Since the end of April 1974, Wilfred Burchett has spent much of his time in Portugal reporting on political developments in that country. He is presently writing a book on his experiences.

Burchett gave this interview to Mavis Robertson in November 1974.

What were the social conditions which led to the changes in Portugal? In this context, could you comment on the following:

(a) The pressure of the movement for liberation in the colonies
(b) The position of women, e.g. as in the case of “The Three Marias”
(c) Other causes particularly the position of the working class.

At the end of almost 50 years of fascist dictatorship the social conditions in Portugal were conditioned by a corrupt, inefficient regime which maintained itself in power by the terrorist organs of state repression - symbolised by the hated PIDE (secret police). Inflation was running at not less than 30 per cent by 1973-74. A feudal type agriculture, with vast landed estates of absentee landlords in the South and pocket handkerchief plots of the small-holders in the North, made life on the land impossible. It was this that forced hundreds of thousands of farm workers to migrate - a total of 1,500,000 Portuguese were working abroad by early 1974; the population of Portugal itself had remained stagnant at about 9 million for the previous 10 years. Remittances of migrant earnings to their families provided Portugal’s major foreign exchange earnings. A secondary reason for migration was that of young people seeking to evade military service.

Industry was also highly inefficient. Salazar’s original policy had been to block the development of industry on the grounds that it would create an industrial proletariat and this would create communists. It was only after World War II that he was forced to permit a certain amount of development by monopolies protected from internal and external competition by the fascist regime. Three of the biggest of the monopolies were the CUF, concentrating on the main branches of heavy industry - steel, cement, electric power, ship building, heavy engineering, etc.; Champalimaud on medium and light industry and Banco Espirito Santo (literally, the Bank of the Holy Ghost) concentrating on banking. Naturally all three exploited the African colonies. They were protected from inside competition because they had an exclusive charter in
their own field, from outside competition by high tariffs; from labor troubles by the repressive organs of the fascist state.

The Ministry of Labor, for instance, was a 95 per cent police organisation engaged in trying to locate any "agitators" who sought to protect the workers' interests and handing the dossiers over to PIDE for action. Apart from local industry, the Caetano regime which followed that of Salazar opened the doors to the multinationals - American, West German, British, French, Swedish, Italian and other firms to establish plants in Portugal for the exploitation of the country's cheap labor. These plants contributed virtually nothing to the economy and were mainly engaged in assembling parts imported from abroad, the finished products then being exported. The technology remained entirely in the hands of the multinationals, workers did simple, repetitive assembly jobs, learning nothing which could be of use to local industry.

The situation of women was incredibly terrible. They had no rights whatsoever. They were doubly and trebly oppressed. It was entirely a male world, grounds for divorce, for example, being if a wife attended confession without the permission of her husband. The husband was the arbiter in all questions. Women had no right to vote - even in the phoney elections that took place from time to time. Their wages for doing the same work as men were usually about half. Women were forced to work in the factories and fields to fend off starvation, but there were no creches, nurseries, and practically no schools in the countryside for their children. There was a very high infant mortality rate due to lack of mid-wives, medical facilities, and a high rate of accidents to children at home (through fires) and on the roads from automobiles because the children were left at home, unguarded, while their parents worked. But the fact that women were alongside their menfolk in factory and field developed a great spirit of militancy among Portuguese women which I felt from the moment (April 25) when I set foot in the country. It is no accident that the most publicised martyr among progressive circles is the young peasant woman Caterina Eufemia, shot down as she headed a group of striking agricultural workers in the South in an earlier phase of the struggle against fascism.

Wherever I went, in factories and farms, and among the sardine fishermen at Peniche, local progressive men spoke of the role of women in supporting strike actions and in the front ranks battling with the police. The case of "The Three Marias", in their literary protest ("pornographic" in the eyes of the fascist law) against the total suppression of women's rights in every field, including sexuality, was symbolic of the generalised spirit of revolt among women and was one of the indicators that the country was ripe - if not for revolt - at least to support any move to overthrow the regime.

Despite the great difficulties and penalties for militancy, the Portuguese working class, and particularly the illegal Communist Party, never ceased struggling for better conditions. The April 25 coup caught the country in a wave of strikes - including among the sardine fishermen at Peniche and the excellent organisation and working class solidarity became apparent with the mighty May Day celebrations six days after the coup.

How much of the working class was in immigration? Have they now returned in large numbers?

There are 800,000 Portuguese in France alone. They are mostly from the land and have been recycled into industry - often the building trade. Official policy is not to encourage their return at this stage. With swiftly rising unemployment at home - due mainly to economic sabotage by the leading monopolies and the multinationals - plus the necessity of re-absorbing demobilised troops returning from the colonies - it is considered better to leave the migrants where they are. At least they have jobs and their remittances are a precious source of foreign exchange. A couple of months ago, tens of thousands
of them, in an organised action, returned to have a look and there was a mass meeting of about 100,000 in Lisbon addressed by premier Goncalves. There was fantastic enthusiasm and it was clear the migrants thoroughly approved what had happened.

The gainfully employed in Portugal are divided almost equally into three groups - agriculture, industry, trade and commerce.

What triggered off the change?

Profound dissatisfaction with the regime and recognition that the colonial wars were a major factor in the social-economic conditions at home. Demoralisation within armed forces, despised at home and among the whites in the colonies for their failure to win the African wars. A growing conviction within the Armed Forces that the armed struggle was completely hopeless and that there was no military solution.

The precise event which transformed dissatisfaction into action and finally led to the coup was the promulgation of a decree in July 1973 which offended the prestige of the officers' corps. Due to battlefield losses and the general erosion in the officers' corps, the Defence Ministry decreed that university graduates could take a six months' crash course in military training and become officers with the same ranks, grades and privileges, long-service benefits, etc. as those who had done four years' service in the field.

It was this that provoked the first meeting of officers in Lisbon - and in Guinea-Bissau - to discuss the situation. At first they had thought it would be sufficient to demand a repeal of the decree and the Caetano government would see the light. The result was PIDE action to try to discover the ring-leaders and to transfer some officers away from Lisbon. There were some purely titular changes at the top, but nothing else. The young officers - almost exclusively captains - decided to discuss further. Discussions led to the whole question of the African wars, and eventually to the nature of the regime which continued such senseless adventures. Finally, the conclusion was reached that the only way to change such a regime was to topple it by military force. The decision to stage a coup was taken in December 1973 after a step-by-step analysis and discussion on all available options.

An important factor in all this was the gradual change in the class composition of the officers' corps. Until the African wars started it was the exclusive upper class who sent their sons - at least one son - into the army. It was all glitter and braid and soft jobs in the colonies, etc. But when soldiering became an unpleasant and dangerous business, the upper crust found other jobs for their offspring. The social levels were lowered and it was the sons of the petit-bourgeoisie, even in some cases the working class - who entered the military academy. By the time the officers' discussions had started there was a sharp class differentiation between those of up to captain's rank and those with the rank of colonels and above - with a few majors closer to to the captains than to the colonels.

Within the armed forces, at all levels and in all three branches, there were communist organisations. This had been true from the 1930s. Sometimes these organisations, or part of them were uncovered and leaders arrested, but they were never uprooted. In the discussions which led to the decision to carry out a coup, it can be taken for granted that communist party members paid a role. The Program of the 8th Congress of the Communist Party in 1964 includes a passage to the effect that given the nature of the fascist regime, it could only be overthrown by armed insurrection in which part of the armed forces would participate and other parts would be neutralised.

It is logical to assume that from that time on the communist party worked to bring about precisely the sort of situation as erupted on April 25, 1974.
So what about the PCP - its work as an illegal organisation in the army, workplaces, rural areas - how did it exercise leadership from abroad?

In 1941 there was a big reorganisation of the PCP - in personnel, strategy and tactics. It was decided to organise a nucleus of clandestine, professional, full-time revolutionaries. There is here a distinction between illegal and clandestine. Clandestine members changed their names, often wore disguise, abandoned their families and their jobs, moved from place to place - in homes of trusted illegal workers who did not even know their true identity - and organised struggle against the regime at virtually every level - including among the intellectuals. When the first meeting of the Central Committee was held after April 25, it was calculated that those attending represented 240 years of prison and over 700 years of clandestine activity. One cannot say that the leadership was exercised from abroad. It was exercised from within the country - sometimes directly from the prisons. After secretary-general Alvaro Cunhal went into exile, he returned on several occasions to attend secret congresses, etc. I have met Central Committee members who spent between 15 and 21 years each in jail, but their activities as organisers never ceased during their prison terms.

It is said that the PCP is a pro-Soviet party and some claim that this is the source of its "conservatism". Is there any basis in such comments?

I consider the PCP is a party which, above all, has devoted itself to solving national problems in an original, revolutionary and national way. Under the most tremendous difficulties - cut off physically - from any contact with the international communist movement - except for those in exile - the PCP from 1941 onwards had engaged in revolutionary struggle with one aim - the overthrow of the fascist regime by armed insurrection. The step by step process which led to the April 25 coup had been followed by a step by step process since which has consolidated the alliance between the armed forces and the progressive forces, and is also part of an accelerated process according to a carefully formulated program which has socialism at the end of the road. My strongest impression is that the PCP is first and foremost a pro-Portuguese party, sticking to its aims with enormous sacrifices and with very far-sighted leadership. In many ways I am reminded of the Vietnamese Lao Dong Party when I am in Portugal.

When one considers the enormous difficulties and sacrifices that the NLF of South Vietnam had to overcome to get arms in their hands - using hoes, clubs, and picks - to wrest arms from the hands of the enemy, the success of the PCP policy in surfacing with a large proportion of the country’s armed forces siding with the country’s progressive forces, one can give due value to the correct, long-range tactics of the PCP.

In this context, it has been reported that the PCP has opposed strikes. Can you comment?

The PCP has opposed some strikes. These were strikes in the sectors of public transport, the PTT, and bread-baking industry. It has also opposed unrealistically high wage demands.

From April 25 onwards there have been three major counter-attacks by Portuguese reaction. The first was around the end of May, beginning of June. This was the economic attack on a pattern surprisingly similar to what happened in Chile, as part of the "softening up" process to overthrow the Allende regime. It is now public knowledge that the CIA was behind this. In Portugal, millions of dollars were paid out in support of strikes in the transport sector. From the very first days of the coup some of the big monopolies and the multinationals (including ITT of notoriety in the Chilean affair) suddenly started offering very big wage increases whereas before they had been refusing to honor even the modest wage contracts negotiated during the Caetano regime. This had a three-fold aim.
(a) to accelerate the process of swallowing up the medium and small enterprises by setting wage levels that the small and medium enterprises could not possibly pay; (b) creating mass unemployment by forcing the medium and small enterprises to close down, thus contributing to economic chaos; (c) by setting abnormally high wage levels the monopolies hoped to provoke a wave of strikes as workers strove to attain the high levels suddenly offered by the monopolies.

PCP policy was in line with that of the Armed Forces program which provided that the conditions of the "under-privileged" should be speedily alleviated. The PCP supported the proposal to set a minimum basic wage - set at 3,300 escudos per month on a basis of equal pay for equal work. This was adopted and immediately resulted in doubling the wages of over half of all employed. The overwhelming majority of workers quickly saw through the tactics of the monopolies. The trade unions, supported by the PCP staged a huge demonstration on the first Saturday in June calling for a halt to "wild-cat" strikes, under the main slogan: "No Strikes for the Sake of Strikes". In general, that demonstration ended that phase of the counter-attack on the economic front.

The policy of the fascists was to create the sort of economic chaos that would force intervention of the armed forces against the people. PCP policy was to preserve the unity between the Armed Forces Movement and the people.

The second counter-offensive was the government crisis in early July. Conservative prime minister Carlos Palmas threatened to resign unless the question of elections was more or less indefinitely postponed; that President Spinola was appointed virtually indefinitely heading a sort of presidential regime with increased powers and that parts of the AFM Program was shelved. (Essentially the AFM Program provided for the dismantling of the fascist structure; an end to the African wars; the creation of conditions under which democratic elections could be held by March 31, 1975.)

Carlos Palmas eventually had little support and was allowed to resign. Spinola wanted to appoint one of his own men, former defence minister Major Firmino Miguel, as prime minister. But he had played no role in the April 25 coup. The AFM rejected him and insisted on appointing their own man, Lt. Colonel Vasco Goncalves who had supported the AFM from the beginning. (Spinola referred to him as "that communist Goncalves"). On the day that Goncalves was appointed, another decisively important thing took place. That was the setting up of COPCON, a special military command for territorial Portugal charged with ensuring the strict application of the AFM Program. In fact it was a sort of anti-coup command. Heading it was General Costa Gomes, the highly respected former chief of general staff, sacked by Caetano in the last days of the latter's regime, reappointed after the April 25 coup. Deputy Chief was a major (moved up to brigadier for his new appointment) Saraino de Carvalho who had been the technical military brain in organising and carrying out the April 25 coup. Saraino de Carvalho was also appointed commander of the Lisbon Command. The "captains" were beginning to see what they were up against and took measures accordingly. The July crisis resulted in the elimination of rightist forces from the government, the entry of members of the AFM into the government, a consolidation of unity between the AFM and the progressive forces.

The third counter-offensive, and by far the most important, was in the second week of September. Under the pretext of organising a monster rally in Lisbon to support Spinola and denounce the "forces of totalitarian extremism", a military coup was prepared. The intended rally was to be used as a cover to smuggle assault forces and great quantities of arms into Lisbon and stage a fascist restoration.

Without going into detail, this plot was thwarted by the mobilisation of the masses and the unity and solidarity between the people and the armed forces.
At least 100,000 people worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the armed forces in erecting barricades all over the country - blocking off all movement from the major centres and at the approaches to Lisbon. They searched and found arms which were then distributed among the activists. Spinola tried to call out troops he thought would be loyal to him, but apart from a couple of hundred parachutists, they refused to move without specific orders from COPCON. At a critical moment, Spinola thought he had decapitated COPCON by holding Costa Gomes and Saraivo de Carvalho incommunicado under virtual arrest - together with prime minister Goncalves. But COPCON went into action. It reoccupied the radio and TV stations seized by Spinolas men and raced to the Lisbon barricades. It was here that the question of civil war was averted. the COPCON men reasoned with the parachutists, explaining the real situation. The parachutists decided to withdraw and leave the field in the hands of COPCON. (All this took place on the night of September 11 - 12.) The rally was called off - it had been physically stopped at the barricades in any case. Two days later, Spinola resigned and three of his supporters in the seven-member Military Junta of National Salvation were forced to resign and the remaining Spinola supporters within the cabinet were kicked out, including defence minister Firmino Miguel. The third counter-attack resulted in further consolidation of the unity between the AFM and the progressive forces.

What is the present perspective of the PCP? What is its strategy for socialism?

At this stage, the step by step process is to prevent the return of fascism, and pursue a national-democratic policy - a policy under which the maximum of anti-fascist, democratic forces can be mobilised and unity with the armed forces maintained and strengthened. At the time I left Portugal, following the September crisis, the electoral law had not been approved, so PCP strategy for March 1975 elections could not be defined. I was told that the PCP was against a “Popular Front” or “National Front” alliance, but favored a “Democratic Front” within which the maximum of anti-fascist democratic forces could be mobilised. The PCP felt also that the AFM should now be considered as a political movement. Its Program is essentially a political program. More and more the AFM - which now represents virtually all the armed forces in the country - has played a political role, even an administrative role and has earned the right to play a leading role in the political life of the country.

The AFM Program provides for restricting the economic powers of the monopolies and as the monopolies were clearly implicated in the attempted September counter-coup, it is certain that their wings are going to be clipped. The PCP supports the idea for creating conditions for a democratic choice at the forthcoming elections and believes that the progressive forces have nothing to lose from an electoral confrontation. No fundamental changes in the social-economic structure can take place before there is an elected government - this is inscribed in the AFM Program. An elected government, the PCP considers, will provide the base to push ahead towards socialism in a form suitable to the concrete situation in Portugal. The PCP attaches great importance to supporting the small and medium enterprises against the monopolies; the small and medium landholders against the absentee landlords. But to push ahead giving primacy to slogans about socialism in a country where the entire population has been brain-washed with anti-communist propaganda for half a century is not considered good tactics at the moment.

A variety of left groups exist. What is their strength, their programs, their relations with the PCP, their prospects?

Over 60 political parties sprang into life within weeks of the April 25 coup. Among them, 12 or 15 “leftist groups”. These included three or four trotskyist groups, three or four so-called “maoist” groups. Virtually all of them highly critical of the PCP for its “revisionist” or “reformist”
line. These groups are very active in Lisbon, mainly restricted, as far as support is concerned, to the student community and in certain enterprises where the work force is predominantly "white collar". Most of them have not as yet published their programs. There have been various conferences at which some of the groups have tried to establish a "united revolutionary" movement, but up to the time I left, this had not resulted in anything concrete. As far as I could ascertain, these groups have no roots among the main working class organisations, nor among the peasantry. They have some influence among intellectuals but nothing compared to the influence of the PCP. Many of the adherents of these groups are devoted, sincere activists, very courageous - their analyses of the situation are often theoretically justified. But if they are strong in revolutionary theory they are weak in tactics, organisation and, above all, in experience. They tend to see problems in isolation from the overall situation, partially and not wholly.

PCP veterans take a tolerant attitude towards these parties and groups. They explain that their appearance on the scene is partly a reaction to the terribly authoritarian pattern of feudal family relations. Their revolutionary fervor against the old society can also be explained in those terms. Until the September crisis, there were virtually no relations at all between them and the PCP - except in the case of combating some of the wildest of the strikes. But when the call went out to build and man the barricades, many members of these parties came to the headquarters of the PCP and the MDP (Portuguese Democratic Movement supported by the PCP, the Socialist Party and other anti-fascist groups and individuals) and asked for guidance. They offered to work wherever the PCP decided they were needed and to do whatever was needed. They were among the most effective workers, and their services during this first effort at "unity of action" may pave the way for a drawing together of all anti-fascist forces. This is the concept of the PCP.

Is there any discussion of, and practice of, the concept of workers' control?

There have been instances where factories have been abandoned because, with the doubling of the minimum wage, the cheap labor power on which these factories were based was beginning to cost twice as much. In several such cases - tailoring businesses for instance - the workers have taken over and have run the factories themselves. These are only a few isolated instances. They could form a nucleus of a much broader movement if the monopolies or multi-nationals start abandoning their enterprises. I do not believe the PCP is pushing for workers' control at this stage. It could alienate the small and medium enterprises and have a bad effect on the type of anti-fascist national unity which the PCP strives to foster.

How would you describe mass ideology towards (a) former colonies; (b) socialism?

On the first question, there is almost a total mass opposition to the continuance of the African wars. In my travels and interviews I did not find a single person who was not in favor of ending the African wars even where people considered this meant total and complete defeat. The continuance of these wars is so clearly linked with the social and economic ills at home that mass opposition is total. This is so even in the most backward areas of the country - among the peasant small-holders in the North. After all, it is their sons who are taken off into military service. Even if they are not wounded or disease-ridden, when they return from the wars they no longer want to go back to their old homes and villages. They have a taste for "urban life", the "bright lights", and no longer want to return to the mediaeval, feudal conditions of the villages. The soldiers have no sympathy with the white settlers who accuse them of cowardice, inefficiency, failure to win the colonial wars. Even in the smallest villages in the most backward - ideologically - parts of the country there were slogans on the walls calling for an end to the wars in
In respect to support for socialism, attitudes are developing among the agricultural laborers in the southern part of the country; many are expressing the idea that the absentee landlord estates should be taken over by the state and made into state farms. Even in the north, one heard many expressions of interest in co-operative farming. The property of the small-holders is always dispersed, because of the splitting up which occurs at the time of marriage, inheritance, etc. People with four or five acres may have up to 15 or 20 different plots of land. Sometimes they even share olive trees with a neighbour. So the idea of pooling these dispersed plots and pooling funds to buy a tractor and work the land more efficiently is becoming widespread even in the most reactionary areas of the country.

Among the working class, I believe the idea of a socialist system is gaining ground and this concept will undoubtedly have been given an impetus because of the exposure of the role of the monopolies in the counter-revolutionary attempted coup in September. Nineteen members of the Espirito Santo banking family fled to Madrid when the coup was thwarted, a member of the Champalimaud family (the second largest monopoly) was amongst those arrested. The Armed Forces Program provides for curbing the power of the monopolies. The idea of the state taking over such monopolies would be highly popular among the working class and progressive intellectuals. But the idea is not being pushed at this moment in the same general interest of mobilising the broadest possible mass of public opinion, preventing a fascist comeback, and enabling the electoral confrontation by the end of March 1975. It is felt that the progressive forces will have a clearer mandate after those elections. The PCP wants to be able to take the Armed Forces Movement with them in every step along the road to a national democratic revolution.

One of Portugal’s colonies is Portuguese Timor. Is anyone in Portugal conscious of this? Is there any program for Timor?

Yes, people are conscious of Timor, as they are of Macao and other small pockets of Portuguese rule. Obviously as there is no fighting going on there and large numbers of troops are not involved, it is a question of secondary importance. The government - before the September crisis - did make a general statement that Portugal was now ready to accept various UN resolutions on the colonial question and grant self-determination to all the overseas territories. (This was contained in a statement made by Spinola at the insistence of the Armed Forces Movement last July.) On the decolonisation front, policy has been to settle the easiest one - Guinea-Bissau - first, with the idea that this would facilitate a settlement of the next easiest - Mozambique. It was hoped that the settlement of Mozambique would facilitate a settlement in the much more complicated problem of Angola. After these three major problems were settled, the settlement of territories where there has not been armed conflict would be tackled.

Could you say how the PCP views the international communist movement, in particular their views on the Soviet Union and China, and their relations with the CP of Spain?

My impression was that the PCP is so involved in the clear and pressing dangers of avoiding a fascist comeback and the organisation of all those progressive forces inside the country that can be organised, that the international movement seems very remote. References to the CPSU in the PCP press are more frequent than references to the CP of China. In general, I found a great curiosity as to what is going on inside China, matched with very scant knowledge. Relations with the CP of Spain, as far as I could discern, are very close indeed.