Remembering the Portuguese Revolution

written by Raquel Varela | April 26, 2024

On 25 April 1974 the junior officers of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) released a radio communique: 'The Portuguese armed forces appeal to residents of the city of Lisbon to remain in their homes and remain in the utmost calm.' But the workers of Lisbon didn't stay at home. This was day one of the Portuguese Revolution. On the 50th anniversary of the Revolution, ***Raquel Varela****, author of* A People's History of the Portuguese Revolution*, speaks to rs21 about what happened next.*

Lisbon Street Art 2024

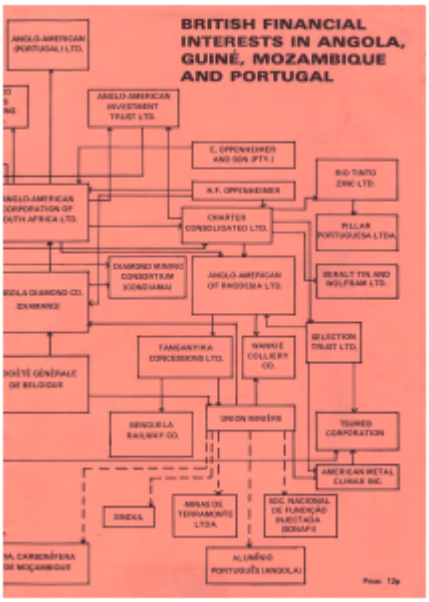
In 1974 Portugal was one of the poorest countries in Europe. We had the lowest wages. Women could not even go abroad without the permission of their husbands. There was a dictatorship, official censorship, and political police who arrested thousands of workers. Free unions and political parties had been forbidden for 48 years.

In *A People's History of Portugal*, written with Roberto della Santa and not yet translated into English, we develop the idea that Portuguese capitalism was dependent on British capitalism, in the sense of Ellen Wood's notion of capitalism being exported by the British Empire to the periphery and semi periphery.

The Portuguese bourgeoisie started to make their own revolution to establish capitalism and overthrow the monarchy in the 1820s. But they could only finish it as a counter-revolutionary process, under a fascist regime, in the 1930s. It is the last attempt of the bourgeoisie to create a nation state. The dictatorship was based on a rural, peasant society, where women had to provide kids for the labour force to support the process of industrialisation. Portugal had had one of the strongest anarcho-syndicalist movements in all Europe in the late 19th century and beginning of the

20th century. Under the fascist regime strikes and political parties were forbidden and brutally repressed.

The third part of this dictatorship was the use of forced labour on a massive scale in the Portuguese colonies, which directly connected with apartheid and South African capital accumulation. So again, very connected with British capitalism.



There was also a fourth pillar of the regime. It was the so-called industrial 'conditioning'. The state allowed the bourgeoisie to create their own monopolies so there would be no competition in certain areas. So, it was a typical Bonapartist state that managed the bourgeoisie's business. But during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) there was an Iberian revolutionary process, and we argue in *A People's History of Portugal* that this produced a directly fascist regime in Portugal. As a result, in the late sixties, less than 20% of the population had access to a proper water supply or proper houses; 30% were illiterate and there was the highest rate of child mortality in Europe. At that time there was a huge strike of forced labourers in Baixa do Cassange in Angola. The strikers were smashed by the Portuguese army, 5,000 were killed, maybe 10,000, nobody really knows the right figures. This is the beginning of the colonial wars from the perspective of the Portuguese state, and it's the beginning of the anti-colonial wars from a socialist perspective. The colonial war is the name used by the Portuguese state. We talk about anti-colonial revolution. The anti-colonial revolution started a colonial war. Over the next thirteen years the Portuguese army recruited 1.1 million to fight the war in Africa. This from a population of almost ten million. There was only one more militarised society at that time, which was Israel.

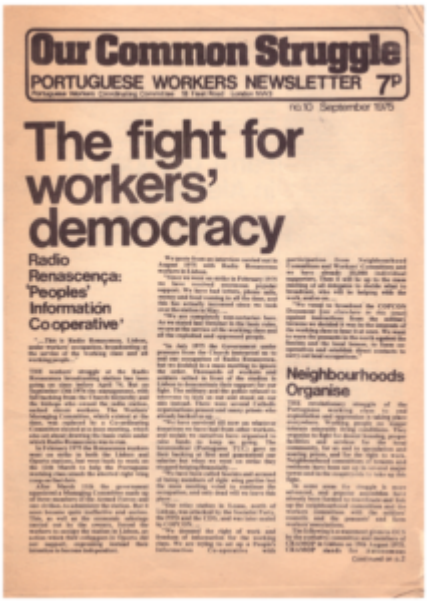
To avoid accommodating the higher pay and conditions demanded by strong unions in core countries after the Second World War, and in the face of the decline of profits in the sixties, investment flowed from core countries to Portugal. Many industrial areas of foreign capital were concentrated around Lisbon, Setubal and Oporto. In addition, 1.5 million workers were recruited from Portugal to go to Luxembourg, Switzerland, France, Britain and Germany to work. This led to a situation where objectively workers were in a strong position, because the labour force inside Portugal had shrunk because of the colonial war and migration. And then on top of this we had the oil shock, the so-called oil shock crisis, which is the crisis of the end of the reconstruction after the second world war.

In Portugal the bourgeoisie split because at the time 40% of the national budget was for the colonial war. People didn't have clean water, but 40% of the budget went to the colonial war. All these

contradictions developed intensively after May 1968 in France and the civil rights movements in US. A huge number of students were inspired to rise up against the war. In Portugal we call it the 'academic crisis'. And there were a huge number of strikes. My hypothesis, which I develop in the new book with Roberto della Santa, is that Portugal was a kind of 21st century revolution. A huge proportion of the people that took part were engaged in the service sector and in intellectual work. Doctors, nurses, teachers, public servants, journalists; all these sectors were involved in dual power organisations, in workers commissions and in the self-management organisation of hospitals and schools.

The revolutionary moment

The process started with some strikes in 1968 and 1969, but the revolution in the metropolis was driven by the colonial war, especially from Guinea Bissau, where a great leader, Amilcar Cabral, defeated the Portuguese army. I should underline that 9,000 Portuguese soldiers were killed in Africa as well as 100,000 combatants and civilians from the liberation movements. So, this is a massively catastrophic war. It becomes a kind of a perfect storm in the Marxist sense of a political national crisis. The bourgeoisie could not govern, and the workers didn't want to be governed anymore.


Our Common Struggle
PORTUGUESE WORKERS NEWSLETTER 7P
no.10 September 1975
The fight for workers' democracy
Radio Renascença: 'Peoples' Information Co operative'
Neighbourhoods Organise

The 25 April starts as a coup d'état by the middle ranking army officers – the captains. But it spreads immediately because there were no unions and no political parties. Immediately on the day of the coup d'état, people go to their workplaces and the democratic revolution becomes a social revolution. This is really Trotsky's notion of permanent revolution in motion. People go to the workplace saying we want the end of the colonial war, but immediately, because they were workers, they start demanding the end of night shifts, compensation for holidays, free theatres, houses. So suddenly, there is a dual power situation. In my opinion it was the most radical dual power situation after the Second World War in Europe. There were three million people directly involved in worker's power. The bourgeoisie escaped from the country in 1975. They fled the country. The banks were nationalised without compensation. There was worker's control in the bank sector.

It became the most radical process since the Second World War. And I want to emphasise on the

50th anniversary that as socialists we should study the Portuguese revolution, because it's an incredible process of prefiguration of socialism, of democracy in motion, of socialists in motion. We have just been remembering Chile (1973), not just because we want to remember our comrades that were killed in Chile but because the bourgeoisie want us to remember the defeats and not the process of victories.

I have studied the Portuguese revolution for 20 years. Looking at the photos from the time, across all sectors, it's very difficult to find someone who is not smiling. This brings us to the sense that in a revolution we reconcile with work again. In place of alienated work, we reconcile with ourselves. People were struggling and working as never before in their lives. They belonged to their work. They were deciding what to do and they were doing what they decided. Things changed completely. Portugal had been probably one of the saddest countries in Europe. People wore black. There had been three hundred years of Inquisition and 48 years of dictatorship. And now people were just smiling. This takes us back to the ontology of social being of Gyorgy Lukacs and to the work of two incredible socialists, Rosa Luxembourg and Simone Weil. They remind us that we can recover our happiness, pleasure, sense of humanity; we can do it in the process of struggle.

May Day 1975 – image by Red Saunders

Counter-revolution

The revolution was defeated. The first step was a coup d'état, organised by the Socialist Party, with, in my opinion, the complicity of the Communist Party. The army generals took control. More than a hundred officers from the Armed Forces Movement, including Otelo Carvalho, were arrested and rank and file soldiers were sent home. Politically it's very similar to what happened in Barcelona in 1937. I am currently doing research on this. It's not clear exactly what the role of the Communist Party was. What we know is that they were not against the coup d'état and that they complained about the revolutionary military sector. This we know for sure.

The coup d'état aimed to break the power of the revolutionary military sector. The Portuguese Socialist Party was supported by the Socialist Party of Germany, with American and British diplomacy and money. Mario Suarez, leader of the Socialist Party, had the support of all the right-wing sectors in Portugal. They worked with senior officers, the permanent cadres of the military, against the officer's movement and against the rank and file soldiers' councils which were very strong in some barracks.

And after that, slowly the counter revolutionary process gathered strength. In 1982 they dismantled the land reform, in 1989 they dismantled the nationalised bank sector. It was a slow process. In 1979 they made a law against workers commissions. In 1982 they made a law against democratic management in hospitals. It was a gradual process of substituting direct democracy for representative democracy. They had to give huge compensation for the workers to get these measures through, just as the French government after 1945 had to compensate the resistance to convince them to give the guns back. Giving a lot of social services, a national health service, and right to have a job and to be protected in your job. And of course, after the eighties, they managed to defeat the most radical sector of the revolution at the same time as the miner's strike in England. In 1986 they defeated the shipyard workers and the radical unions. And after that, a slow process of social pact.

Finally, after a long period of offensive as the state clawed back power, we had a left (social democratic) government supported by the Communist Party and the Left Block. From 2015 to 2019 there was a huge new movement of unions and strikes, which were defeated. The Socialist Party sent in the army to take over the jobs of striking truckers. The left block and the Communist Party didn't oppose this. This has meant an even bigger demoralisation for the left.

The situation today

In this year's elections the right-wing neo-fascists, organising from an international base, won a million votes, a huge part of them coming from the traditional right. These are not new votes for the neo-fascists. But the fascists are very enthusiastic with these one million votes. The left is very demoralised, and the neo-fascists are full of strength after these elections because they can now try to build themselves as a neo-fascist current with money from the state. Having access to the parliament means having access to a huge amount of money transferred by the state according to each deputy elected.

At the same time there is a huge, new, and very important union movement that was not defeated. It didn't win, but it was not defeated. We had the doctors one year on strike last year. The university teachers, one year on strike. And so, there is a tension. The bourgeoisie cannot deliver any kind of workers' demands. Accumulation is not made through investments but through destroying public services to pay off the public debt and selling the houses of the country for tourism. This is bringing the country to a situation where it's not possible to govern. There is a group of neo fascists, and the right wing won the elections but there is huge instability.

The revolution is remembered very differently depending on who you are. For most of the workers in schools, in hospitals, in public services, in factories, and in local communities the 25th of April is the most celebrated day in all Portugal. People sing Grandola Vila Morena, the song of the Carnation Revolution. They don't sing the national anthem! Within the state itself, the social democrats want to celebrate the end of dictatorship and the coup d'état, but they don't want to celebrate the dual power in the revolution. They consider it a process of chaos and craziness to which the representatives of democracy brought stability and common sense. The right wing like the Liberal Initiative say more or less the same as the social democrats, that the country was okay after the coup in 1975 that ended the sovietisation of the armed forces. The fascists say that after the 25th of April everything was bad in Portugal. If we talk about the public use of memory, there is a huge monument, a sign to Africa, a totally neofascist monument inaugurated 30 years ago but there is not one single monument to the liberation movements or to Amilcar Cabral, or to the forced labourers. Otelo Carvalho is not considered a national figure, but the right-wing generals were recently honoured by the president of the republic.

They are trying to vanish the memory of the revolution because it was the biggest nightmare of the Portuguese state. They really were afraid. And they really lost. For you to have a notion, 18% of the national wealth was transferred from capital to labour during 1974 to 1975. It was the biggest moment in Portuguese history.

To read more about the Portuguese Revolution and its aftermath, Raquel Varela's *A People's History of the Portuguese Revolution* is available in English from Pluto Press. There is also a review of the book on the rs21 website.

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