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### **Portugal 1974 – when workers and soldiers united in revolt.**

**Jim O'Connell writes about the 'Carnation Revolution' of April 25<sup>th</sup> 1974.**

In the last few weeks in Olhao in the Eastern Algarve region of Portugal an online concert of songs commemorated the 'Carnation Revolution' of 1974. This event, like many others across Portugal, shows how strong the memory of the '74 revolution is among the Portuguese working class.

It is referred to as the 'Carnation Revolution' because some of the most memorable images of the time were those of young soldiers on the streets with flowers in their gun barrels - placed there by crowds of working people, thankful for their newfound freedom and anxious to maintain it through protest.

A coup by a relatively small group of junior army officers, unhappy with the worsening social and economic situation, Portugal's wars and living under a right-wing dictatorship, achieved quick and spectacular victories.

Unrest in Portugal's African colonies had erupted into open warfare in 1961. Portuguese soldiers were being killed at an alarmingly rate in actions against freedom fighters and demoralisation spread in the army.

After the end of the monarchy in 1910 Portugal had gone through a period of Republicanism which was fiercely opposed to the powerful and conservative Catholic church. This period was brought to an end in 1926 by a military coup that led to the coming to power of the oppressive right-wing regime of the 'Estado Novo'. This far right regime remained in place right up to the early 70s.

The dominant figure was António de Oliveira Salazar. He was an admirer of both Hitler and Mussolini, Salazar went on to enforce his own brand of fascist rule until 1968 when he was removed from office for health reasons, dying in 1970.

By the time Salazar was replaced by Marcello Caetano, Portugal was undergoing economic crisis. In the late hours of April 24<sup>th</sup> the rising against the regime was started by playing a Eurovision song on the radio as a signal to begin.

As the small units of military rebels made their moves across Lisbon, Porto and other areas around the country, they were quickly joined by other soldiers and military units. Before long and without much resistance, the rebel soldiers were in control.

What happened next was not part of the rebel's plans.

Workers and students alongside radical left activists, who had come out of hiding, took over public buildings, schools and workplaces. Prisons were opened. Political dissidents and military prisoners were freed. The red flag of the socialist working class was flying everywhere.

The coup was becoming a true people's revolution. Ordinary people, released from under the heel of the oppressive regime were determined to seize the opportunity for real freedom. Land and property were taken into public ownership.

But the ordinary people of Portugal were also taken by surprise.

Though they were emboldened to take over public land, institutions, and workplaces they still lacked the confidence, consciousness and experience to push the revolution even further and establish a new Portuguese state from below – one that was based on democratic assemblies in all the major workplaces and working-class communities.

The revolution was threatened from many sides. The obvious enemy, the home-grown right-wing supporters of the dictatorship were easy to identify, to fight and push back. More difficult to deal with was the sometimes subtle, sometimes openly brutal forces of international capitalism with their control of the global economy.

But it was the enemies 'within' that eventually led to the demise of the revolution.

Stalinist communists, obsessed with central control moved to take advantage of the people's revolution by organising themselves as local figureheads of the struggle with little accountability. They helped to stabilise the situation and rescue the machinery of the Portuguese state. Instead of arguing for a new state to be built by the revolution - they saved the old one.

Into this space moved reformist Social Democratic parties and groups, who shamelessly expropriated the title of 'socialist' and took advantage of both the lack of confidence of the workers and the backlash against the Stalinism of the Communist Party.

The power of the people was allowed to be usurped by professional politicians who rescued Portuguese capitalism in the name of 'socialism' – but once the revolution had been tamed the workers returned to their factories to find the same old bosses in control.

Should the momentous events of 1974 and the Portuguese Carnation Revolution be celebrated?

Most definitely they should. Those events demonstrated that even in a time of deep oppression, the united determination of ordinary people can quickly throw off the shackles of an oppressive regime. The coup provided a crack, an opening, and the people rose.

But the revolution also showed that without a leadership drawn from the ranks of the working-class revolutions can be co-opted by those who want to bring the revolt back into harmony with an exploitative and corrupt system.

The Portuguese, in general, are justifiably proud of the events and achievements of the Carnation Revolution.

Visiting Portugal today anyone with even a moderate political eye can discern the spirit of a people who, not so long ago seized the initiative from military dissidents and showed how revolution can emerge.

When the current pandemic conditions allow, people will soon gather once again in cafes and bars and in sunlit public areas - perfect settings for exchanging views and news. Maybe having seen how quickly global conditions can change the talk may be less on soccer and more on a future rising of the working class.

A Luta Continua! (The fight goes on!)

**The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.**

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