

Portuguese teachers mount nationwide strike

Alejandro López
23 January 2023

A nationwide teachers strike is underway in Portugal amid a rising tide of class struggles in Portugal and internationally, three years into the COVID-19 pandemic and as NATO wages war on Russia in Ukraine. Last Monday, teachers began an 18-day strike called by eight union confederations, which had previously rejected calls for strikes, claiming it was “not an appropriate time.”

They called a strike under mounting pressure from teachers who held one of the largest protests since the Carnation Revolution toppled Portugal’s far-right regime in 1974. Called by the Union of All-Education Professionals (STOP), up to 100,000 teachers, school staff and parents marched in Lisbon. They waved banners demanding “respect,” “dignity in the profession,” “a public school system (that works),” calling on Socialist Party (PS) Education Minister João Costa to resign.

The PS government is threatening to ban the strike. “What is happening is that there is a strike one day at one hour and the next day at another. In our opinion, this does not respect basic principles of what a strike should be,” Costa said. This echoes the PS attack on the 2017-2018 Portuguese nurses strikes, which it attacked by declaring that crowd-funding of strikes is illegal.

Teachers are demanding an end to professional instability, precarity and unpaid overtime, calling for more hiring and higher wages. Teachers have lost 20 percent of their purchasing power since 2009. Teachers are also demanding to retire without penalty after 36 years of service, since obtaining a permanent job as a teacher can take decades of work.

The average monthly salary for teachers in the lowest pay band is roughly €1,100 (\$1,191.08), and even those in the highest pay band are typically under €2,000. Low wages have been compounded by the skyrocketing cost of living triggered by EU bank bailouts and the NATO war in Ukraine. Inflation reached 9.6 percent in 2022,

and food prices rose 18.9 percent.

The public schools have not recovered from EU austerity imposed after the global 2008 capitalist crisis. In 2011, the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank bailed out Portugal with €78 billion. These funds, handed over to the banks, were repaid with a decade of austerity imposed by the entire political establishment: the right-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD), the PS, and PS minority governments backed by the middle-class Pabloite Left Bloc (BE) and the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP).

Now, Portugal’s competing union bureaucracies are blocking a broader struggle against the PS, preventing united action by teachers and other layers of workers, and cutting them off from workers struggles internationally. Several unions are calling rolling strikes, dividing teachers across different regions, while STOP supports an indefinite strike but refuses to broaden the struggle.

STOP emerged after decades of union collaboration with successive governments to impose cuts to public education. Created in 2018, STOP poses as an “apolitical” alternative to traditional trade unions. It describes itself as a “non-sectarian, non-partisan and truly democratic union,” committed to “never signing important commitments/agreements with the government without democratically listening to the teaching class first.”

STOP organized a protest of 20,000 teachers in Lisbon last December and called the current strike. STOP does not, however, offer an alternative to the old union bureaucracies and explicitly refuses to broaden the strike into a struggle against NATO war and the PS government. It is led by André Pestana, a former BE leader who has founded the pseudo-left *Movimento Alternativa Socialista* (MAS).

On Facebook, STOP says that while teachers want to

broaden the struggle, STOP and other unions cannot work for this. It states: “The overwhelming majority of strike/union commissions agreed to appeal to civil society solidarity, as we did on January 14 for March 1 (without specifically inviting any professional sector).”

In reality, strikes are erupting in one economic sector after another. In November, thousands of Portugal’s doctors, nurses, teachers and civil servants went on a one-day strike to demand wage increases. They were opposing the paltry wage increases of 3.6 percent for the public sector in 2023. Judicial staff are set to strike from February 15 to March 15 over wages.

At Volkswagen’s Autoeuropa assembly plant near Lisbon, one of Portugal’s top exporters, 5,100 workers struck. The union bureaucracy imposed a 5.2 percent wage increase, effectively cutting real wages by 4 percent.

Starting in December, port administration workers and staff at the veterinary and sanitary inspections authority (DGAV) struck for higher wages. Rail workers also went on strike, demanding bonuses to compensate for falling purchasing power in 2022. This forced the cancellation of over 1,000 train services.

In coming weeks, cabin crew at state-owned airline TAP will strike to demand higher wages, better working conditions and against an EU-approved €3.2 billion bailout plan for TAP. This plan would downsize its fleet, cut more than 2,900 jobs, and slash wages up to 25 percent.

Workers in Portugal cannot fight the essential problems they face divided by industry and on national soil. All these problems—the upsurge of inflation, the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, EU austerity and the COVID pandemic—are essentially international and global problems. They can only be solved by building a powerful network of rank-and-file organizations of struggle to coordinate united international struggles by the working class.

This requires the development of conscious political opposition in the working class to the reactionary role of pseudo-left groups like the BE and PCP.

In 2019, they backed a PS deployment of the army to break a nationwide truckers strike, as fuel stations ran dry. The BE endorsed the PS use of the army to break the strike, with BE leader Catarina Martins stating: “In certain fundamental sectors, it is understandable that there are minimum levels of service; in other sectors it

is not understandable. ... The government will have to do whatever is essential for the country to function.”

In the autumn of 2021, mass strikes erupted across Portugal of rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, nurses, firefighters, and civil servants. The PCP and BE did not, however, seek to mobilize the workers against the minority PS government, which they were supporting in parliament. Instead, they sought to prop up the PS by forcing new elections.

They suddenly voted against the PS budget, which they had previously supported. This was not because they opposed EU austerity. Both the BE and PCP had loyally supported all the PS austerity budgets since the PS took power in 2015. Their vote against the PS budget triggered a government crisis and new elections, in which the PS narrowly eked out a victory against the PSD.

The PS cannot be fought on an apolitical, trade-union basis. STOP claims Portugal’s right-wing PSD president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, can protect the strike from the PS. It hails de Sousa as “guarantor of the regular functioning of democratic institutions ... Therefore, the President must have a clear position in the face of this attack on the right to strike (which is a constitutional right).” But the PSD is a right-wing tool of finance capital, as hostile to strikers as the PS.

Only the overthrow of this corrupt establishment, in a necessarily international revolution against capitalism, can resolve the burning problems facing workers. Building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees can allow workers to overcome the demobilizing influence of the national union bureaucracies. This requires building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, to struggle for socialism against the counterrevolutionary Stalinist and Pabloite defenders of the bureaucracy against the workers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact