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Collective bargaining in the railway sector -- Abilio Carvalho

After the April 1974 revolution, the Portuguese railway sector was nationalized and placed at the service of one of Portugal's development strategy, in which good transport has become a right of the Portuguese people and a tool to link the various regions. The workers as the main actors in this transformation, organized in their union structures, promoted the implementation of this measure. Their organizational skills and interventions were crucial to realise a collective agreement that rewarded their work with rights.

The railways were a sector with only one company employing about 30,000 workers. In an early stage it faced a strong attack from the forces opposed to the April ideals when they seized power. This unique company has been subject of a break, sustained in European policies, which transformed the public company in a number of companies, initially all publicly owned, but as a first step to privatization, similar to what happened in the area of goods transport, where state property has been sold this year to multinational MSC. Other planned privatisations have been halted.

The destruction of the company was one of the components of this offensive against the public railway agreement to replace rights without working relationships, or other different collective agreements, ending up well with the connection between the rail of different companies. Not able to halt the break-up process, the union intervention aimed at keeping upright the bulk of the company's enterprise agreement in the newly formed enterprises. This happened against the backdrop of the widespread attack in Portugal on collective bargaining that lasted between 1990 and 2000, followed by a period of struggle as to consolidate existing agreements. A major role played the aggression memorandum, which resulted in the biggest offensive against the public dial, against collective bargaining, wages and against the rights of workers in the public companies were used to justify the attack on all workers in general. It included a campaign against the public companies, including slander, arguing that wages and workers' rights had to be reduced.

Since the removal of the right in politics, a new political cycle has already recovered some rights taken by the previous government; wage cuts have been undone and public sector companies also apply a set of legislative rules that keep the contents of the various company agreements, making them ineffective.

We understand that the time we live in Portugal is not to give up. The change of government does not mean a radical change of policies, and it is true that we are taking steps towards achieving union demands. Yet unresolved fundamental problems remain such as the national debt, on which the union movement argues that it should be renegotiated to release funds for the development of the country. Also, we remain tied to the Lisbon treaty, the budgetary treaties and European policies and, therefore, we must continue to make claims, to mobilize and to fight, so we can go the as far as possible and at the same time, this mobilization will create the conditions for the government to face the blackmail and attacks that parents are suffering at this time.

Central union claims remain the defense of collective bargaining; keeping up the purchasing power of wages and shorter working hours; the fight against job insecurity, in its various forms; and the defense of the social state enshrined in the constitution of the Portuguese republic.

We have every reason to be optimistic, but we know that we must continue to mobilize workers for collective struggle in defense of their class interests.