s economic recovery doesn’t always mean that “everything is possible for everyone.”

The Costa government’s major achievement has been to repay early the €78 billion given to Portugal to bail out its banks after the 2008 financial crisis, while claiming to be “anti-austerity.” This is due to its conceding a few hundred million to raise the minimum wage to €600 a month (\$687)—still the lowest in western Europe—increase some pensions by €10 a month and unfreeze public sector promotions over a number of years. Most of the austerity measures imposed since 2008 remain. The BE has voted almost unanimously to ally with the PS for next October’s election.

The “recovery” in the Portuguese economy has been built on low interest rates, quantitative easing, increased tourism and overseas investment based on cheap casual labour. The Bank of Portugal now forecasts the economy will slow every year to around 1.5 percent in 2021, around half the current figure, with government debt still standing at 125 percent of GDP.

Meanwhile, the average wage in Lisbon is €860, not much more than the minimum, with a sharp rise in precarious employment, housing costs and threat of eviction. Nearly 20 percent of young people remained unemployed and tens of thousands have emigrated.

To stem rising social anger, the government secured an agreement from Facebook to close down the Yellow Vest protest organisers' website and drafted in a massive force of 20,000 security police (PSP) in a country with a 10 million population. It declared that only 25 assembly points in 17 cities nationwide would be permitted, while the air force announced the creation of six-kilometre exclusion zones around main airports.

Under the slogan "Vamos Parar Portugal" (Let's bring Portugal to a halt), the protests called for much bigger increases in the national minimum wage and pensions. In the Algarve capital, Faro, around 100 people demanded "Cut the cost of fuel," "Increase the minimum wage," "Lower VAT," "Abolish motorway tolls," "No to corruption" and "End public-private partnerships (PPP)."

In response, Arménio Carlos, CGTP general secretary and PCP central committee member, declared, "Instead of demanding progress and social justice, they are supporting extreme-right positions aimed at societal and civilizational regression."

"This is a far-right operation," declared Francisco Louçã, leader of the Pabloite Revolutionary Socialist Party (1978-1998) and founder of the BE. "They are using social media to whip up aggressive politicization in far-right terms."

In Catalonia, the Socialist Party government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also responded with police repression to pro-independence demonstrators protesting his decision to hold a cabinet meeting in the centre of the regional capital, Barcelona. Nine thousand extra police were drafted in to attack protesters who blocked roads across the region and clashed with anti-riot police in Barcelona.

At least 12 protesters were arrested and scores were injured during the clashes by the time the meeting in Barcelona finished, said the regional Mossos d'Esquadra police. Thirty officers were injured, it added. Officers wielded truncheons and shields and parts of the city were placed under lockdown. Some protesters wore yellow hi-vis vests, referencing the gilets jaunes in France and the yellow flag of Catalonia, prior to a pro-independence march in the evening.

That day, a strike called at the Spanish railway network Renfe caused the cancellation of 571 trains, about 30 percent of those initially scheduled for the day. The previous day the CCOO and UGT trade unions reached an agreement with the employers to suspend the strike, but the strikes went ahead under the anarcho-syndicalist CGT union.

The eruption of social anger and the hostility to the existing parties and trade unions is palpable throughout Europe. But a way forward depends upon the development of an independent axis of struggle uniting the working class across the continent on the basis of a socialist programme and the formation of committees of action, to lay the basis in the working class for such a unified offensive in opposition to all Europe's governments—of the so-called left, right and centre—and the political and organisational efforts of sabotage by the pro-capitalist unions and pseudo-left parties.