The Portuguese Communist Party and the labour movement in the beginning of the Carnation Revolution (April–September 1974)

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When those from above no longer can and those from below no longer want.

On 25 April 1974, the Portuguese Armed Forces Movement (MFA) carried out a coup d’état that brought to an end nearly forty-eight years of dictatorship. Immediately, and against the MFA’s appeal that people stay at home, thousands of protesters took to the streets to demand ‘Death to Fascism’. The crowd surrounded the Carmo barracks of the national guard in Lisbon, in which Marcelo Caetano (the prime minister) and members of his government were located; the doors of Peniche and Caxias prisons were opened to liberate all political prisoners; the political police (DGS) was dismantled; the headquarters of the regime’s newspaper (Época) was attacked and censorship abolished.

Although the Portuguese revolution occurred in a country on the periphery of Europe, it nevertheless claims some significance when viewed from a historical perspective. For a number of reasons, the revolution produced what some have claimed to be postwar Europe’s most radical social movement.

Three factors, in particular, should be underlined: the anti-colonial struggle and its link to the revolution in the metropolis (and, inversely, the impact of the revolution in the fight for colonial independence); the effect of the colonial struggle on the military hierarchy; and the social features of the revolution. In Portugal, the ‘classically’ reformist objectives of the revolution (nationalisation, agrarian reform, better wages) took on a revolutionary dimension because they were achieved against the bourgeoisie through archetypal labour movement methods (strikes, land and factory occupations), and, in many cases, through autonomous workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ organisations.

The revolution was, then, the translation to the metropolis of Portugal’s colonial war defeat. In 1973, Amílcar Cabral’s African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde had declared unilateral independence for Guinea. In Mozambique and Angola, the Portuguese colonial army had suffered major losses. A civil war that had lasted for over thirteen years without a glimmer of a political solution, and with defeat imminent, provoked a crisis in the military hierarchy that underpinned the Caetano regime. As a result, the ruling class found it difficult to mobilise the army against the revolution, and significant sections of the military themselves became radicalised. This was, therefore, one of those moments in the history of the twentieth century where – following the analysis of the Third International – the revolutionary liberation movement for national independence of the colonies combined with the revolutionary workers’ movement in the metropolis.

The typical metaphor used by historians of the Portuguese revolution is apt – the military coup uncovered a ‘pressure cooker’. However, the events of 1974 became even more explosive once they combined with a prolonged national crisis, reflected not only in the Caetano regime’s incapacity to win the colonial battle, but in the freeze on social mobility. More than 1.5 million workers left Portugal in search of work during the 1960s, while the global economic downturn of 1973 (the most sustained crisis since the war, in which US production fell by 10.4 per cent in 1974 and unemployment stood at 9 per cent) saw Portugal’s GDP growth-rate fall from 11.2 per cent in 1973 to 1.1 per cent in 1974 and contract to -4.3 per cent in 1975.

These objective factors, which formed part of a wider process of national decay, were complemented by the activities of the labour movement. Most of the social conflict that informed the Portuguese revolution was initiated from within the working class; for example, 19 per cent of labour disputes took place in the textile industry, 15 per cent in machinery and metal manufacturing, 9 per cent in construction and public works, and 7 per cent in the chemical and food industries. Such disputes also tended to emanate from within the industrial working-class communities of towns such as Porto and Setúbal, with Lisbon providing
the backdrop to 43 per cent of the above disputes. As this suggests, social conflict occurred mainly within those sectors of society that directly produced value; was engaged in by a relatively young working class, formed, in part, from the great migration from the rural to urban areas that began in the early 1960s; and was geographically concentrated around Greater Lisbon, the country’s disproportionately populous capital.

One week after the April coup, the annual May Day demonstrations drew half a million people in Lisbon alone. Medeiros Ferreira quotes studies that point to a hundred demonstrations throughout the country, involving approximately a million people, gathered to listen to some two hundred speakers. Squatters increasingly targeted empty homes and unused residential properties. In the first fifteen days of May there were strikes, stoppages and, in some cases, occupations in hundreds of factories and businesses.

Between April 1974 and November 1975, when a counter-revolutionary coup ensured the stabilisation of the state under a liberal democratic regime, Portugal experienced a revolutionary situation that facilitated: the end of the colonial war; the independence of the colonies; agrarian reform; the nationalisation of large national enterprises; the right to work; improved salaries; quality-driven public education and health services, extended across the whole population; and access to housing. Throughout the period, workers organised themselves in workers’ and soldiers’ committees, occupied land, and, within the military, formed an autonomous soldiers’ organisation, the SUV (Soldados Unidos Vencerão; Soldiers United Will Win), which created a ‘deliberative’ ambiance of participative democracy that so worried the military hierarchy that Democratic Unit Assemblies (ADUs) were established in the main military units.

**From Paris ’68 to Lisbon ’74**

The Portuguese revolution took place amidst years of economic upheaval and the greatest social transformation of the western world since the war ended in 1945. May 1968 opened up a new world situation, marked by two factors which had not occurred in developed countries since the defeat of Nazi-fascism in 1945 – the re-emergence of the mobilised working class in the political arena; and the end of the hegemony of pro-soviet communist parties.

The notion that May 1968 forged a revolutionary situation has been advanced by several historians. Peter Birke, for example, organised a pan-European study on the consequences of May 1968 across several countries, arguing that the period should be defined as a global revolution, with consequences that spread beyond Europe to the US, Brazil, Mexico and beyond. Arcary has also argued that ‘for the first time after the war, pre-revolutionary or directly revolutionary situations hit some countries in the centre of the world system’, while Loren Goldner has proposed that 1968 opened a ‘new era of global revolution’ that was followed by the ‘hot autumn’ of 1969 in Italy, the ‘more dispersed but more radical eruption of class warfare in Spain’, and the subsequent Portuguese revolution. Indeed, the events of May 1968, which saw the greatest general strike in post-war Europe, caused Gerald Ford, who served as US president from 1974 to 1977, to state that he feared a ‘domino effect’ (i.e. the force of example, the demonstration that you can try what others have already accomplished, the cumulative momentum of victory). In Italy, the 1968 students’ struggles were complemented by workers’ protests at Fiat in Turin, Pirelli in Milan, and the Petrochimico of Porto Marghera over the autumn of 1969. In July 1969, the social tensions were such that students and Fiat workers clashed with police in Turin during negotiations to renew the collective agreement of the metal-workers.

More broadly, of course, the United States was poised to lose the war in Vietnam, which was entering its final phase at the same time as the Watergate scandal led to President Nixon’s resignation in August 1974. Even Britain was experiencing what Giuseppe Mammarella has described as its ‘most difficult years’, during which class conflict manifested itself most obviously in the miners dispute that helped bring down the Conservative government of 1970-74. In 1973, too, General Augusto Pinochet mounted a coup with US support and the personal involvement of Henry Kissinger to overthrow the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular in Chile, thereby establishing one of the bloodiest dictatorships in Latin America. In October, the Middle East was wracked by the Yom Kippur war between Israel, Egypt and Syria.

The ‘Red Mediterranean’ appeared to pose a real threat. In Italy, Enrico Berlinguer’s ‘Historic Compromise’ between the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Christian Democrats was seriously at stake; in France,
amidst the aftermath of May 1968, the communists and socialists signed a ‘Joint Programme’. In neither of these countries did the communist party try to seize power through revolutionary action or seek to undermine the capitalist mode of production. But their election results suggested a social radicalisation that was feared by the ruling classes of western Europe and the United States. It was in just such a context that the Portuguese revolution took place.

The PCP and the strategy of ‘democratic revolution’

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) was most likely unaware that a military coup was scheduled to occur on 25 April 1974. The party may have suspected that something was afoot, most probably via underground information passed to the party by conscripted officers, but nothing indicated that the PCP was alert to the coup’s schedule. Certainly, the party did not change its strategy as outlined in *Rumo à Vitória – As Tarefas do Partido na Revolução Democrática e Nacional*, the report presented to the sixth party congress held in Kiev in September 1965 by Álvaro Cunhal, the party’s charismatic general secretary between 1961 and 1992. Cunhal’s report described Portugal as a backward country, placed last in terms of European development. It was, Cunhal insisted, ‘dominated by a handful of monopoly groups and big landowners who sacrifice the people’s and the country’s interests for their own good’. Given this, neither the internal contradictions of the dominant class nor foreign pressure was deemed such that the overthrow of the dictatorship was possible. The PCP was therefore to lead the workers in unity with all progressive social sectors, including petty and middle bourgeoisie. In such a way, the sixth congress confirmed the policy of class collaboration advocated by the Soviet Union from 1935.

The PCP’s analysis was (and remains) based on the premise that the thesis of national uprising was confirmed by history. However, the reality of the situation was somewhat different; and the party’s leaders had to adjust to it. The dictatorship was overthrown not because Portugal was a backward nation, but because it was an imperial one – the war of liberation led by the African peoples paved the way for the terminal crisis of the regime, putting an end to it in a few hours, almost without violence. It was not a revolution led by the masses in association with progressive military sectors, but a coup d’état organised by a group of middle-range officers – united in the captains’ movement – who would not continue with a war they deemed lost.

But the PCP’s inability to forecast the contradictions that led to the demise of the regime did not affect its strength. Indeed, the party’s growth was so spectacular that it emerged as the principal party of the Portuguese working class during the revolutionary period. To give an idea of the PCP’s expansion, its membership grew from some 3,000 in April 1974, to 30,000 in October of the same year, and up to 100,000 by May 1975. Over the same two years, the party extended its influence over key sectors of the workers and trade unions, participated in the provisional government, and boasted trusted comrades within the military hierarchy.

The party was also quick to lend its backing to the events of 25 April 1974. Several PCP pamphlets were issued to state the party’s support for the MFA and the Junta de Salvação Nacional’s (JSN) democratisation measures, though warning that the party would further demand a general amnesty, political rights and liberties, the end of the colonial war, and better living conditions for the workers. However, the most significant feature of the PCP’s policy in the immediate aftermath of the coup related to its willingness to participate in the proposed provisional government.

Álvaro Cunhal, in his speech at INATEL stadium, where a May Day demonstration of some 500,000 people was taking place, insisted that both working-class unity with democratic forces and the MFA and the enactment of the PCP’s proposed legalisation depended on its participation in the Provisional Government and the country’s democratisation. Indeed, the taboo of the Yalta and Potsdam agreements, which ‘forbade’ communist participation in western governments, had fallen into disrepair in response to the crisis provoked by the military coup. On 29 April, therefore, the PCP was welcomed as a partner by the JSN. For Mário Soares, the Socialist Party leader who set out on a series of meetings with western diplomats from 2 May 1974, the PCP’s entry into the government was necessary because it was the best organised political organisation in a situation where neither the right nor the social-democrat left had the capacity to reorganise themselves as quickly. If the PCP did not enter the government, Soares argued, they might demand immediate elections that only they had the political apparatus capable of winning. As a result, Soares sought to obtain, in his own words, at least a year to organise the
Socialist Party before elections were scheduled to take place. It was also, the socialist leader argued, necessary to place the burden of controlling the potentially explosive social movement developing in Portugal – amidst the ongoing colonial war, economic crisis and widespread popular mobilisation – on the PCP’s back.\(^\text{13}\)

Communists entered the first provisional government, inaugurated on 16 May 1974. Their participation in government was deemed so important that the first legal edition of *Avante!* – the PCP newspaper – was printed almost a month after the coup, on 17 May 1974. The objective of the cross-class government, in which the communists Álvaro Cunhal (minister without portfolio) and Avelino Gonçalves (labour minister) served alongside social democrats and liberals, was ‘to eliminate the state’s fascist structures, democratising political life, put an end to colonial war and prepare and carry through elections for the Constitutional Assembly’. This was to be done in liaison with the JSN and the President of the Republic, General António de Spínola.

The first legal edition of *Avante!* began with an echo of the PCP Central Committee’s (CC) announcement of 4 May, condemning ‘leftism’, ‘provocative’ strikes and spontaneous demonstrations. The PCP insisted the strikers were ‘reactionaries’ whose actions would ‘objectively suit the counter-revolution’.\(^\text{14}\) The second fortnight of May was then marked by a radicalisation of social conflicts. The setting-up of the first provisional government, and the PCP’s appeal for the working class to support the government, in no way eased the tension. The government’s decision, on 14 May, to approve a minimum wage of 3300 *escudos*, much less than the workers demanded, only provoked even more strikes and occupations of plants and companies. Demands for wages over 4000 *escudos*, or even 6000, were common. The metal industry, for instance, demanded a minimum wage of 6000 *escudos*, before the union accepted 4500 *escudos* in an agreement signed on 12 June with the Ministry of Labour under the direction of the PCP.

There was also a qualitative change in the PCP’s policy towards the social movement following its entry into government: the party militated and actively mobilised against strikes. Nor did the PCP mince its words. In the official CC bulletins distributed publicly, the party reaffirmed that the strikes were directed by ‘those who are interested in the return of fascism’.\(^\text{15}\) Such a position was soon tested. On 27 May, bread workers went on strike in defiance of their union. In Lisbon, bus workers for Carris also struck, as did the postal workers, meaning the capital lacked public transport, mail and bread within the first ten days of the provisional government. The PCP’s response was to denounce the strikes, as the CC made clear:

> We are facing a collusion of the most reactionary elements not yet dislodged from their positions by the April 25 movement, who with the deliberate aid of some so-called leftist adventurous groups are trying to bring about economic chaos and destroy the democratic conquests achieved so far.

On 7 June, the PCP described the end of the strikes as the ‘first defeat of the counter-revolution’.\(^\text{16}\)

Similarly, when Intersindical – the single union federation supported by the communists – staged a demonstration against the strikes at Eduardo VII Park in Lisbon on 1 June 1974, the PCP mobilised in support and called on all workers to participate in a ‘protest demonstration against the manoeuvres of the workers’ enemies and in solidarity with the Armed Forces’.\(^\text{17}\) The demonstration numbered, according to the PCP, some 10,000 workers, who cried out ‘No to strikes for the sake of striking’.\(^\text{18}\) Avelino Gonçalves, the PCP minister of labour, applauded the Intersindical demonstration:

> Comrades. On behalf of the Government, especially the Ministry of Labour, I thank you for your demonstration … [and for] keeping your voice clear and audible, denouncing and defeating the reactionary manoeuvres, and tracing with exemplary maturity a line of realistic unionist action, against the opportunism and adventurism that would lead to chaos and division of the democratic forces …\(^\text{19}\)

### The workers’ committees

As Soares noted, one of Cunhal’s central objectives was to ensure the stability of the working class. In the first months of the revolution, this resulted in a generalised policy of containing the workers’ struggle and building the Intersindical in order to override the embryonic forms of
dual power appearing everywhere in the form of workers’ committees. These were soviet-type forms of organisation that arose as a result of the strength of the labour movement after the revolution. They were formed in almost every factory and workshop in the country, comprising elected assemblies of workers following the principle of free revocability (though this principle was rarely applied). It was, moreover, to be the workers’ committees, rather than the union leaders, that provided the source of most conflicts within industry and the services sector at the beginning of the Portuguese Revolution. They provoked many of the most important labour disputes and thus garnered the opposition of the PCP and most trade union leaderships, who labelled them ‘wild forms of organization, instruments of the bosses and the “divisionists”’.20

Avante!’ had outlined the party’s policy towards the ‘working masses’ in its first legal edition: this was to call on workers to organise and place themselves under the command of the Intersindical – ‘the only truly representative interlocutor of the Portuguese workers’ interests’. In order to reinforce the Intersindical’s position, the PCP was to lend it its strength, and not allow ‘it to get away from its main goals’. Its strategy was to be ‘based on a solid workers’ organization, coordinated in its unitary action together with all anti-fascist forces in order to deepen democratic liberties and to build up and consolidate a democratic state’. Already, the PCP warned the workers: ‘it is not the structures which should be great, but the struggles’.21 Once the revolution was underway, however, the reality was that the autonomous workers’ organisations proliferated and were far more numerous than the trade unions, which were still in the process of rebuilding themselves. In 1976, a group of sociologists analysed the location of ‘labour conflict negotiation’ within 158 industries (comprising the electricity, trade, transportation, banking and insurance sectors). They reported that conflict had broken out in 61 cases within the workers’ committees; compared to just six instances in the company committees; 10 in national or district unions; 13 in the Ministry of Labour; and 26 in the JSN or MFA.22 These reports relate only to the period between 25 April and 1 June 1974, but still strongly suggest that the workers’ committees had a far more significant influence over shopfloor unrest than the PCP-supported Ministry of Labour, the JSN and MFA. The Intersindical, moreover, which had been founded in 1970, was still at an embryonic stage when the dictatorship fell, repre-

senting only 12 unions. By May 1974, it represented no more than 54 unions.23

Tensions over the issue of strikes led the PCP towards confrontation with the labour movement. As António Ventura has noted:

The PCP’s participation in the government, whose Ministry of Labour it controlled, led the party to try and block the demands of the movement that exploded everywhere and which it considered dangerous for the new regime’s consolidation. This led to frequent confrontations with the extreme left, which spread its influence by supporting the most advanced economic and political struggles. Workers’ and dwellers’ committees were set up free from the influence of the PCP and informed by old and new ‘leftist’ organizations.24

Social tensions in the summer of 1974

The summer of 1974 saw three strikes that exerted a significant economic and political impact: the Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP), Jornal do Comércio and Lisnave shipyards strikes. The period was also marked by a deepening economic crisis that led to an increasing number of redundancies. In response, workers from factories and businesses occupied their work premises, took their bosses hostage or prevented them from entering the workplace. The government, in turn, reacted with a wave of repression, including the militarisation of TAP employees and the passage into law of restrictions on the right to strike. The latter measure served only to exacerbate social tensions within Portugal, not only among workers but also in the military, where the impact of the revolution was beginning to be felt at the level of the ordinary soldier.

The TAP strike was highly symbolic. It was a workers’ struggle in a key sector of the economy, and it was repressed at gunpoint by a government of which both socialists and communists were part. On 2 May 1974, the TAP trade union commission presented a document to the JSN which included a series of wage, sanitation and organisational demands that highlighted the need for self-management and the reinstatement of all workers previously dismissed without just cause. In an attempt to reconcile the interests of all involved in the conflict, an Administrative
Commission was created that comprised three workers’ representatives, alongside three military junta members, and was chaired by Colonel Moura Pinto. On 25 July, the Base Workers’ Committees (COB) released a statement insisting that there could be no reconciliation of conflicting class interests within a capitalist company, and issued a document calling for a strike in August to demand *saneamentos* (the dismissal of cadres connected with the Salazar-Caetano regime), re-negotiation of the collective bargaining agreement, and a prohibition on unfair dismissals:

> We shall not be intimidated by manoeuvres trying to make us give up our struggle, especially by those who invoke the spectre of economic chaos. Economic chaos has always existed and still exists. Economic chaos consists in production not being oriented to meet the needs of the majority and instead being oriented to obtain the maximum profit for a minority. That is economic chaos and this chaos will end only when our struggle achieves the final victory, capitalism is overthrown and we the workers control the entire society in order to achieve a classless society, without exploiters or exploited.\(^{25}\)

On 26 August, the deadline set by the workers, employees of the Division of Maintenance and Engineering, went on strike. The government responded by sending in troops to suppress the action and, two days later, workers were subject to the Rules of Military Discipline. Such measures were supported by both the Socialist Party and the PCP. According to *Avante!*:

> A strike in TAP now will only serve the reactionary forces, because it will paralyze the country’s only airline at a time when the political and economic situation is difficult. It would represent a clear sabotage of the ongoing process of democratization.\(^{26}\)

Four days earlier, on 22 August 1974, the three hundred workers of Oporto newspaper, *Jornal do Comércio*, moved to occupy the company premises, demand the resignation of Carlos Machado, and wage parity with fellow workers on the *Diário Popular*. They called for freedom of the press and accused the newspaper of having an extreme-right political line that it forced its workers to follow. Given the administration’s refusal to negotiate, the workers continued their action and resolved to publish a strike newspaper. The government, again with the support of the PCP, responded with the threat of armed retaliation. On the night of 26-27 August, the Public Security Police (PSP) and a battery of the Light Artillery Regiment 1 surround the premises. On 28 August, the occupiers were evicted and the premises sealed to prevent further printing of the strike newspaper.

Such action brought forth a wave of solidarity from all sections of the press. On 29 August, the Journalists’ Union (SJ) declared its support for the protest; and on 3 September, a meeting convened by the SJ and the Graphic Arts, Proofreaders, Newspaper and Lottery Sellers’ Trade Union called for a 24-hour national strike. On 4 September, only two newspapers were published: the *O Século* and the *Diário de Lisboa*. Meanwhile, the *Jornal do Comércio* strike lasted for 46 days.

The Lisnave workers’ struggle, which developed into a fight against strike legislation, caused the government intense difficulties. Like TAP, the Lisnave shipyards were of strategic economic importance for the country, but they were also a heavy industry company located on the south bank of the Tagus and a stronghold of the Portuguese working class. On 7 September, an assembly of 2000 workers ratified the decision to organise a march by the Lisnave metal workers to the Ministry of Labour in Praça de Londres in the centre of Lisbon. There the workers demanded the *saneamento* of the management and the repeal of what was labelled in the workers’ press releases as the ‘anti-strike law’.

The government responded on 11 September, forbidding the demonstration for fear that the unrest would spread to other companies. On the same day, the PCP distributed a statement arguing that the workers were not acting independently, that they had been led politically astray by ‘irresponsible groups’, and that the demonstration represented an ‘expression of hostility to the government and of disrespect for democratic order’.\(^{27}\) The PCP remained concerned, however, by the anti-government sentiments of the demonstration. Fátima Patriarca has suggested that the PCP response was not well received in the Margueira shipyard. Even those workers who were members of the PCP and unsympathetic to the strike baulked at taking a definite stand against it, and some later even participated in the demonstration. Patriarca also mentions workers who claimed...
to have torn up the PCP’s statement when they received it. In the event, attempts by a delegation of the MFA to postpone the demonstration failed. On 12 September, the workers reaffirmed their commitment to demonstrate, with only 25 voting against the action. In the event, although a large military presence was dispatched to surround the shipyard, the six-hour demonstration began at 5.20 pm, and swamped Lisbon’s main avenues.

The Law on Strikes that aroused such hostility had been passed on 27 August 1974, with the specific intention of preventing demonstrations against the government. It was, however, immediately seen by many on the left as a law ‘against the workers’. The main features of the law were: (a) it was not allowed for collective agreements to be renegotiated prior to their fixed term – which meant, in the context of double-digit inflation, that wages were quickly eaten up by price rises, and employers were thus able to extract extra surplus value; (b) strikes were prohibited in the military and militarised forces, the fire service, police force and judicial magistracy; (c) the ‘unilateral termination of employment by personnel in strategic sectors of the company, in order to disrupt production’ was forbidden, as was the occupation of work premises during any such strike; (d) political and solidarity strikes were prohibited; (e) employers were ensured the right to lockout employees engaged in industrial action.

This law was issued with the support of the PCP, but in effect it conceded the lack of control that communists and other components of the provisional government (including the military) were able to exert over the working class. But the law’s obvious targets – solidarity strikes and occupations – were to be fought de facto by TAP and Jornal do Comércio strikers, and the legislation was to be openly defied in the demonstration of the Lisnave shipyards workers, who stated:

That we are not with the government when it enacts laws against the working class, which are restrictive of the workers’ struggle against capitalist exploitation. That we’ll actively fight the ‘Law on Strikes’ because it is a deep blow against the workers’ freedoms. That we reject the right of employers to put thousands of workers into poverty because the lockout law is a law against the workers and to protect the capitalists.

The ‘reconstruction of the nation’

The seventh congress of the PCP was held on 20 October 1974 at the Sports Pavilion in Lisbon, and was the first to be held legally after the April defeat of fascism. This was a privileged moment of public affirmation for the PCP, which stood as the largest political party in the country, and received due praise as the organisation that had most consistently and persistently resisted repression amidst the difficult conditions of illegality. Among the 36 members of the central committee, only four had not been arrested and jailed during the Estado Novo. In total, Octávio Pato recalled, the party’s CC members had spent 308 years in prison, and he referred to each of the former prisoners in turn over the course of his speech to congress. The strength and tenacity of the party activists was indisputable, and perhaps helps explain the growth and consolidation of the PCP after April 1974. As Joaquim Pires Jorge made clear in his opening speech to congress, the ‘resistance […] explains the confidence of the masses in our party’. This, in turn, as Loren Goldner reminds us, recalled the speeches of Maurice Thorez, Jacques Duclos and Palmiro Togliatti in the years that followed the Second World War, which invoked the (deserved) status of the PCF and the PCI as parties of the resistance dedicated ‘rebuilding the nation’.

Although the dictatorship had not fallen as a direct result of a communist-led revolution, the PCP was nevertheless in position to claim the mantle of vanguard party in April 1974, with some 2,000 militants hardened in the struggle against fascism. The extreme left, which grew in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, May ‘68 and the radicalisation of youth over the 1960s and 1970s, really only existed in small groups, and comprised mainly students. As for the Socialist Party, formed in 1973 in West Germany, it was until April 1974 little more than a nucleus consisting of a few dozen lawyers and other professionals.

Even so, the PCP congress was not convened to discuss party policy. It was scheduled to last for a single day, and there was just one item on its agenda: the discussion and approval of the programme and statutes of the PCP. And although 1,003 delegates and approximately 4,000 members were present, more than half of the 50 contributions were speeches made by members of the party’s executive bodies. Each point of the PCP’s programme needed thorough discussion. But the congress took the form
of a rally, during which the principal leadership simply gave speeches of unreserved support for the new party programme. As was usual, the CC was presented to – rather than elected by – the congress, with a slate of candidates comprised of cadres active from before the revolution. Indeed, the core leadership group remained unchanged from April 1974. As the survey undertaken by Schmitter discovered, the average length of party service of the CC membership was 32 years, with 20 years the minimum and 48 years the maximum term. Cunhal had been a member of the party since 1933 and of the CC since 1937. According to Schmitter, such figures suggested that the PCP was:

headed in a very oligarchic manner by a compact group of dedicated men who know each other well as a result of their long suffering together in prison and in exile. Their leading positions are not open but very gradually co-opted. Their internal differences appear to be minimal in public.33

Ostensibly, the congress was designed to adjust the party programme to the new political reality marked by the global economic crisis of 1973-4 and the onset of revolution. The proposed changes were compiled in the Plataforma de Emergência (Emergency Platform), which set out a series of measures designed to overcome any obstacles to the continuation of production, whether mounted by sectors of the bourgeoisie (economic sabotage, asset-stripping companies) or the workers (strikes, struggles for wage increases).34 These proposals included the strengthening of the democratic state and the freedoms to be obtained through saneamentos (the PCP sought to secure positions within the state apparatus for its most trusted cadres), the defence of civil liberties and a ban on all fascist organizations; and the ‘defence of economic and financial stability to guarantee development’, which was interpreted to mean control of public finances, nationalisation of some banks, the state regulation of private banking, control of capital transactions, support for industry, especially medium and small industry, and state intervention into companies that were in ‘difficulty’, or made unfair dismissals, or appeared financially wayward. (Notably, state ownership of transport, communications, mining and energy, as provided for in Rumo à Vitória, had disappeared from the Platform).35 Land reform also disappeared from the programme, which called only for the abolition of the foros and delivery of the common land to the public; lending to small and medium farmers and the ‘taxation of absentee landlords and tenants’; and the direction and planning of foreign trade in agreement with the European Common Market. Foreign capital was to remain untouched, with a ‘total guarantee’ to ensure the consolidation of the economic and financial situation in return for the lowest profit rates, the highest wages and respect for democracy.

With regard to the working class, the Platform validated the PCP’s policy to date.36 It envisaged a series of measures to advance and protect workers, including: the continuation of collective bargaining and the enforcement of collective agreements; the prohibition of unfair dismissals; restraint on the prices of staple goods and the regulation of wages to meet rising prices; and public works and the improvement of social benefits (pensions, allowances, medical assistance, etc.). All of these measures reflected the strength of the workers’ struggle and offered a vast improvement on the situation prior to April 1974, but remained some way short of the position in other democratic capitalist countries such as France or Germany.37 Indeed, Cunhal was clear about this when he told congress that the price of liberty might be the containment of workers’ claims.38

Cunhal’s speech, following the opening address by Joaquim Pires Jorge, welcomed all those in attendance, and proclaimed the congress’s legality as ‘proof of the radical political transformation [that had] occurred in Portugal since 25 April’. Even so, Cunhal defined the PCP’s approach in October 1974 in a way that dated back to the popular front approach of the Communist International in the mid to late 1930s. This included the contentious idea that capitalism would die of ‘natural causes’;39 and the assertion that Portugal was unable to become a ‘bourgeois democracy’, meaning that the counter-revolution would necessarily take a terrorist form rather than a democratic one.40 The source for this view – which he did not refer to in his speech but was widely acknowledged by the PCP in various documents – was the coup that had taken place in Chile in September 1973, led by General Augusto Pinochet.

Conclusions

There was much more at stake for Portugal in 1974-5 than the consolidation of a democratic regime. The political analysis of the PCP did not
survive a reality test for more than two years: the counter-revolution in Portugal, in Greece (which had just come out of a military dictatorship), and in post-Franco Spain came through democratic means and not under the boots of a Chilean-style military dictatorship. Portugal did face a dictatorship or democracy dichotomy in 1974, as the PCP suggested; but this possibility was resolved in the first weeks of the revolution, when the people destroyed in a few hours the political structures of fascism – almost without resistance – and opened the prison doors to liberate political prisoners. And, while some with connections to the former dictatorship played their part in the alliance of the Socialist Party and the ‘Group of 9’ in the ‘hot summer’ of 1975, they were never a threat to the democratic regime. The counter-revolution that began with the coup of 25 November 1975 was led by forces that the PCP had defended in a political alliance, including the Socialist Party and most of the MFA, and was led by those who had argued for the consolidation of a liberal democratic regime. In other words, it was forged from among the PCP’s allies, and, on the very day of the coup, with the consent of the party. The consolidation of democracy – to which the PCP made an essential contribution – was achieved, but the possibility of a relatively independent capitalism emerging from the revolution soon proved to be utopian.

As noted at the beginning of this article, there are few opportunities to study the history of a pro-Soviet communist party in western Europe at the opening of a revolutionary process. But Portugal provided one, and its study allows for a historical comparison that enables us to deepen our knowledge about the realities of complex social transformation. Admittedly there is no pure model of revolution, despite the tendency of scholars to compare all contemporary revolutionary processes with the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions. Indeed, there is also a tendency to compare the PCP with the Bolsheviks, discussed in terms of the ‘leninisation’ of the PCP’s strategy – which some authors associate with the Fifth Provisional Government and others with 25 November. Most would also believe that comparison with the Russian revolution can enrich the investigation of communist parties, and the history of revolution and the labour movement. Nevertheless, our findings are different.

There are a number of substantial differences between the strategy of the PCP and that of the Bolsheviks. Firstly, at the beginning of the revolutionary process, the PCP advocated participation in a provisional government with the bourgeoisie. Lenin, in 1917, led the Russian revolution, defending its transmutation from a bourgeois revolution into a workers’ revolution, with the theoretical justification that the revolution would not solve its democratic, bourgeois tasks without the access of the proletariat to power; and that the proletariat, once in power, could not remain confined to the model of a bourgeois revolution. On 3-4 April 1917, in his well-known ‘April Theses’, Lenin defended his approach against the then majority of the Bolshevik central committee, which advocated participation in government.

Secondly, in the midst of the largest and most radicalised outbreak of strikes Portugal had ever experienced, the PCP mobilised against the protests and called on workers to offer a ‘day of work to the nation’ (4 June), encouraging them to demonstrate their loyalty to the Intersindical. Lenin’s call, when he arrived in Russia, was ‘All power to the soviets’, which were not then dominated by the Bolsheviks, but by the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. There is no echo of this in the PCP’s addresses to workers following the revolution.

Thirdly, during the revolutionary crisis from September to November 1975, the PCP – whilst trying to lead some of the workers’ committees – opposed any form of national coordination. Against the soviet-like committees in the armed forces (soldiers’ committees), the PCP defended the re-composition of the MFA and the retention of ADUs composed equally of officers and soldiers. Against the Bolshevik call for workers’ control, the demand for which was made in Russia on 8 November 1917, and which explicitly determined workers’ control over production and distribution enforced by delegates elected in general assemblies of workplaces, the PCP proposed only a form of co-management between union members and representatives of the state in the nationalised industries.

If a comparison can be made with the Russian revolutionary process, then it would be between the PCP and the Mensheviks, who participated in the provisional government and pursued a policy of national reconstruction, made on the basis of an alliance between different classes. The PCP’s policy was founded on the idea of a final crisis of capitalism, a mode of production that would supposedly ‘drop dead’ when the objective conditions were ripe, and which Rumo à Vitória summed up as follows: ‘Capitalism cannot solve the irreconcilable contradiction that corrodes it and eventually will dig its grave’. Moreover, the PCP was an organisa-
tion that, across Portugal as a whole, reflected the setbacks that the wider labour and socialist movement had suffered with the defeat of the 1918 German revolution, the failure of the revolution in the industrialised west, the isolation of the Soviet Union and the rise to power of Stalin. From isolation to a class-alliance policy was but one small step. If you side with the nation, it is for the nation and not for the working class that you build a policy. Today it seems clear that at the beginning of the Portuguese revolution the most interesting analogy sets the PCP’s policy alongside the theory of progressive bourgeois camps advocated by the Mensheviks in the Russian revolution – the idea that there are progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie with which the workers should seek to build alliances.

And if another comparison is allowed, then it is with the camp of counter-revolution as understood in its historical sense; i.e. the camp of parties and organisations that opposed the revolution but comprised more than one objective. The openly bourgeois component was embodied by Spinola, who until March 1975 was relatively isolated from other sectors of the Portuguese ruling class. The objective of the Socialist Party and ‘Group of 9’, which came to include the Spinolists during the ‘hot summer’ of 1975, gradually succeeded with the victory of the market economy. And then there was the PCP objective, in which the party was accompanied by sectors of the MFA and the extreme left, who longed for a regulated and relatively independent capitalism that respected the main capitalist countries, did not question the maintenance of Portugal in the sphere of NATO, and did not require an end to the private ownership of the means of production. Kerensky, let us not forget, was in the streets of Russia fighting against Kornilov, in the same way that the PCP was an essential force in the streets of Portugal defeating Spinola. The same Kerensky was two months later opposing the Bolsheviks, and the assumption of power by soviets led by the Bolsheviks. In the same way, the PCP refused to create and support the forms of dual power that would lead to the seizure of power by the working class, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, and so initiate the transition towards socialism.

Notes

10. Ibid, p23.
13. FCO 9/2072, Visit by Dr Mário Soares, Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs to London and other European capitals, 1–6 May 1974, in the papers of the Foreign Office, Central Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Southern European Department, National Archive.
15. ‘Caminho difícil mas imperioso’, Avante!, 7 June 1974, p1.