

Portugal: nation in a vacuum

Special Report

Shortly after I had returned to Stirling from Portugal a friend here said to me, "I heard the Portuguese are a serious people. Is that true?", and I thought it strange he should say that. One of the most striking things about the people of Lisbon was their somber attitude. A burst of laughter is almost an extinct species in Lisbon. There are reasons for this, I don't believe it is an intrinsic part of the Portuguese, though 48 years of fascism no doubt helped to create that sort of illusion. None-the-less, all I can do here is present a sketch of the people and circumstances I encountered in Portugal and hope it is sufficient to give a clearer picture of the Portuguese than you might've had before.



The event which remains at the centre of my Portugal experience occurred on Wednesday of my second week there. On that day police shot into a crowd wounding six and killing one. The papers in Lisbon and overseas said there were agitators in the crowd and that they provoked the crowd to attack the police. They didn't say the crowd chased the police after they had arrested two strikers. They didn't say that the crowd was made up almost entirely of strikers, comrades of the arrested men. When the papers said there were agitators in the crowd they neglected to name the police as the agitators. Such is the repression which is slowly beginning to grow in Portugal.



The police dispersed the crowd with automatic weapons and truncheons, lovingly called 'head crackers' by those who use them. They used their weapons indiscriminately. One woman of about 55 who was straggling from the retreating crowd was given a sound whack on her right shoulder near the base of her neck by an officer eager

to keep the peace. When she received she immediately stopped running and turned on the cop who had hit her. There in the middle of the street, with the cops friends approaching and the sound of gunfire dangerously close,

'Communists' are usually moderates but there's no time to figure out the particulars. The arguments are too short and heated to allow it



she confronted this 'John Wayne prototype. She kicked and hit him until he retreated, presumably to replace his 'head cracker', which had proved inadequate, with an automatic weapon. The woman got away safely accompanied by the cheers of the retreated crowd. Such is the spirit the Portuguese retain in the face of repression.

"THE ONLY LAW IS THE LAW OF THE WORKERS"

I was able to speak with some heads of the Electricians Union, one of the unions which called out 75,000 people to a demonstration my first Saturday in Lisbon. I was talking to one head about the government freeze on wages and moves by the moves by the government to create laws which would divide the unions and weaken contracts. He told me that, "We will not accept these laws. The only law is the law of the revolution...of the workers. We will not allow our wages to be frozen. We will not allow the capitalists to ruin out economy and destroy the revolution."

His is not a unique attitude but it is an attitude which is tempered by an understanding of the present situation. On one side, people, such as the electrician, are faced with a government bureaucracy which is drifting slowly to the right, because of Western economic pressure, and on the other side they have a police force which has demonstrated the ease with which it will resort to violence. To stop the drift to the right they know they will have to confront the police, and while it may be inevitable it is not desirable. Hence, their words of action are fiery and grim.

People don't discuss politics in Portugal, they argue them. When two Portuguese are arguing politics both participants are soon labelled by their opponents as being in one of three categories. One is either a Fascist, a Communist or a Revolutionary. The

"IF WE DON'T STRIKE WE DON'T GET SHOT"

Not all people discuss politics though. There was a pimp who had some girls working a street corner near where I stayed. About every half hour he would cruise up to the corner and check the situation out. He drove a Mini with wide tyres. It was the most unpretentious pimp-mobile I've ever seen.

The pimp didn't discuss politics, or at least I had never heard him. Just out of curiosity on the Wednesday night of the shooting I asked him if he had heard about the killing. He said yes he had. I asked him what he thought of it. He said, "It does not bother me. I don't strike. The girls don't strike. If we don't strike we don't get shot."

The Angolan family who lived on the same floor as I at the hotel didn't discuss politics either. They were fully subsidized by the government and didn't work. They were white. The mother spent a good portion of the day yelling at and hitting her youngest son. The oldest boy sat in the kitchen and looked at his 'Money of the World' collection. At night, when the fuse blew, as it did at least five times every night, he would get up and rewire it then return to the kitchen and look at his collection some more. The pattern rarely varied. They didn't discuss politics.

THE PORTUGUESE WORKER IS SUBJECT TO THE WHIMS OF WESTERN ECONOMIC MANIPULATION

There were many people who, for one reason or another, didn't talk politics but who thought politics. It was clear it burned inside them. In and around the shanty towns the walls are thick with political slogans but it is impossible to get them to talk politics with an outsider. An outsider is anyone who is not from the shanty town. Most of the people in the shanty towns are black. They receive no government aid.

Continued on next page

The 350 workers in a factory in the north didn't talk politics either though they were militant. For almost a year they had had control of their factory but they tried to keep the fact hush because they feared economic boycotts if word got out that the factory was under workers control. Their fears were based on the experiences of other workers in other factories throughout Portugal. The experience of all Portuguese workers is based on the dictate summed up in a secret memo sent by the US to the MPLA. In essence the memo stated that 'all governments should recognise that economic and industrial development is impossible without the goodwill of the US'.

It is because of that sort of black mail policy that Portugal has an inflation rate which would make the inflation in other countries look as if it wouldn't blow up a basketball. To gain the goodwill of the US, which is manifested in the form of money and technical help, the government drifts to the right. To make sure that good will isn't lost the government slashes social service and education budgets, "because of inflation" while it increases the budget of the GNR (paramilitary police) so they can afford

the latest riot control equipment from the US.

Why be concerned about Portugal and work to help its workers? Because, when I was talking to a workers commission in one of the factories one of the members asked me if we "will help when we are political exiles?" He asked the question behind a poorly constructed facade of laughter. When he finished the question I told him about some of the work that has been done for Chilean exiles. He and other members of the commission listened closely. When I finished they looked at each other and were silent. Finally the man who had asked the question said "Thank you."

Trite?

Maybe, but it could well be that the men I spoke to will end up as political exiles if things don't change. Any help given them is of consequence. There is a void in the political scene at present and there is a leak of direction for the people because of it. Soon the void will be filled and whether its filled by the workers or by their blood depends on how much support they can rally overseas.



STUDENT?

Course? _____ Agreed
Digs? _____ Arranged
Books? _____ Reviewed
Grant? _____ Approved?
BANK ACCOUNT? NO....?

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