

Portuguese building workers' strike: A WORKING CLASS VICTORY

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In Portugal, last November, there took place some of the most dramatic developments of the past two years. Most notable was the construction workers' strike, says

BEN PIMLOTT, in this eye-witness account.

THE events leading to the failed Left-wing coup in Portugal of November 25th, which weakened, split and demoralised the whole Portuguese Left, aroused little comment in the British Press. British papers had decided that the whole Portuguese story had "died", and so few of their journalists were in Lisbon at the time. Yet there took place during the fortnight which preceded the attempted putsch some of the most dramatic developments of the past two years. The most notable was the great construction workers' strike, which culminated on November 12th and 13th in the siege of Prime Minister Admiral Pinheiro de Azevedo and 200 deputies in the Palace of São Bento, Portugal's Palace of Westminster, which includes the Constituent Assembly and the Prime Minister's residence.

The workers, Communist and Marxist-Leninist led, demanded a 40 per cent wage rise, and refused to leave until their claim was met. For two nights they encircled the building, squatting round fires, chanting slogans and singing revolutionary songs - and displaying the government's helplessness. After 18 hours they released the deputies, but continued to hold the Prime Minister as (in effect) a hostage, until the military Supreme Revolutionary Council capitulated in the early hours of November 14th.

For the workers and the Left it was a great victory. For Azevedo and the "moderates" it was their lowest point, and it precipitated two weeks of genuine anarchy, in which the government lacked any authority at all.

AWAKENING

Whatever the merits of the construction workers' case (and an arguable economic case can be made against them), this confrontation and its outcome, had the utmost significance for Portuguese politics and the Portuguese working

class. It was a political and industrial awakening. A key section of the workers proved the reality of its power, after generations of degradation and oppression.

During both nights of the siege, I was inside S. Bento Palace, the first night in the company of bewildered and anxious deputies, the second (after the Assembly had been cleared of politicians) with the building workers' committee and Left-wing military police. At intervals, I noted down what was happening around me.

Thursday, November 13th, 1 a.m.: In the main lobby of the Assembly, some deputies pace up and down, others try to sleep on couches. A few yards away, on the balcony, a worker is speaking to a huge and noisy crowd below.

This afternoon I followed the vast column of men - 100,000, perhaps more - as it marched in perfect order up from Praça do Comercio along the Avenida da Liberdade, and eventually to São Bento - a solid, impressive line of blue overalls and yellow helmets. It was probably the biggest industrial demonstration Portugal has ever known. The marchers took nearly two hours to fill the square below the Palace, overflowing into streets beyond.

Inside the Assembly, in the Socialist Party room, deputies were peering awesomely out through net curtains, greeted from time to time by a chorus of jeers and catcalls from below if they allowed themselves to be seen. I asked one, a lawyer in his mid-thirties and a member of the PS Secretariat, what he expected to happen. He shrugged. "A Right-wing dictatorship," he said and then, pointing down at the workers: "In five months' time they will be shouting for a Pinochet".

Another Socialist deputy gave me his view of the workers: "Of course you realise that they are all manipulated by the extreme Left. At the elections most of them voted for us and for PPD (Popular Democrats)".

SIEGE

I left, and came back about 10 p.m. to find a full scale siege, and the Prime Minister getting an angry reception as he tried to speak from the balcony. There could be no decision, he said, on the workers' demand before the Council of Ministers met on November 27th.

The workers weren't having that. "United we will win!" and "The struggle goes on!" they called back (but in Portuguese it sounds much better: "Unidos Venceremos!" "A Luta Continua!")

The number of workers has greatly declined. I think they are operating a shift system-but those who remained had settled down for the night, with fires and tantalising smells of cooking. It soon became clear that once back inside the Palace, I was as much a prisoner as anybody: when I wanted to leave to talk to workers in the crowd, stewards shook their heads politely but firmly.

Now, in the dark, it is possible to lean right out of the window and watch the extraordinary scene below. Workers are sitting, lying, standing, all over the square, the steps and the gardens, many in groups around wood fires. Occasionally somebody starts a chant, or a song, and this spreads rapidly across the crowd and then dies away. There is a smell of roast sardines and chestnuts. The mood is cheerful, excited, expectant.

Inside, deputies who are not sleeping are becoming gregarious. The PPD room has become a social centre. One PPD man, representing a Lisbon suburb, told me how little difference he saw between Popular Democrats and the Socialists. "They might be wings of the same party." He was in PPD because he distrusted Mario Soares' demagoguery.

While we spoke, the room was silenced by an angry telephone conversation between Cunha Leal (a prominent Popular Democrat) on this end, and Sa Carneiro (PPD Secretary-General who, like the other party leaders had left early in the afternoon, on the other. "If it goes on for one day, two days, three days, twenty days," we heard Leal shout, "there must be no surrender!"

IMPOTENCE

The atmosphere is increasingly unreal. More and more deputies are bedding down (there is a bearded and shoeless Socialist snoring softly at the other end of the couch on which I am sitting) and among those who are awake - civil police, deputies, secretaries - there is an uneasy camaraderie. But above all is a sense of impotence: of separateness and lack of touch. The majority of deputies have no more than one year's political experience, are not leaders in the normal sense, and have no ability to communicate with workers -a third of them are lawyers and, apart from the Communists, almost none come from working-

class backgrounds. By contrast, the workers' committee, the men with power at this moment, stride confidently and busily through the building.

What is notable is that the deputies don't even attempt to do anything to discuss or plan. They are mere spectators. There was talk of a special session, but nothing came of it. Nobody has even tried to convene a party group meeting. Instead there is the blank desolation of a railway waiting-room after the last train has gone.

2.35 a.m.: This whole conflict, at one level centres around the question of legitimacy. It was power, not legitimacy which established this government, like every other since the coup. Hence it is completely vulnerable to the power of the opposition. The workers outside don't recognise this government as having any right to control them, and in this they are merely following the example of successive groups of soldiers since April 1974.

One irony is the opulence of the building, which adds to the feeling of 1789 or 1917: late Edwardian classicism, high ceilings and pillars, mirrors and chandeliers. The balcony opens out from a large banqueting hall - with murals in high noon fascist realism, wholly out of keeping with the architecture, depicting Portuguese explorers subjugating and converting to Catholicism an array of marble-eyed blacks.

A blond little boy of about six (to whom does he belong?) is imperturbably playing a private game of trains up and down the corridor, occasionally colliding with people.

3.45 a.m.: They have started to sing "Venceremos" in the crowd again. A couple of lorries with pears and vegetables have arrived in the square, to the pleasure of the besiegers and the envy of the besieged. The workers are getting noisier, as their committee relays more messages to them from the Palace balcony. Twenty minutes ago a workers' delegate - a boyishly good-looking hulk of a man with bloodshot eyes and a raffish grin - announced that the Prime Minister was about to meet the workers' committee, which means that he is negotiating.

A PS deputy from Braga told me that at 2 a.m. the President had ordered in Copcon. But they have not arrived, so either they were disobeying orders or it was just a rumour - like the hopeful one three hours ago that armoured cars were on their way. Yet much now must depend on Otelo (General Otelo de

Carvalho, the subsequently dismissed commander of Copcon and of the Lisbon military region) and also on the views of the troops under him.

5.15 a.m.: A workers' delegate has just read a message saying that the Alentejo peasants will start to move towards Lisbon at 7 a.m. if nothing is settled by then. Azevedo has said that he must put the workers' demands to the Council of Ministers, and the crowd has accepted this: But if pro-Left peasants do arrive on the scene, open conflict will be hard to avoid.

5.35 a.m.: A youngish man in a velvet suit and a diamond ring paused for a word with a group I was talking to, before moving off gracefully with an effeminate finger wave. "Like an English Tory MP", I said, "and he must be a barrister." I was right on the second point, but he is reputedly a Left-wing PS deputy.

6 a.m.: An unseemly squabble: about food. When it was announced that the workers would supply food to members of the Palace staff and deputies who were "with the workers' struggle" (i.e. the Communists) and nobody else, there was uproar: shouts of protest from a scuffling mob of PS and PPD. It was an undignified, almost embarrassing, scene. One elderly PPD deputy has had a mild heart attack. He was given food, and then taken off in an ambulance.

3 p.m.: I was able to leave at noon, and about one the deputies were released, running the gauntlet of whistling, catcalling strikers. The Assembly is now almost empty. But the Prime Minister is still barricaded into his house, the workers are still outside, and there are road blocks cutting off all approaches.

Thursday, November 13th, 2 a.m.: Back in the Assembly, and a totally new situation with the workers in full possession of this vast echoing mausoleum - or rather the workers' committee and some Left-wing military police: everybody else is made to continue the vigil outside. In the middle of the huge hall with the fascist murals, there is a large sack containing small loaves of bread. Young workers and soldiers - almost all in their early twenties - eat and talk quietly, while others bustle in and out, from the Prime Minister or the Revolutionary Council, as the negotiations proceed. At times the crowd outside seems more radical in its demands than the committee: once, the committee asked the main body of workers to allow the Prime Minister to attend a meeting of the Revolutionary Council.

"No, let him resolve the matter first!" they shouted back. "Let the Council come to him!" So the Prime Minister remains under house arrest, helpless, and unable or unwilling to use military force.

VICTORY!

5.30 a.m. Awakened by a general commotion after a couple of hours snatched sleep. Workers and soldiers crowd on to the balcony. There is cheering, embracing, dancing. It is over. The Revolutionary Council, fearing the consequences of a clash between building workers and a planned demonstration of anti-Left parties, and fearing also that troops sent to clear the strikers might decide to side with them instead, has given in on all essentials.

7 a.m.: As soon as this was announced, the workers formed into a column, and began to march back through the city, chanting "Victoria!" and singing "Venceremos!" through empty streets, applauded by early morning workers. One old charwoman leans out of the first- floor window of an office in Rua do Ouro and shouts "Viva a classe operária!" -"Up with the working class!"- over and over. There is an intense feeling, a justified feeling, of the power, strength and solidarity of the workers as a class - a new and hopeful discovery.