

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Portugal

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This study offers a brief analysis of the relationship between trade unionism and far-right populism in Portugal, which is tenuous but has potential to grow. The authors argue that the origins of trade unionism and its historically consolidated democratic values (emancipation, solidarity, and legitimised collective representation) are the very antithesis of populism. In the Portuguese case, i.e., in a context marked by a labour relations system dominated by traditional union structures, such as the *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses* (CGTP; General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers) and the *União Geral de Trabalhadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) that were first established in the 1970s during the period of democratic transition. The populist “calls” are relatively recent and have to do with the way in which the party composition of the country’s parliament was reshaped after 2019. We are thus witnessing a “populist agenda”, seemingly imposed from the outside in a far-right partisan logic targeting the very heart of the trade union movement, whose aims are obvious but also murky and perilous.

INTRODUCTION

In order to analyse populism’s “intrusion” into trade unionism, we first look at the latter’s historical legacy and its noblest missions. Ultimately, however, to invoke that heroic past is to be faced with the multiple signs of the crisis affecting trade unionism, notably in Europe (the cradle of trade unionism), where that crisis has been felt for several decades. In our view, the populist projects have

emerged in part as a reaction to manifestations of the trade union crisis, often with the aim of serving as a political alternative.

Similarly, the perception of the problems currently affecting trade unionism cannot be dissociated from a reassessment of trade union power resources. The intensity and the timing of those populist forays is largely determined by the strength or weakness of the resources available.

In the third part of our text we offer a brief characterisation of the Portuguese labour relations system and a description of the key trade union actors. Actors in the Portuguese labour relations system are historically on the side of working-class values and committed to a left-wing agenda.

The advent of the political party *Chega* (CH; Enough!) is the latest instance of a populist notion taking root on Portuguese soil. It is addressed in section four, where the party’s ideological tenets are briefly presented and a description of the connections between *Chega* and *Movimento Zero* (Movement Zero), an emerging inorganic movement that has made a few public appearances, especially during demonstrations organised by police and other security forces. *Movimento Zero* is, in fact, a virtually “faceless” phe-

nomenon, without a clear voice or a spokesperson one might consider a legitimate interlocutor.

The fifth part deals with a recent sociological fact in the Portuguese context: The public announcement (in August 2022) of the establishment of a union (*Solidariedade*; Solidarity), that shares *Chega's* ideological identity and owes its inspiration both to the Polish phenomenon spearheaded by Lech Wałęsa four decades ago and, more recently, to Spain's *Vox* party.

By way of conclusion, we list a number of challenges and obstacles that far right trade unionism is inevitably bound to be faced with and proceed to make a few comments and recommendations regarding trade union action.

HISTORICAL LEGACY

In order to analyse the sociological relevance of trade unionism, it is imperative that we travel back to the past and look at its origins. The struggles waged by workers and trade unions since the first half of the 19th century played a crucial role in terms of achieving decent living and working conditions and shaping the identity of the modern working class as a social class. The 20th century proved the importance of trade unionism for the emancipation of the working class, notably in the area of labour rights (and in Europe in particular). Progress in this area was indeed impressive, a telling example of which was the eight-hour day (which, not coincidentally, was also the theme of the first convention of the International Labour Organization in 1919).

By the same token, the welfare state and the entire body of legislation underlying labour law, especially in the period between the post-war and the 1980s, helped guarantee stability and security with regard to wages, working hours and working conditions. In Portugal, the process had largely to wait until after the 25 April 1974, and took place during the transition from almost 50 years of right-wing dictatorship to a democratic system. During the 1970s, the two main trade union organisations gained increasing relevance. These unions are CGTP, which stands for a class-based, mass-based trade unionism, and UGT, which advocates for social dialogue and is committed to the process of European integration. These two unions continue to be relevant today. In partisan terms, CGTP was closer to the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP; Portuguese Communist Party), whereas UGT had links to the *Partido Socialista* (PS; Socialist Party) and *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD; Social Democratic Party).

Alongside this return to a relatively distant (and promising) past, there is the history of the last four decades of European trade unionism, along a path that has led to vulnerabilities and to a pessimistic present marked by a crisis – indeed, a number of crises – that are gaining ground both in terms of discourse and social practices. On the one hand, a number of “external” circumstances (especially visible on an international scale since the end of Fordism), such as the affirmation of neoliberal globalisation and the growing financialisation of the economy, have greatly deepened the commodification of labour and caused trade unionism to become increasingly fragile, notably in peripheral contexts. Coupled with austerity, the crises that afflicted Europe have unleashed processes of “precariousness-inducing exclusion” that have been particularly harsh in the peripheral countries of Southern Europe (Costa et al. 2020). As far as Portugal is concerned, the economic and social crisis brought about by the Troika's intervention following the country's 2011 bailout request and the adoption (mainly by the 19th Constitutional Government) of austerity measures at the domestic level made the vulnerabilities of trade unions even more blatant (Silva / Estanque / Costa 2020).

On the other hand, the crisis affecting trade unions was also highlighted by “domestic” factors, such as the difficulties inherent in bringing together shared interests and building collective identities, the poor effectiveness of trade union action, insufficient cadre rejuvenation, the small number of women in leadership positions, limited receptivity to non-union related topics and structures, and more. As Jelle Visser (2019) also pointed out, among some of the structural concerns driving the internal logic of union action is the ongoing decline in unionisation (the number of new members has remained low), persistent polarisation (public versus private sector, stability versus precariousness), and the need to “reach out” to other organisations of worker representation. While there may be a predisposition among trade unions to adopt best practices in order to defend workers in distinctly precarious situations, there is also evidence that unions are increasingly losing the ability to defend a cohesive collective identity. This is especially the case as we witness increasing atomisation among workers, alongside calls for a broader view of union representation (Rego / Costa 2022).

TRADE UNION POWER RESOURCES PUT TO THE TEST

Structurally, the power of trade unionism manifests itself in the specific position occupied in the labour market (as measured in terms of qualifica-

tions, for example), and in its bargaining capacity within the labour market (measured, say, by the capacity to autonomously influence working conditions). In recent years, mainly as a result of the pandemic, the bargaining capacity of workers in the context of work has been greatly diminished. This has mainly been due to the dramatic rise of unemployment and threats of collective dismissals in temporary work agencies and in sectors such as hospitality and tourism.

Trade unionism's organisational power is best measured by the number of registered workers. Union membership (through payment of membership dues) and membership rates (the ratio of unionised workers to total unionisable workers) are key indicators in terms of assessing representativeness and perceiving the viability and effectiveness of collective bargaining, social dialogue, and the degree of participation in collective labour relations (Sousa 2011; Costa / Rego 2021). Contemporary individualism (which the confinement has only enhanced), the climate of economic uncertainty (enhanced by the war in Ukraine), and the "new" modes of labour brought by the digital age (with its revival of teleworking) tend to make unions' associative power weaker.

As for trade unionism's institutional power, it helps establish compromises with an impact on the passing of legislation. Labour legislation not only plays an important role, but also encapsulates the outcome of processes of both conflict and negotiation. In fact, two complementary and equally important paths are involved here: The first is important because it seeks to legitimise discontent expressed through properly regulated forms of protest; the second, because, for example, it highlights the position of trade unionism vis-à-vis collective bargaining.

The fourth form of power recurrently mentioned in the literature (Lehndorff et al. 2017) is societal power. Societal power is comprised of two primary components; a cooperative dimension (building networks and coalitions with other civil society organisations sharing the same problems) and a discursive dimension capable of influencing public discourse and speaking to the heart of society, thereby paving the way for the adoption of innovative trade union strategies (with the potential of increasing other forms of power, such as organisational power).

The difficulties inherent in implementing these forms of power, whether separately or all at once, are one of the reasons for the proliferation of populist projects within the trade union movement. The populists are positioning themselves as a radical alternative to

trade unions and taking advantage of the ways in which traditional trade unionism is failing to enforce those forms of power.

THE LABOUR RELATIONS SYSTEM AND THE STRUCTURE OF TRADE UNIONISM

Portugal's system of labour relations is characterised by the following specific aspects: Both internally and among themselves, the relations between capital and labour organisations follow a pluralistic, competitive and fragmented model; the processes for negotiating working conditions tend to be highly politicised; trade unions have ties to the party system; the state plays a central role in the relationship between capital and labour; and, there is a persistent blockage of collective bargaining. In addition, the employment system is characterised by low productivity, low wages, a correlation between employment and intensive labour, low levels of education, skills, and qualifications, poor-quality employment, and a widespread presence of various non-standard forms of employment such as "green receipts" (bogus self-employment), fixed-term contracts, temporary and part-time work, and work in the informal economy, for example.

Since the end of the 1970s, the trade union field has been dominated by a "top-down polarisation" between the two trade union confederations, CGTP and UGT. First, the CGTP was originally an underground organisation when it was first established back in 1970, when Portugal was still living under a dictatorship. When it came on the scene, the CGTP defined itself as a "class-based, unitary, democratic, independent, mass trade union organisation" (CGTP 2020), whose roots and principles lay in the organisational and fighting traditions of Portugal's working class and Portuguese workers in general. To paraphrase Richard Hyman (2001), CGTP stands for a *class-based* type of trade unionism that draws its strength from anti-capitalist mobilisation and the class struggle. This means that, as a trade union, it is historically made up of blue-collar workers with low educational qualifications. However, in recent years it has strengthened its presence in the public service; as a consequence, the number of union members with higher education has increased.

The UGT was established in 1978 in response to the hegemony held by the (pro-Communist) CGTP within Portuguese society. It was mostly comprised of office workers' unions and unions from the banking and insurance sectors, and from the outset it had the support of the PS and the PSD at the national level, trade union confederations in Central Europe and

Scandinavia, as well as Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Eisfeld 1983). Positioning itself as the political and ideological rival of the CGTP, the UGT was built and grew around a coalition of service trade unions and white-collar workers. To use Hyman's typology once again, one could say that UGT represents a society type of unionism, first and foremost because its member unions are basically in favour of social integration and the promotion of social dialogue (2001).

According to Estanque, Costa and Silva (2015), the influence of the PCP with its counterpower strategy on the CGTP has exacerbated the protest dimension, while the influence of the PS and PSD on the UGT has pulled it toward a negotiation-based kind of trade unionism. The two opposing stances, a protest-based unionism, which often fails to produce palpable results and a negotiation-based unionism that often confuses participation with submission to management criteria, have ultimately converged in creating a void where defensive unionism prospered. This has led to a gradual tendency toward de-unionisation.

THE CHEGA PHENOMENON AND MOVIMENTO ZERO

In the Portuguese context, the origins of contemporary far-right populism can be traced to the political party *Chega*. Formally created in April 2019, *Chega* is a radical right-wing party that mixes nationalism and conservatism with an appreciation for laissez-faire economics. As is frequently the case with radical parties, *Chega's* message is often indistinguishable from that of its leaders. In this case, extensive media coverage of André Ventura, the party's leader, began when he was still a member of the Social Democratic Party, Portugal's second largest party and the spearhead of a parliamentary coalition that ruled the country from 2011 to 2015, the period of the Troika's intervention (2011–2014). Ventura began to use the media to accuse the Roma communities of living on welfare and leading idle lives during this time period.

Although Ventura had already run in the European Parliament elections of May 2019 as a candidate of the *Basta!* (Enough!) coalition. The first true shock came in October of the same year, when he won a seat in the elections for the Portuguese Parliament. The election was all the more striking at the time because of its unprecedented nature in the country's parliamentary context and of the candidate's high profile. A new shock happened in 2022 elections, when *Chega* succeeded in winning 12 from a total of 230 seats in the national parliament, becoming the third most repre-

sentative political party. According to final results from the national election agency, *Chega* grew from 1.4 per cent to 7.4 per cent of the vote, which means that 399,659 people voted for the party in the 2022 elections. On February 1, 2022, the main trade union confederation, CGTP, made no direct reference to *Chega*. In its public position on the election results, CGTP called for a "fight intensification", saying that "still at the electoral level, the increase in the vote for the most reactionary and far-right forces stands out, which must be fought with a new policy that responds to the needs and concerns of the workers, rejecting populism and individualism". Similarly, on 18 February 2022, in a meeting of its union members, CGTP made no reference to *Chega*, with the exception of the note that "the results of the elections confirm the rejection of the projects of increased exploitation and destruction of public services and social functions of the state of the parties more to the right, while at the same time there have been changes in their expression." UGT, on the other side, also opted to stress the Socialist Party's win and made no reference to the right-wing forces in the Executive Press Release dated January 31, 2022. An exit poll from Pitagórica shows that *Chega* voters are mostly young men with a high school degree (Cancela / Magalhães 2022).

Chega's first links with Europe's far-right political family came as early as September 2019 when it signed a protocol with the *Vox* party in neighbouring Spain, pledging to fight socialism and communist-inspired totalitarian regimes. This international ideological alignment (formally concluded in July 2020, with *Chega* joining the far-right association Identity and Democracy) is in line with a xenophobic rhetoric that calls on the state to stop unchecked immigration and advocates the introduction of immigrant quotas. Opposition to feminism and so-called gender ideology and LGBT movements, combined with a defence of family values, are some of *Chega's* other watchwords.

Although *Chega's* pronouncements have not been known to attach much importance to the world of work, one month into his election to the Portuguese Parliament, André Ventura sought to capitalise on the topic by participating in a police demonstration held in November 2019. In this particular event organised by police forces in the early days of the Socialist government (the PS had taken office in October), the main demands made by the police unions involved included the following: Wage increases, as there had been pay raises neither for *Polícia de Segurança Pública* (PSP; Public Security Police, Portugal's urban police force) nor for the members of *Guarda Nacional Republicana* (GNR; National Republican Guard, Portugal's rural and traffic police force) since the

Troika-era; update of wage supplements; a risk bonus; and the assurance of more and better personal protection for the security forces.

Members of *Movimento Zero* walked alongside police trade unionists demonstrating on the streets on November 2019, their representatives clearly identified by their distinctive t-shirts. The movement had been created on Facebook in May 2019, following the conviction of PSP officers from the Alfragide police station (near Amadora in the greater Lisbon area) for assaulting a group of young people from Cova da Moura (one of the largest and oldest neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area where there are large concentrations of immigrants). *Movimento Zero* portrayed itself as “an informal protest movement that aims to defend the interests of PSP and GNR professionals and their pride in serving in the police forces” (Rego et al. 2021: 130).

In March 2021, the non-institutional movement had as many as around 60,000 followers; at this time *Movimento Zero* showed little interest in talking to the supervising ministry. Nevertheless, from early on it gave signs of being close to *Chega*. This proximity, attested to by the inclusion of members of *Movimento Zero* on *Chega*'s lists of candidates, was read as a criticism of traditional trade unionism for its inability to give voice to the abovementioned police demands and for the fact that, in a context of union fragmentation (only partially remedied by Law 49/2019), the absence of effective negotiation processes between the trade unions and the supervising ministry considerably diminished the possibilities of improving the working conditions of these professionals. Rather than viewing *Movimento Zero* as an allied force, the police trade unions (and, in particular, the more established ones) tended to have a very critical view of the dynamics of *Movimento Zero*: “It is more like a movement against the unions than anything else”; “*Movimento Zero* is policemen, and the only reason it has emerged is because we have reached this point where the unions themselves lack the tools to make the Government back down in a number of issues or fail to respond to a number of problems” (statements by members of police trade unions, Rego et al. 2021: 131).

In the aftermath of the demonstration in November 2019, and probably out of the fears caused by the emergence of *Movimento Zero*, the Ministry of Home Affairs seemed concerned enough to go back to holding regular meetings with the trade union associations that “represent the interests of workers, both legally and formally” (Rego et al. 2021: 131). Nevertheless, the logic of *Movimento Zero* continued to be aligned with *Chega*, a party that has been a vigorous defender of a

strengthened authority of the country's police forces, including prison sentences of two to five years for filming or photographing the security forces.

In June 2021, the *Movimento Zero* organised a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Home Affairs to demand the resignation of Minister Eduardo Cabrita. The demonstration, which was to include a concentration in front of the Portuguese Parliament, ended up spilling outside the limits initially agreed upon with the authorities, creating traffic chaos and causing PSP itself to take the case to the Prosecutor General's Office. It is true that socio-professional dissatisfaction was the stated reason for the protests, hence its addressing some of the concerns voiced by the main police trade unions such as better wages or the attribution of a risk bonus to all members of the police force. However, in practice the protests gave way to negationist chants and calls for civil disobedience, all this right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the leader of the largest police trade union association the *Associação Sindical dos Profissionais da Polícia* (ASPP; Trade Union Association of Police Professionals) put it at the time, it was all about “exploring the dissatisfaction of police officers for political purposes (...) because there is a sector of Portuguese politics that is taking advantage of the present situation, of this dissatisfaction, which I have no doubt is the case here” (Santos, 2021). He also expressed his fear that the movement might become more dangerous. In fact, the leaders of other police unions, such as the *Sindicato dos Profissionais de Polícia* (SPP; Trade Union of Police Professionals) and the *Associação Profissional da Guarda* (APG-GNR; Professional Association of the Guard) also chose not to be officially represented at the demonstration, “to avoid giving a voice to inorganic or faceless movements” (Neto, 2021).

In August 2022, *Movimento Zero* announced its own dissolution while simultaneously accusing some trade unions of supporting the demonstrations of the police forces for no other reason than allegedly seeing the protests as an opportunity to promote themselves by latching onto the movement's success in the media. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from a press release: “despite our commitment, the Movement has failed to attract the PSP and GNR professionals and therefore is forced to end” all its “operational activity and protest actions, so that it will now continue only and exclusively for purposes of dissemination and solidarity through the *Associação Núcleo de Amigos do Movimento Zero* (Association of the Core Friends of Movement Zero); “the end of MO was brought about by all those who attacked it, ignored it and kept undermining it” (excerpts from a statement by Franco 2022).

ESTABLISHING A FAR-RIGHT TRADE UNION?

It seems no coincidence that the dissolution of *Movimento Zero* in August 2022 coincided with *Chega's* efforts to create its own trade union structure. *Chega's* intentions in this regard gained traction when the party won 12 seats in the Portuguese Parliament in the January 2022 elections. With this result, *Chega* became the third political force in the country, a position previously held by consolidated left-wing parties like *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE; Left Bloc) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP).

The proposal to create a trade union (or a federation of unions) was publicly announced in mid-August 2022, and the name *Solidariedade* (Solidarity) was suggested on October 17, 2022. Hardly an original name, it takes its inspiration from the party's international identity as a member of the Identity and Democracy political group and replicates the situation in Spain with the far-right party *Vox* and its "social arm" *Solidaridad*, created in 2020. More important, however, is the trade unionist dimension, namely the fact that the brand identity is drawn from (and actually a copy of) Lech Wałęsa's *Solidarność*, the trade union that fought communism in Poland the early 1980s.

Making the police and security forces the main focus of its future trade union can be read as *Chega's* way of institutionalising *Movimento Zero* in the framework of a trade union structure rather than maintaining it as an informal movement. Other likely targets for its proposed trade union are senior officials in public administration, teachers, and health professionals. Whatever the professional sector, however, the political objective set by *Chega's* leader is very clear: To represent those workers who do not identify with the left-wing union confederations, CGTP and UGT, which they view as being "linked to the Communist Party, the Left Bloc, and the Socialist Party" in order to create the conditions for "taking social protests to the streets" (excerpts from a statement by Santos 2022).

The creation of a trade union organisation backed by political parties is not unprecedented (the creation of UGT in the late 1970s was also political to the extent that it was a response to the Portuguese Communist Party's growing hegemony within CGTP, which to this day continues to be accused of being instrumentalized by PCP). Now, however, we are faced with an especially conspicuous phenomenon, because of its high profile and the fact that it has a "top-down" (i.e., party-induced) logic as opposed to a "bottom-up" logic. In other words, it is not rooted in society, in organised

social movements, or in more established and reasoned forms of organisation.

There are a few potential obstacles to the establishment of a Portuguese *Solidariedade*. One of them has to do with the fact that, in addition to the aforementioned lack of originality, given that it is a replica of the trade union model used by Spain's *Vox*, the project in question is not unanimous and is not based on a broad consensus. Indeed, from the start, the notion that *Chega* might be compatible with a "trade union dimension" has always been viewed defensively rather than with enthusiasm. In the words of a former vice-president of *Chega* and one of its founders, who is also the president of *Sindicato do Pessoal Técnico da PSP* (SPT/PT; Union of PSP Technical Staff), the creation of a trade union federation "is pure posturing to make newspaper headlines", "will be a total failure", and "will be over even before it begins, because no trade union will ever join it", because "it is not being taken seriously by the members of the police force" (excerpts from a statement by Santos 2022).

Furthermore, under existing laws, police trade unions has to have members, and so the mere creation of an artificial structure will not be enough. The measure of representativeness has been altered by Law 49/2019. Under the terms of the new law, right to compensation of union-related work (hours paid) requires that at least 10 per cent of the members of the police force be unionised. In addition, for each union delegate there must exist at least 10 unionised members in the workplace. By the same token, participation in negotiations with the supervising ministry is predicated on the existence of trade unions representing at least 20 per cent of the total number of workers or of trade unions representing a single category of workers, as long as their members total at least 5 per cent of the members of the category in question.

In addition to the required "evidence" of *de jure* and *de facto* representativeness – which in any event would have to vie with the structures of more established trade unions – it would still be necessary to set in motion an active effort aimed at dismantling the well-oiled machine of trade unionism with its historical commitment to working class values as embodied in historical struggles whose culmination was the consolidation of labour law as the guarantor of labour protection. As we've pointed out at the outset, traditional trade unionism is not (and could never be) above criticism, but any trade union strategy that is excessively dependent on party directives would be doomed to failure especially if it is bound to breed more disunity than solidary-driven integration.

TO CONCLUDE: A FEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Trade unionism and anti-democratic values are just not compatible. It is ironic that the trade union proposed by *Chega* is called “Solidarity” while assuming, in line with what is advocated by the party, an anti-systemic stance. The fact is that, if it affirms itself for what it stands against, for what it rejects or excludes, and not so much for what it stands for in a constructive manner, it will certainly run a serious risk of moving away from the original spirit of trade unionism.

As recently as 8 November 2022, judgement no. 751/2022 of the Constitutional Court (Acórdão nº 751, 2022) found that *Chega*’s statutes, approved in the party’s congress held in November 2021, are unconstitutional. According to the judgment, § 15, not only was there “a significant concentration of powers in the hands of the party’s president”, but there was also a “pronounced increase in the complexity of the party’s internal organisation, which poses problems in terms of articulation and transparency”. In the same paragraph, the court also condemned what it described as “the extension of the prohibition to join associations and bodies directly or indirectly associated with another party or otherwise subordinated to it”, for it could prevent the members of *Chega* from joining not only trade unions linked to other parties, but also other types of associations. Such questions of constitutionality cast uncertainty on the party’s objectives with regard to the trade union movement.

Trade unionism — a “training school”, “sword of justice”, and a vehicle for emancipation and social integration — has been faced with multiple crises. In order to address these challenges, it needs to reinvent itself and respond vigorously to any populist attacks that have the potential to limit its actions in democratic contexts. In addition to assuming a reactive posture to such attacks, trade unionism will also have to be proactive. The fact that trade unions refuse to make alliances with obscure forces or even with trade unions directly emanating from political parties does not mean trade unionism should refrain from seeking to build bridges between union structures of the same professional sector and with union organisations belonging to other sectors, be it through acts of solidarity or by promoting reciprocity mechanisms.

If trade unionism is to have a future, a whole new strategy for attracting members is required. In any event, trade unionism will fail to expand its associative power if fragmentation triumphs over trade un-

ion pluralism, particularly if the trade unions now existing in a number of sectors (such as the police forces, here under analysis) are joined by other trade unions derived from failed inorganic movements or from political moves masterminded by party leaders.

Whether driven by the values of conflict or by those of negotiation, trade unionism’s institutional power needs to be grounded in organisational forms whose legitimacy in terms of representation is beyond question and within the confines of the law. In the Portuguese context, the unions that claim to represent the police force cannot negotiate with the relevant supervising ministry if it does not meet the legal threshold for legitimate representation.

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