

Twenty years since the Portuguese Revolution

FOR EIGHTEEN months after April 25, 1974, workers, capitalists, generals and politicians of both left and right held their breath, realising just how much was at stake as capitalism tottered before the increasingly confident and self-organised industrial and agricultural workers of Portugal. The Portuguese Revolution was arguably the greatest revolutionary crisis in Western Europe since the Second World War and yet, 20 years on, the capitalists are still in power, stronger than ever, in a Portugal fully integrated into the European Union and NATO. In commemorating the Portuguese Revolution we should not simply be asking: 'What went wrong?' This exhilarating event is rich in lessons for the working class not just in Portugal but throughout the whole world. We owe it to those workers in Portugal who wanted to fight for socialism to learn the lessons of their revolution.

By the start of 1974, Portuguese workers had suffered over 50 years of fascist dictatorship, and the poorest country in Western Europe was frittering away 50 per cent of its gross national product in a prolonged, hopeless attempt to hang on to its African colonial empire. A huge wave of strikes the previous year had been a straw in the wind to a section of the bourgeoisie and military, making more urgent its project of remodelling Portugal along bourgeois democratic lines, integrating its economy with the EEC and seeking a neo-colonial solution for the African colonies in order to guarantee Portuguese and foreign investments there. On the morning of April 25, 1974, the playing over the radio of Portugal's Eurovision song contest entry was the signal for a well-organised military uprising which overthrew the fascist regime of Caetano. As Caetano handed over power to the conservative veteran of the African wars General Antonio de Spínola, he warned him with a certain prescience: 'General, I surrender the power to you. You must take care. I am frightened by the idea of power loose in the streets.'

Caetano's fears proved well-founded: the uprising opened a Pandora's box of class struggle. Workers hunted down supporters of the old regime, and particularly members of the fascist secret police, the PIDE. In their thousands they went on strike, demanding higher wages and better conditions. On May Day, 100,000 workers packed the streets and squares of Lisbon. Soldiers marched alongside workers, red carnations in the muzzles of their rifles. To try to control the situation, Spínola was obliged to bring representatives of the two biggest workers' parties, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Communist Party (PCP), into the first Provisional Military Government in which the PPD, the capitalist party of the centre, already had ministers. Over the next 18 months, the influence in the working class of the PS, the PCP and the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) would be both decisive and destructive.

The central role of the armed forces, organised as the MFA, was a result of the partial disintegration of the old state apparatus after April 25. Many of the old political parties or organisations were in a state of collapse or were discredited by their links with fascism. Many members of the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus had fled to Spain, Brazil or elsewhere.

By Barry Murphy

Only the armed forces were able to hold the ring between the weakened native bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers and the working class, claiming to be above politics and the only force which could unite the country. In line with the initial conservative strategy of the MFA, its newly-formed internal security apparatus, COPCON, was used to enforce anti-strike laws, and its economic plan explicitly rejected nationalisation. The overthrow of Caetano was in a tradition of military involvement in Portuguese politics; the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic in 1910 had been led by army officers, and the military were heavily implicated not only in the establishment of the fascist 'Estado Novo' but also the early opposition to it.

Stalinism and social democracy

The PCP was the majority party of the industrial and rural proletariat, and was led by Alvaro Cunhal, a Stalinist to the marrow of his bones. The PCP exploited its position to mislead the most militant and class conscious workers throughout the revolutionary period, in the most criminal and disastrous fashion. Once it had been brought into Spínola's first government, it denounced striking bakery workers as 'fascists' and supported the military government's anti-strike laws. It advocated a 'special role' for the MFA, and its strategy boiled down to acting as the MFA's policeman in the working class, in particular in the trade union federation, Intersindical, which it dominated. Here it tried to suppress the rights of other tendencies and parties. In the workers' committees which emerged in the revolutionary period, it did its utmost to limit the struggle to economic as opposed to political questions, thus trying to destroy any potential the committees may have had as organs of working class power.

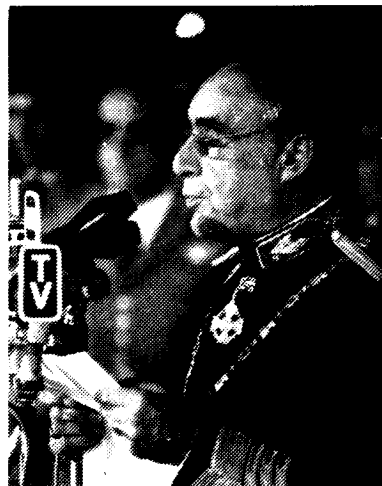
Although a rival to the PCP for working class support and influence in the state apparatus, the Socialist Party led by Mário Soares developed a rough division of labour with the PCP. While the PCP held back workers in the trade unions and tied them to the MFA, the PS was the party of bourgeois democracy rather than workers' democracy, of the EEC and NATO. It was able to attack the way the PCP operated in the workers' movement and use this as a way of creating illusions among workers that parliamentary politics would safeguard their interests.

So far as Spínola was concerned, matters were fast getting out of hand. Working class militancy was putting his project of creating a stable bourgeois democratic Portugal in jeopardy, and he needed to show the EEC and NATO that he was in control. His so-called March of the Silent Majority on September 27-28, 1974, was halted by armed workers and rank-and-file soldiers. His attempted coup of March 11, 1975, collapsed and he fled abroad. These two attempts to roll back the gains made by the working class resulted in a massive escalation of the class struggle. In October 1974 alone, there were 400 'disturbances' recorded, ranging from wage demands to the expulsion from a factory of the entire management. Workers, especially in Lisbon, built com-

mittees with the aim of fighting for workers' control of industry. As many unions were affiliated to the ENT, the union body set up by the fascists in 1934, new workers' organisations emerged after April 25. Among the most important were the *plênarios* in which all workers in a given enterprise, regardless of which union they were in, would discuss their problems and elect committees to act as a leadership and fight for their demands. By the end of October 1974, there were 2,000 of these committees throughout the country. They were elected for one year and subject to recall. They were parallel bodies to the trade unions, such as those affiliated to Intersindical, with which they often came into conflict. For example, the committee in the militant Lisnave shipyard called a demonstration against the anti-strike law which was denounced by the union and the local PCP branch. As well as immediate workplace concerns, the committees would discuss wider political and cultural questions, or would show films such as *Battleship Potemkin*.

Workers' control

In those companies still in private hands, workers' committees generally refused to take part in management on the grounds that it would help employers increase their profits. In companies where the boss had fled or been thrown out, there were discussions about whether wage differentials should be maintained, both between skilled and unskilled workers and between men and women, and about how profits should be shared. Time and again, the committees were confronted by the internationalisation of capital: they took over their factory and produced goods, only to find that the means of distribution were in the hands of a foreign multinational. For example, one firm produced parts for computers which were shipped to Puerto Rico for assembly, and thence to the USA. When the



General Antonio de Spínola

workers took over the factory it simply folded. At first, the proposals from the committees were naive and ill-thought out, but in time, as many of the workers became aware of what they were up against, the solutions became more radical and more political, the analyses more coherent. By the end of March 1975, 200 committees were actually running their factories or workplaces. In January 1975, a federation of workers' committees was formed, called Inter-Empresas, linking 24 of the largest firms in Portugal, whose aim was 'to aid and support workers' struggles'. Of course, the PCP was profoundly suspicious of this new development, see-

ing it as a threat to its own dominance in the workers' movement and to the position of Intersindical. When Inter-Empresas called a demonstration for February 7, 1975, against the visit to Portugal of NATO forces, the PCP denounced it, comparing it to the right-wing 'silent majority' march the previous September. Regardless of the strictures of the PCP, the demonstration went ahead, with 40,000 workers marching behind a banner proclaiming 'Redundancies are the inevitable consequence of the capitalist system. The workers must destroy this system and build a new world'.

Things were moving elsewhere. In the Alentejo region in the south, thousands of landless farm workers occupied large estates and ran them as co-operatives with names such as 'Now or Never', 'Liberty or Death' or 'Red Star'. And 1974-75 saw a profusion of grassroots campaigns concerning housing, health and education. These would often occupy deserted office blocks or large houses and use them as a headquarters, or set up a nursery or a 'popular clinic' in which sympathetic doctors would give their services free. Women's organisations emerged, campaigning for the right to divorce, free birth control and abortion on demand, and combatting not only the patriarchal attitudes of the church and the right wing, but also the inequalities which still existed even in the most militant workers' committees. Many of these organisations or campaigns by-passed the PS and the PCP, being non-party or in some cases influenced by anarcho-syndicalism or Maoism.

Witch-hunt of the PCP

The PS, PCP and MFA reacted to this upsurge in different ways. The PS, being the party of bourgeois democracy, the EEC and NATO, saw the need for counter-revolution to make Portugal safe for imperialism and to strengthen its position in the labour movement and the state apparatus. It had a base in the new Constituent Assembly, having won 38 per cent of the vote in the election of April 25, 1975. The PS was in conflict with the PCP over the *República* affair. *República* was a newspaper whose printworkers were against the attempts of its owners to turn it into a mouthpiece of the PS. Soares falsely accused the printworkers of being PCP members trying to 'silence' the paper. Under the thin disguise of a campaign for 'pluralist democracy', the PS withdrew from the Provisional Government and launched a ferocious anti-left witch-hunt, chiefly aimed at the PCP but in fact taking in all trade unionists and socialists. This mainly took place in the poor, conservative north, where the church was stronger and where the small farmers, whose situation was quite unlike the militant rural farmworkers in the south, felt with some justification that they had been neglected by the PCP. All the forces of reaction, including fascists, joined in a hideous campaign of vio-



Lisbon, May Day 1974

lence against the left, burning offices and beating up militants, cheered on by priests and nuns. In the northern cathedral city of Braga, the archbishop, an old friend of the fascist dictator Salazar, called for the 'forces of love to triumph'. This they did - by attempting to burn down the local PCP offices with the members inside. The campaign caused something of a crisis within the PS; many members, and not only those in the faction sympathetic to the PCP, were appalled by these tactics.

As for the PCP itself, although at the receiving end of every form of reactionary violence it proposed only solutions which would play into the hands of the right wing. It attempted to tie the working class response to the witch-hunt to support for the 5th Provisional Government led by 'left-wing' army officer Vasco Gonçalves. Instead of turning to the strength and independence of the working class to beat the right wing, the PCP sought to use workers as a stage army in support of Gonçalves's faction in the MFA.

The response of the MFA to the upsurge in class struggle was significant. Politically, there was a shift to the left. There was widespread nationalisation, with 19 banks, along with the steel, transport, electricity and petroleum industries, being placed under state control. There was an increase in the minimum wage and prices were declared frozen until the end of 1975. 'Nationalised in the Service of the People' appeared on many banks and companies, and the nationalisations were hailed by the PCP and the Intersindical. But these moves against private property were designed to head off the working class offensive. They were also prompted by the dire state of the economy, or in some cases because the original owners had fled the country. The leftward

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Communist Party leader Alvaro Cunhal

shift should not have been taken at face value. The MFA leadership remained basically hostile to the struggles for workers' control; its aim was the rebuilding and restoration of the bourgeois state apparatus.

Rifts in the Armed Forces Movement

The other development was the break-up of the 'non-political' monolith. The MFA's call for abstention in the April 1975 election for a Constituent Assembly had attracted only seven per cent of the vote, as opposed to over 50 per cent for the PCP and PS combined. The MFA realised that it was going to have to influence the parties, rather than by-pass them. Accordingly, pro-PS and PCP factions developed in the MFA, represented respectively by Melo Antunes and Vasco Gonçalves. Given that many workers saw themselves, albeit in a somewhat confused way, as being to the left of both the PCP and the PS, it followed that a 'revolutionary' faction also developed in the MFA. Led by the commander of COPCON, Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, this faction became increasingly reluctant to act against striking workers. Further, on July 8, 1975, the general assembly of the MFA declared the 'institutionalising' of workers' committees in the name of a 'pact between the MFA and the people'.

In response, the right-wing opposition to Vasco Gonçalves and his 5th Provisional Government crystallised around the 'Document of the Nine' – which set out a political programme friendly to Western capitalism – amidst warnings from Costa Gomes, a member of the MFA's central leadership, that the 'revolution is taking place at too fast a pace'. The left critics of Gonçalves produced their own 'COPCON Document', which spoke of 'Popular Assemblies' and was filled with vague and woolly phrases about 'people's power' and 'revolutionary government'. On August 20, there was a huge demonstration in Lisbon in support of the demands of this document, with workers from the militant Lisnave and Setenave shipyards, as well as rank-and-file soldiers and sailors, participating.

On September 6, the MFA Assembly forced the resignation of Vasco Gonçalves and the fall of his government. The new Provisional Government, the sixth, represented a distinct move to the right in the MFA. It was led by the right-wing Admiral Pinheiro de Azevedo, and the Group of Nine were dominant, as were the PS and the bourgeois PPD at the expense of the PCP which had reduced representation. This led to a further growth of the workers' and neighbourhood committees, and a stepping-up of the struggles for workers' control and for better wages and conditions. There were also increased attempts to co-ordinate these mobilisations in the face of a clear

counter-revolutionary threat. Military discipline was further eroded, with demonstrations of soldiers shouting 'we will turn our guns on the bourgeoisie' and the formation of SUV (Soldiers United Will Win). SUV announced itself in its manifesto as a 'united anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist front' which would 'struggle with all workers for... the destruction of the bourgeois army and the creation of the armed wing of the power of the working class'.

By the autumn of 1975, many workers saw this latest stage as the opportunity to crush the right wing and establish workers' power. Workers' organisations were growing, workers everywhere – but especially in Lisbon – were discussing politics and reading the left-wing press, Marx, Lenin and anything else they could get their hands on. Discipline in the armed forces was collapsing, with the rank and file and junior officers talking of revolution. So why did the working class not take power?

The absence of a revolutionary party

The problem was not any lack of a will to fight on the part of the working class. The problem was leadership, or rather the absence of it. There was no leadership prepared to fight for the independent interests of the working class, as distinct from those of the MFA. We have seen how the PCP consciously reined in the struggles of the working class and channelled them into support for 'left-wing' officers. Of course, the move to the left of rank-and-file soldiers was extremely positive, and every effort should have been made to unite with them where common action could be agreed. But this did not mean that the demagoguery of Vasco Gonçalves or the confused phraseology of the COPCON Document was any substitute for a revolutionary programme. The latter's vague utterances about 'revolution' and 'people's power' reflected the views of middle class junior officers who had lost confidence in the status quo, but who had only recently been won to socialism and could not conceive of seeking the mobilisation of the working class. At no point was there abolition of military ranks, the election of officers or, most importantly, systematic arming of the workers to allow effective self-defence. The workers could not rely on the MFA, nor even its most left-wing faction, nor could they look to the PCP for leadership.

What the working class desperately needed was its own party, armed with a programme based on the politics of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, which could have broken the hold of the PCP and the left-wing officers and so won the most militant sections of the working class to recognising the crucial tasks of the moment. These were the need to extend and deepen workers' democracy where it existed in the committees, and to fight for it, against bourgeois democracy, where it did not; to fight for workers' control, not simply nationalisation; and to fight for the organs of workers' democracy to take on a political and an administrative role, so posing the question of dual power – who rules, the workers or the bourgeoisie? This would have helped break illusions in co-operativism and self-management which undoubtedly existed among many workers.

Effective workers' self-defence was essential. The workers' organisations should have demanded arms, and tried to persuade the left-wing soldiers to put their money where their mouths were, so to speak, and hand over arms to the workers. In the process, left-wing soldiers could have been broken completely from the military hierarchy. Of vital importance was the question of the united

front: demanding united action where agreement could be reached with other workers' organisations to combat reaction, but also to demonstrate in practice to militants from the PCP and the PS how their leaderships were preparing to betray them. A serious and non-sectarian attitude to the parties which dominated the workers' movement would have been an antidote to the anti-party or non-party attitudes of some workers and the ultra-leftism of the Maoist groups which characterised the PS as 'social fascist'.

A party with this kind of programme would have armed the workers, both literally and politically, and prepared them for the struggle for power which, while not posed in the immediate sense, was a realisable perspective. No such party existed. Given the record of the PCP, and of Stalinism worldwide, it was inevitable that it would not take this course. However, what about those groups to the left of the PCP – the ostensibly revolutionary organisations claiming to stand not in the tradition of Stalin but of Trotsky? Unfortunately for those Portuguese workers suspicious of the Stalinists and the MFA, these would-be revolutionaries did not fight for the independent interests of the working class either.

Portuguese Trotskyism

At that time, the biggest single international organisation claiming to be Trotskyist was the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI), which had two sections in Portugal. The LCI supported the faction in the USFI led by Ernest Mandel and the PRT supported the faction led by Joseph Hansen. Both groups tried to tie the working class to hostile, non-proletarian forces – the LCI to the MFA and the PRT to the Constituent Assembly.

In August 1975, the PCP became concerned at the apparent powerlessness of the 5th Provisional Government and, fearing isolation, turned to revolutionary groups for support in a 'united front', concluded on the 25th of the month. Of course, a real united front – unity where there was common agreement, freedom of action where there was not – between workers' organisations against counter-revolution was absolutely necessary, but this was no such thing. The text of the 'Unitary Agreement' made it absolutely clear that it had been convened by the MFA and that its programme never went beyond that of the MFA leadership: 'The COPCON Document... constitutes a valid basis of work for the elaboration of a revolutionary political programme.'

Far from being a genuine united front, this was simply a manoeuvre by the Stalinists to tie the working class to the military leadership. It was signed by, among others, the LCI. The PCP was thus able to turn a massive demonstration on August 27 into a rally in support of Vasco Gonçalves. Embarrassed, Mandel was obliged to denounce his Portuguese section, which was a little unfair since it had merely been putting into practice the line he himself had been pushing. Mandel criticised the LCI for appealing to the MFA 'under the same heading' as workers' committees. However, in *Intercontinental Press* he defended the armed forces' 'institutionalisation' of the workers' committees on the grounds that it was a move to the left. He condemned the LCI for making 'concessions to the orientation of the leadership of the CP', yet previously he had argued that these same leaders were being 'forced' to line up with the revolutionary left! The confusion was compounded by the LCI itself in its statement justifying its action, which explained that it had disagreements 'with the concrete formulations of certain

points in the agreement', particularly the 'part concerning the integration of the MFA in a front of workers' and people's power, of workers' and revolutionary parties'. However, it still signed, although it showed its unease by marching only half the way with the Stalinists, leaving the demonstration before it reached the presidential palace!

Hansen's supporters in the USFI hailed the Constituent Assembly as the 'only body elected by the workers and poor masses' and 'the only forum where the problems of the masses could be discussed openly' (*Intercontinental Press*, July 14, 1975). The July 18 edition of *The Militant*, paper of the American SWP (then sympathetic to the USFI but prevented from affiliating by reactionary legislation), denounced the MFA July 8 assembly proposals for 'institutionalising' the workers' committees, stating that the proposed committees were 'instruments to help provide demagogic cover for the CP and the MFA to police the working class and discipline it'. Very good, except that both USFI sections in Portugal supported the MFA assembly proposals! On July 10, *Combate Socialista*, paper of the PRT, announced that its earlier support for the Constituent Assembly and opposition to the MFA had been wrong, and that the MFA was 'introducing dual power from above'. The military had ceased to be bourgeois and was 'becoming half sovietised'!

Meanwhile, the Mandelites and the Hansenites continued their internecine warfare in the pages of the USFI's press. Take the August 4, 1975, edition of *Intercontinental Press*, in which the USFI declaration includes the following: 'In the short term, the armed forces no longer represent an entity sufficiently homogeneous and tightly controlled by the military hierarchy to be easily used in a putschist project' (page 1138). But on page 1108 of the same issue, Gerry Foley writes: 'The dominant group in the Portuguese armed forces took another step on July 25 towards consolidating an open military dictatorship.' So who is fooling whom? Is Carvalho fooling the workers or are the workers outflanking Carvalho? What workers looking to the 'revolutionaries' of the USFI as a way of breaking from the PCP or the MFA must have made of this gibberish is anyone's guess! Needless to say, there has never been any honest accounting by the USFI for this shambles.

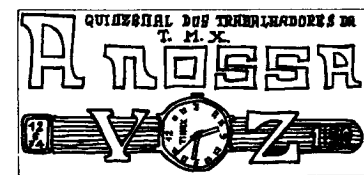
In fact, the so-called 'united front' between the PCP and the revolutionaries broke up, and then continued as a rump (the FUR) consisting of the LCI and half a dozen other groups, including the PRP (which was supported by the British International Socialists, forerunner of the SWP). The FUR confused the need to build a revolutionary party with the need to build united fronts, and hindered clarification on both questions. According to its manifesto, the FUR 'sets itself the task of uniting revolutionaries around a revolutionary platform of struggle that the popular masses accept as theirs' and was a 'contribution to the unification and organisation of the class vanguard'. It had no stated policy on the PCP or its policies, or on the MFA. It blurred the distinction between the leadership and the base of the PS and in fact refused to distinguish between the PS and the

fascists, making the FUR useless for any united front project with the main workers' parties. The FUR failed to raise the demands for the arming of the workers or for a workers' militia.

Revolution in retreat

As both sides were preparing for confrontation, the working class was eager for the struggle, but politically disarmed. On November 25, 1975, Carvalho was relieved of his military command. In support of Carvalho, 1,500 paratroopers staged a revolt which was defeated by troops loyal to the government. This was followed by 'normalisation' in the army – including the sacking of left-wing officers and the detention of 200 others – the sacking of 30 government officials and the takeover of all radio and TV stations except the church-owned Rádio Renascença. All civilian-held arms were to be given up and demonstrations were banned. In response, crowds of workers congregated outside barracks demanding guns, and strikes were called in support of the paratroopers. The PCP called a two-hour strike, then reneged on this and told workers to go back to work, abandoning the paratroopers to defeat. It did not even leave the government, but used its influence to sabotage the working class counter-offensive, criticising striking nurses and bank workers as 'serving the plans of reaction'. The PS leader, Soares, hailed the coup, declaring that 'November 25 saved the revolution', and went on to support all the anti-working class measures taken by the government, most notably the wage freeze which clawed back the benefits won in the autumn.

The collaboration between rank-and-file militants of the PS and the PCP in struggles against these measures was eloquent, if belated, proof of the need for a united front, and of the potential for winning these militants from their reactionary leaders. Ironically, Soares signed a pact with the MFA in April 1976 allowing for an all-powerful president and the subordination of the legislative assembly to the 'forces of order'. Despite predictions that Portugal would become 'another Chile', this did not happen. The bourgeoisie did not need another Chile. They were able to roll back the gains of the working class by wearing it down, by letting the Stalinists of the PCP, the gravediggers of the Portuguese Revolution, do the job for them. Despite nearly 20 years of 'normalised' bourgeois democracy, the Portuguese Revolution has not been forgotten. We must hope that next time the working class in Portugal, or anywhere else, is on the advance, the lessons of 1974-75 will have been learned.



Papers of the Timex, Lisbon Docks and Lisnave Shipyard workers' committees