Where is the Portuguese Revolution heading?
by Dean Ashenden

Lisbon in December was a city very different from the one I had visited in August. In the Rossio (the main square) the throngs of revolutionaries and political connoisseurs had been replaced by even larger throngs of unemployed, restless Angolans. The Mercedes and BMWs are appearing on the streets again, their owners now safe from the cries of “Fascist!” which had put their status symbols up for sale or in the garage for a year or more.

It may be too soon to mourn over the dead body of the Portuguese revolution. Yet it is hard to hope that the left in Portugal can recover from its now desperate situation.

For months the political crisis persisted, an impasse which everyone knew would last only so long as neither side felt confident that it could knock out the other .... or while neither side made a slip, an error which, however slight, would allow the opponent to tip the balance, release the deluge and surge to power. The paratroopers made that slip on November 25 and within hours the MFA was purged of 100, perhaps 200, left wing officers. In their place have stepped the released prisoners of March 11 - Spinola’s mistake.

Left wing journalists have been sacked, radical administrators and managers in the state and the nationalised industries replaced, and the leaders of parties left of the PCP seem to have escaped only because the BBC announced their arrests before they were, in fact, secured. The right is making the most of its luck, spurring on a backlash which threatens to stop well to the right of even the PS. The PCP is cowed, and only 18 months after emerging from its long clandestine battle against fascism is talking once again of the construction of an anti-fascist front as “the main task”.

If the working class of Portugal has been defeated, it will be a bitter defeat not only for the Portuguese, but for working people and the socialist movement everywhere. There will be an immediate consequence for the developing struggle in Spain. In the capitalist west the defeat must increase fears that the economic crisis is producing a world-wide swing to the right.

One of the most exhilarating things about the events in Portugal was the apparently irresistible speed with which anti-fascism became a movement for socialism. Most palpable to the visitor was the radical attack on one of the cruellest consequences of fascism -

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the massive inequalities in knowledge and understanding. The revolution was a giant classroom. I was told "It used to be football - now it's politics!" I met workers who were illiterate only three years ago, and who are now elected representatives of their workmates on the Workers' Commissions, who can discuss and analyse their own situation and its place in the revolution with an insight and fluency which would put most of us to shame.

Fascists were purged from top jobs in government industry and finance. Basic democratic freedoms were implemented. A rash of nationalisation removed up to 60 per cent (estimates vary) of the most basic economic institutions from the direct command of capital. The most exploited sections of the working class gained considerable increases in their real wage. Wage differentials have been reduced, and intricate job hierarchies have been greatly simplified. Workers' assemblies and their commissions have greatly reduced the untrammelled control of management. Trade unions have been unified in Intersindical. In education this attack on structure has gone further than in any other social sphere, with basic relations between teachers and students, student and student, learner and knowledge coming in for radical criticism and in some cases, revision. The military went far towards changing its class loyalties, and in the process brought into question both its own structure and its role in society.

These spectacular gains were made in the wake of the sudden and comprehensive collapse of the old regime. The old regime paid above all for its failure to resolve the African wars. But why couldn't the Caetano regime solve the colonial question? This is no place to try to provide a comprehensive answer, but it can be said that by 1974 Portuguese fascism could not change itself, or Portugal or Portugal's fatal imperial embrace. It had become both internally rigid and badly isolated. It was isolated not just from the great bulk of the population, but within its own class and its small elite of educated servants and mendicants. The Caetano regime had become a clique, and maintained itself in power only because extensive repression was effective in the political confusion and inertia of a society cloistered for 40 years. Unable to reform Caetano and his henchmen were swept away at the last hour by people of their own kind. The insurgents of April 25 acted for fear that if they didn't the fate of the Caetano clique would be the fate of their entire class.

It very nearly was. The Portuguese ruling class - a hybrid of bourgeois and landed aristocracy - was badly discredited. When it abandoned its entrenched methods of fascist rule it had no other to replace it. There was no new program. There were no new men organised to take over. There was only a space, a political vacuum, and into it rushed the myriad (and sometimes charlatan) representatives of contenders for power: bourgeoisie; petit bourgeoisie; working class; peasantry; landowners; imperialists.

When Spinola fled to Spain it seemed that the radical insurgents were perhaps on the eve of becoming the working class in power. But the Portuguese ruling class had enormous reserves to fall back upon. The first of these was the monopoly it had held on the political and social life of the country and the myriad links which this had forged between its members. Portugal is a small country, and Lisbon a small capital. The elite of the country went to school together, go to dinner together, intermarry, meet in select restaurants, hear of each others' movements, share business interests and political connections. They are both intimately organised and effortlessly exclusive, and the combination produces a bizarre brand of politics.

For example, I was at a dinner party in Lisbon three weeks ago where two of the eight guests had been in prison under the Caetano regime and another had been imprisoned by Salazar, while a fourth was a close personal friend of Caetano who had just returned from visiting him in Brazil. The hostess was the daughter of a former President of the Salazarist industrialists' syndicate and yet had worked closely with the PCP at her workplace. They all knew each other well and got along famously.

Another strength is the Church. For a time the Church seemed in eclipse, overwhelmed by more modern ideological apparatuses in the hands of its enemies. But now that the radical left has lost control of the media, the Church - an institution which has remained absolutely untouched by the left - is resurgent. The sacking of the PCP offices in the north is
only the tip of a vast iceberg of social power which is undividedly and unhesitatingly dedicated to reaction, and here lies no small part of the reason why the apparent hegemony of left ideas over the past year or so has now revealed itself as relatively superficial and fragile.

The State has remained largely intact. Perhaps most centrally the armed forces - nearest of all state instruments to "going over" - are now returning to the fold. It is hard to see how the MFA can find its way back to even the ambiguous ideology and strategy of a few months ago, much less to the significant power which it held within the armed forces. The return of the forces "to the barracks" is their return to the service of the bourgeoisie - nothing more, nothing less.

The civil arms of the State also remained relatively unscathed. Of course, there were many changes in the personnel, but it is now clear how transient these changes are when the political climate which sustained them has gone. Of the old apparatuses, only the paramilitary PIDE was dismantled. The rest stands, and it may be that in some ways the internal coherence of the state machine has been strengthened. The connections between the political sphere and the bureaucracy, for example, are now much more vital than they were in Caetano's last days. It seems likely that nationalisation will strengthen relations between the economy and the State while at the same time maintaining a capitalist organisation of production.

Finally, the ruling class of Portugal has had a trump card to play: foreign capital, both actual and potential. The last decade of fascism was open slather for the multinationals in Portugal. As in Australia they command both a significant proportion of the economy as a whole and the most crucial sectors of it, ranging from 100 per cent of oil refining to 30 per cent of manufacturing. This has all been taboo in the welter of nationalisations, but that hasn't stopped extensive sabotage ranging from withdrawal from Portuguese operations to denial of credit, sales, and spare parts. If this is the stick, there is also the carrot, disguised as "economic aid" for "democracy" and held out by EEC politicians for their multinationals and monopolies.

So these were the forces arrayed against a rising and, for a time, threatening working class. What of the working class, its allies, and its organisation? Did the people of Portugal ever have a sporting chance? If so, why have they lost?

The PCP remains at the centre of the organised working class. Like a magnet, its power of attraction and repulsion has imposed its shape on Portuguese politics.

It is impossible to mistake the central place which the PCP has occupied in the minds of the Portuguese working class and of its enemies. To understand what has happened to the revolution, it is best to begin with the PCP.

The PCP emerged on April 25 as the only organised left political force. Its 5,000 cadres were well trained and placed to conduct the saneamento in the unions, local government and the state machine. It had the prestige and respect earned in 40 years of dedicated and unflinching resistance to fascism. "One of the Communist Party's claims in the run-up to the April 1975 elections", reports Antonio de Figueiredo, "was that their 247 candidates for the Constituent Assembly had served between then 440 years behind bars."

It was this which drew over 90,000 new members into the Party in the flood-tide of Revolution. Amongst these was Maria Velho da Costa, one of the "three Marias" whom I met on each of my visits to Portugal. Da Costa was fiercely proud that the Party had drawn "the best" of the young workers, intellectuals and writers into its ranks.

But if it attracted "the best" it has certainly not retained them. Many of the dozen or so left political groupings in Portugal had their origins in dissent or expulsion from the Party, some dating back to splits originating in the 20th Congress, others much more recent.

Some of those who joined after April 25 are leaving again. Together with those whose experience of the Party was earlier and longer, they are constructing an increasingly systematic and telling critique of the Party. It is a critique which draws in various degrees and ways on Maoist, Trotskyist and anarchist traditions. Of course, there is nothing like a consensus. Nor is there a new, rival centre of gravity for the organisation of the working
class. But there are a number of themes which run consistently through criticism of, and opposition to, the PCP. It is criticised for attempting to dominate or even monopolise the revolution and for misconceiving revolution as a process which can be controlled and directed from above. It has been attacked as cautious, defensive, conservative, and as being manipulative and anti-democratic.

Perhaps no part of the PCP practice has drawn quite so much fire as its attitude towards the various organs of "people's power". The Party had been lukewarm towards proposals for work-site and neighbourhood committees when they were first floated by the left wing of the MFA. The PC did not come out against the new organs, though many who were in contact with it reported that the Party's cadres were hostile to the councils, especially where they seemed to threaten the hegemony of syndicates and municipal government controlled by the PCP.

When the Councils began to take hold (the critics maintain) the Party moved in, using its very considerable organisational and political skills to achieve control wherever possible, and often in ways which attracted hostility and active opposition from workers and residents.

It does seem incontestable that office has been the first priority of the PCP. This has not only generated widespread hostility and mistrust but denied the Party and the revolution some crucial developments. The Party has numbers and energies without rival in working class politics, or indeed in Portugal as a whole, yet so far as I could see those energies have been spent in a narrow and eventually stifling way. The PCP has not been primarily concerned to agitate, organise and educate. Its concern to dominate and control, to operate from above has had the paradoxical effect of reducing its impact and restricting its influence. In consequence of its choices it has maintained its strength as a political organisation but has failed to spark off a self-generating and self-expanding movement across a wide front of the Portuguese revolution.

For example, the PCP has not sponsored a women's movement. I asked Velho da Costa what her feminism had brought to the working class struggle. "Nothing", she answered. She went on to explain that the condition of the country both now and when she joined the Party left the women's movement very low down on her list of priorities. She refuses to discuss the women's movement.

Yet women are of quite central importance in the working class itself. Women make up an important proportion of the "new" working class which is badly organised and low in consciousness, and women are concentrated in some of the most important sectors of Portuguese industry, especially in electronics and textiles. They are discriminated against in their conditions and wages, and oppressed in their lives both inside and outside the factories. The PCP has no policy to deal with the special problems and conditions of women, either in the workforce or outside it. It has not been notably purposeful or successful in stimulating and co-operating with struggles for better education, health and housing. Perhaps most damningly, there has been no policy at all to win over, or at least neutralise, the peasantry in the north of the country.

Finally, there are many critics who maintain that the PCP has been the disciplinarian of the labor force, that it has stifled legitimate struggles, opposed legitimate strikes - even political strikes - and has thus slowed the development of the consciousness and organisation of the working class. The PCP has argued that many strikes have been the work of leftist adventurers, agents provocateurs, and workers in already overprivileged sectors. It has insisted that workers limit their demands to those which the economy can bear. It was often more prepared to face up to Portugal's economic plight than some of its critics.

But in practice a policy has been implemented by a party which has compromised itself in many eyes by holding, for the most revolutionary period, the Ministry of Labor. These aims have been pursued by a party which has been seen by many as encouraging or discouraging strikes, as the case may be, according to its own immediate interests; which has had an ambiguous attitude towards overthrowing capitalism; and which has often been seen to oppose other forms of workers' struggle - such as the workers' commissions.

This is where one is most likely to hear criticism of the PCP over its "Moscow Connection". The PCP has been vulnerable to the pressure of a great power which is, in the
nature of things, more concerned to further its own foreign policy interests than to advance the Portuguese revolution. The PCP has lost heavily from the suspicion that it has tailored its policies, whether reluctantly or not, to suit the strategies of Brezhnev's détente. This has furthered long-standing fears that the PCP would not end foreign domination but would substitute Russian control for western exploitation.

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In the heat and dust of the day-to-day revolutionary situation there is a tendency to reify the PCP, to see it as a force with entirely its own logic, an impetus generated by particular individuals and/or ideologies or ideas. Both its cadres and its critics tend to overlook the ways in which the PCP and its policies have been shaped by its history and by the course of events since April 25. It is often forgotten that the long years of underground struggle against fascism required a heavily centralised, tightly disciplined party, and that the old regime collapsed almost without warning, without a chance for the habits and attitudes of 40 years' resistance to be unlearned, and for the quite different skills and capacities of "open politics" to be learned.

The PCP is not an independent force standing outside or above Portuguese history, but a product and reflection of it. To ask the important question "Could the working class and its allies have carried through a successful socialist revolution?" is, in this discussion, to ask how different things would have been under a different kind of leadership. This is, I think, a sensible and important question if we are to learn from the Portuguese experience, but it should not be an excuse for moralistic outbursts, for "blaming" the PCP - a now popular pastime in some maoist and trotskyist circles. Quite aside from anything else, a moralistic approach usually assumes an answer to the central question - it assumes that, yes, of course there would have been a socialist revolution "if only it weren't for the PCP".

Certainly the obstacles to a successful socialist revolution were formidable. The Portuguese working class has a history of organisation running over most of this century, but it was not strongly placed when Caetano fell. It was organised into syndicates which fragmented the class and integrated it both structurally and ideologically into the State. Long years of anti-communist propaganda and Catholic indoctrination left the working class ideologically weak. A considerable proportion of workers were first-generation members of this class, coming to the new factories of international capital after boyhood in the countryside and young manhood in the army. These men were vulnerable to all the reactionary propaganda which surrounded them, and even more so were the many women who have recently left home and village for the factories. Another major advantage for capitalism is the huge number of Portuguese "guest workers" in Western Europe. Up to three million Portuguese live outside Portugal, leaving only eight million in the country. The "guest workers" are driven by the poverty at home and the high levels of consumption around them, and cannot learn as do their fellows at home from the struggles of the past two years.

The rural population is still large, and is deeply divided between the rural proletariat of the south and the small-holding peasantry of the north. The petit bourgeoisie remains, in an under-developed industrial society, numerous and powerful, its ranks swollen by 300,000 refugees from Angola. The sizeable stake, both direct and indirect, of EEC and US capital gives the relatively weak and undeveloped Portuguese bourgeoisie a strength far beyond its own, and the Church is strong and well organised.

It may seem, then, that the "conservatism" of the PCP was, in fact, responsibility, a sober recognition of the possibilities and of the dangers of trying to wish them away. This is the explicit claim of the PCP, especially in the wake of the disastrous events of November 25. I met PCP cadres who were convinced that here above all was the vindication of the leadership's policy; didn't the paratroopers' disastrous failure prove that the revolution was not yet on the agenda?

So far as I can see, this begs the question, namely: how far has the Party's policies of the preceding 18 months contributed to a situation where the left could be so devastatingly defeated? It seems to me unlikely though not impossible, that a socialist revolution could have been carried through in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of fascism but the possibility was probably greater than the PCP allowed, and ought to have been discussed more widely and
seriously than it appears to have been. But the "top down" approach of the PCP is both unsuited to a real exploration of the potential for revolution and to making the most of that potential.

It is true that a strategy which might be summarised as "revolution from below" runs the risk of populism, of adventurism, of ill-coordinated or ill-timed actions which could cost the working class dear. But can the PCP claim that its policies have avoided or prevented precisely these dangers? What's more, the Party's policies have, I fear, left the working class markedly less able to defend itself now that it has lost the initiative, and less able to press on, in the new conditions, with attacking capitalism and of creating socialist practice and ideas in that struggle.

What will happen in Portugal now? It seems unlikely that the working class will be able to recover its position. Nor do I expect a civil war, though until November 25 I thought it a distinct possibility. Its outcome probably would have been a heavy loss of life and a return to fascism.

The real question now seems to be whether or not there will be some form of social democracy, or a return to a modernised fascism. The right is on the rampage; reports of polls giving the PCP 56 per cent of an electoral vote also claim that the right wing "social democratic" PPD has now taken over from the PS as the largest single vote-getter. Soares will pay a heavy price for his virulent anti-communism. Looking beyond the (rumored) state of "public opinion" it is obvious that capital in Portugal is banking on an influx of investment and state aid from abroad. It is equally obvious that foreign capital will want its guarantees: a quiescent and disciplined labor force, a "stable political situation". If the working class seems clearly unable to carry through a revolution, it is nonetheless fairly well placed to defend itself. Breaking its will and organisation could require a return to fascism.

On balance, the most likely solution seems to be something like Greece - an economy deeply penetrated by foreign capital, especially that associated with multinationals. A population of low living standards and great inequalities - though not as low and not as great as those before April 25. A political regime which relies on political and ideological dominance and the threat of force and repression rather than their systematic and consistent use.

What are the lessons of Portugal? I am certainly not in a position to give anything like a full answer to the question, and I will restrict myself to a few brief points which come fairly directly from my brief experience of Portugal.

First, there are some important implications for the structure, situation and role of a vanguard party. The Portuguese experience does seem to lend further support to the argument that a vanguard party must not become heavily centralised or bureaucratic, and that its leadership must not be protected from the criticism and influence of either members of the Party or those outside it. A vanguard party must not aspire to dominate or control the whole revolutionary process. It must learn to co-operate with all possible allies, going out of its way to neutralise or to avoid antagonising groups such as the smallholders of the Portuguese north. It must encourage active participation by people in workers' and residents' organisations and they must remain outside the control of the Party. It must be independent of any control from outside the country.

Second, I caught a glimpse of the astonishing power of a revolutionary situation. No one who has been to Portugal could fail to recognise the extraordinary speed with which even the most entrenched attitudes change, the most powerful institutions quake, the most "impossible" feats are achieved. History does change its speed, and in revolution the dialectic of change attains an extraordinary impetus. Everything comes up for grabs.

Precisely because this is so, there is, I think, a third lesson. Just as hopes and achievement rise to extraordinary heights, so can failure be extraordinarily bitter and costly. Revolution poses questions which come faster and larger than most of us are used to. Bravado and revolutionary machismo are poor substitutes for a sober political ethic.