



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Portuguese workers campaign for societal change (Ongoing Revolutionary Process), 1974-1976

**Time period notes:** *This campaign started with the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974 and lasted until the election of the first Constitutional government two years later on April 25, 1976, a period referred to as the Processo Revolucionário Em Curso (Ongoing Revolutionary Process)*

25 April

1974

to: 25 April

1976

**Country:** Portugal

### Goals:

Emerging from a 40-year fascist dictatorship, the Portuguese people had a myriad of grievances which they wished to rectify in their new society. However, the primary concern for a vast majority of workers was an improved quality of life through better housing, better compensation, greater control over the means of production, and a purging of fascists from government and company administrations.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike
- 105. Establishment strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike
- 105. Establishment strike

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike

- 105. Establishment strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

**Notes on Methods:**

The nonviolent occupations refers to the housing occupations.

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Communists
- Peasants
- agricultural workers
- industrial workers
- left-wing elements of the military
- socialists

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Much of this social revolution was fueled by grassroots, autonomous activity of various people and groups of people.

However, the left-wing elements of the military such as the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) both encouraged and supported much of the popular movement's actions.

**Partners:**

Not Known

**External allies:**

Not Known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Many of the elites from the era of dictatorship were purged from prominent roles. High ranking military officers were the most notable elites active during the revolutionary process, with some favoring and some opposing the radical activity.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Communists
- Industrial Workers
- Peasants
- Socialists
- left wing elements of the military

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Agricultural workers

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** 4 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Portuguese and foreign capitalists, land owners, right-wing elements of society and the military

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Right-wing forces held demonstrations to gather support and counter the radicalism of the revolutionary period, but were often met with opposition and sometimes even thwarted in their attempts to organize by more left-leaning elements.

**Campaigner violence:**

Not known

**Repressive Violence:**

Not known

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

Within a few years following the revolutionary period the occupied land and housing was returned to its previous owners, wage increases were cancelled, experiments in worker control largely faded and capitalists regained control of industry. However, the grassroots activities and the tremendous assertion of popular power and democratic reform expressed by so many Portuguese workers is credited with helping ensure Portugal's successful transition from dictatorship to democracy as some forces tried to threaten that shift, most notably the far left elements of the military that were seeking a Communist dictatorship.

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In the midst of the depression sweeping the globe during the 1930s, Portugal's finance minister, António de Oliveira Salazar, established the Estado Novo (the New State), a right-wing, pro-Catholic, corporatist authoritarian regime. Based on "patriotism, paternalism, and prudence," Salazar promised financial stability and economic growth. By the 1960s, Portugal was enjoying reasonably stable economic growth, but nearly all of that growth was absorbed by either Portugal's "twenty families" or the regime. In a country where just ten families controlled 53% of the national wealth, poverty and illiteracy were so widespread that Portugal was viewed by many as a member of the "Third World." By the early 1970s, the dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic and educational backwardness of the country was coupled with increasing frustration over the regime's determination to maintain its overseas colonies at great military and economic expense to Portugal (nearly 40% of the government's budget went to fighting the colonial wars).

The immense unpopularity of the colonial wars would ultimately compromise the loyalty of the military. What began as discontent with pay and promotion among the younger members of the officer corps quickly expanded into disillusionment with the wars, which were viewed as wasteful and futile. The wars also enabled the officers to become acquainted with the economically and educationally deprived lower class Portuguese who were conscripted into the military. Eventually left-leaning officers decided to form the Movimento das Forças Armadas (Movement of the Armed Forces), an organization focused on overthrowing the government and initiating a process of democratization, decolonization, and development, with the longer term goal of building a socialist and classless society.

In March of 1974, General Antonio de Spínola, the deputy chief of the general staff, was fired for publishing a book that criticized the government for its colonial policy, Portugal's economic underdevelopment, and its role in the country's growing international isolation. A failed coup followed that month, but at dawn on April 25th, 1974, troops and tanks loyal to the MFA rolled into the center of Lisbon and forced the surrender of Salazar's successor, Marcello Caetano. The rebels took control of a radio station to explain what was happening and implore people to remain calm and stay off the streets, but within hours people were pouring into the streets of Lisbon to show their support. Women bearing carnations soon began distributing them to everyone they saw, especially the soldiers stationed around the city, and the flowers quickly became a symbol of the coup. Wearing carnations in their belts, their buttonholes, their berets, and even in the barrel of the guns, witnesses say the soldiers "looked like walking bouquets."

That day, a military junta headed by General Spínola was set up, and he announced the immediate measures to be taken by the "Junta of National Salvation," including the abolishment of censorship; the allowance of freedom of association including political parties and trade unions; the establishment of a peaceful resolution with Portugal's overseas colonies; and a call for free parliamentary elections by universal suffrage within a year. The next day thousands marched in the streets of Lisbon to cheer the overthrow and Spínola's pledges.

But, as would later be explained by one officer: "On April 25th the military carried out a coup d'état... But on the 26th, or perhaps the afternoon of the 25th, when the people went into to streets is when the Revolution began. Because only the people can make a revolution. Now it's up to you: if you want we will have a revolution; if you don't we will only have had a coup d'état."

And over the next two years that is exactly what the people made: a revolution, a national demonstration of popular power.

Demand for improved living conditions quickly arose and led to massive housing occupations. Just four days after the coup, 100 Lisbon families began occupying a new government housing project, and within fifteen days, people were occupying an estimated 2,500 housing units across the country, mostly new public housing. The occupations only ceased when there was no new government housing left to occupy. The ruling junta refused to legalize the occupations, instead insisting that local committees should approve the occupations on a case-by-case basis, but no reviews ever took place, allowing nearly all the occupiers to remain in the new housing. In addition, neighborhood commissions, organized with people living in shantytowns, began emerging in all of Portugal's major cities to demand basic infrastructure and decent housing. In response, on July 31st, a Mobile Local Support Service (SAAL) was established with the aim of supporting initiatives that enabled the poorly housed to form local associations and cooperatives that could transform their living conditions by their own effort, with technical assistance and a basic investment fund provided by the government. Initially intended to include only a few demonstration projects, shantytowns quickly insisted on greater inclusion, and eventually virtually all shantytowns in the major cities had active brigades.

The coup also set off a strike wave that swept many parts of the country, with workers demanding better wages and a purging of fascists from the government and company administrations. Whereas previous strikes under the dictatorship lasted only hours before being suppressed, many strikes were now lasting days or even weeks until management compromised. By late May, a national minimum wage was established, increasing the pay of around 50% of all workers. Many unions were also successful in demanding a shorter workweek, four weeks of annual vacation, and other benefits.

Under a strong internal leftist influence and pressure from workers, the ruling government also began a series of nationalizations, the first of which was the Lisbon Water Company after workers occupied its headquarters. As workers began to exercise their long suppressed voice, foreign companies responded by threatening to leave the country. What resulted was a wave of experimentation in worker self-management, starting at a French textile company in May 1974 and soon spreading not only to other textile companies, but also construction, commerce, and other small production units threatened with layoffs.

Eventually unemployment did rise in the summer of 1974, so, to boost business confidence, the government passed a Strike Law in August that severely limited workers' right to strike. The law was, predictably, met with strong resistance in the form of protests and strikes. During one illegal protest in September, the military was sent in to prevent the march, but the soldiers were persuaded of the legitimacy of the workers' reasons for protest and allowed them to pass. Again in February of 1975, when 80,000 workers joined to an illegal demonstration against unemployment and NATO, soldiers not only allowed the protesters to pass but many even raised their fists in solidarity with them. Between the people's disregard for the Strike Law and the military's refusal to enforce it, the Strike Law soon became an empty letter.

February 1975 also brought with it a new series of occupations, as unemployed agricultural workers and tractor drivers seized uncultivated agricultural land and urban workers began occupying private housing, 2,500 units in Lisbon alone. The military was again called in to intervene, but often sided with the occupiers, resulting in relatively few evictions and continued occupations. A law adopted on April 14 to protect private property owners made 80% of the housing occupations illegal, so the next month protesters in Lisbon and Oporto came out to demand the revocation of the law and the legalization of all housing occupations.

As the year wore on, with the continued occupations of housing and land and increasing demands for democratic control of the work place, more right-leaning forces began a major effort to take control of the government and roll back the popular movement's advances. On November 25th of 1975, the right-wing of the military successfully established control over the government, and in the following weeks factories, farms, neighborhood commissions, and other popular organizations were searched by the police, soldiers sympathetic to the popular movement were demobilized or even imprisoned, and all wage increases were cancelled. In April of 1976 the first Constitutional government was elected with the Socialist Party winning a plurality. Lacking a majority, though, the Socialist Party ultimately entered into a coalition with the centre-right Social Democratic Party, and this rightward turn led to a reversal of many of the left-wing gains of the previous two years.

## Research Notes

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