

The November 2012 general strike and anti-austerity protests – analysis from the Portuguese case

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ABSTRACT

Opposition against austerity was the cornerstone of the protests which took place since 2010. In Portugal, the first signs of mobilization came from the trade unions, although the emergence of new actors allowed the movement to widen its social influence. This article reflects on the Portuguese contribution to the transnational general strike on the 14 November 2012 in order to explore its insertion in this period's contentious politics, not only regarding its transnational dimension – within the European Union framework –, but also concerning the relationship between different actors – particularly between trade unions and new political actors. While facing a political agenda aimed at implementing major changes to the regime of labour and social policies, the unions encountered increased challenges regarding the use of their ultimate instrument of struggle – strikes –, especially with consideration to its bases of power, which were already quite weakened ahead of this cycle of mobilization.

KEYWORDS

14 November 2012; Portugal; general strike; transnational collective action; austerity

I Introduction

The 2008 economic and financial crisis added to the intensification of global-scale disgruntlement, swelling a protest wave that shook the world.¹ Following an early rise of contention, protests and demonstrations intensified from 2010 on, with opposition to austerity policies as a mobilizing cause and championing, in particular, claims related to economic justice, the welfare State and labour. In Portugal, the first signs of mobilization came from the labour movement, although the emergence of new actors allowed the movement to widen its social influence. Two tendencies were witnessed: the innovation of repertoires, including the introduction of new forms of collective action, but also retrieving, in renovated fashion, old instruments of struggle – namely, strikes; and a relevant growth of mobilization, namely by picking common dates for actions or working to expose the role of international political and financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) or the European Union (EU).

This article reflects on the 14 November 2012 transnational general strike in order to examine the role of general strikes in this wave of protests. The study of this episode² aims to explore its insertion in this period's contentious politics, regarding its transnational dimension³ but also concerning the relationship between different actors – particularly between trade unions and new political actors. This event has been defined differently as to its nature and scale – general strike,⁴ European general strike⁵ or even “an internationalist impulse emerging with the Iberian general strike (...) and the extraordinary social mobilizations throughout Europe”.⁶ The analysis derives from the following questions: To

¹ ORTIZ, I.; BURKE, S.; BERRADA, M. & CORTÉS, H. *World Protests 2006-2013*. Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York. Working Paper, 2013.

² TILLY, C.; TARROW, S. *Contentious Politics*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007.

³ TARROW, S. *The New Transnational Activism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁴ ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. “‘Mild Mannered’? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013”. *West European Politics*. Vol. 38, n.3, 2015, pp. 1–25.

⁵ ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. *Journal of Social Science Education*. Vol.12, n.1, 2013, pp. 31-40; ORTIZ et. al. *World Protests 2006-2013*. Op. Cit.

⁶ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. “Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de

what extent did it represent a new strategy for the actors involved? What are the limits and potentials of this strategy? Did it represent a mere sum of national protests or was it a transnational European protest? What were its impacts on socioeconomic conflicts in contemporary Portugal, and in the framework of the EU?

To render an account of the specificity of the new protest cycle, we chose to consider approaches from two fields of study that have been traditionally disassociated – union studies, on the one hand, and social movements studies, on the other. Singular approaches have accomplished very little in contributing to renovating social critique and considering the increasingly porous and intertwining nature between kinds of collective action and social conflict. Thus, this article begins by addressing the shifts in the power bases of organized labour, aiming to identify their strategic challenges and possibilities for the renewal of collective action. Moreover, the authors present an overview on the politics of contention in Portugal, on the eve of and during the anti-austerity protests which took place between 2010 and 2013, and highlight some of the main traits of the political, economic and social context in which they occurred. Lastly, this article will seek to contribute to clarify the nature of this episode, raising issues that can deepen the study of the role of general strikes as a strategic instrument for the working classes.

2. Shifts in power bases of organized labour

Unions are a historic product of the dominance of waged-labour as a basis for the organization and structuring of social relationships in the capitalist mode of production. They emerged, broadly speaking, during the death rattle of the “The Springtime of the Peoples” in 1848, as part of an anti-systemic movement,⁷ founded on class struggle. They took an increasingly important role during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, as lead actors in the struggles for the decommodification and self-protection of society. (New) social movements, on the other hand, can be traced back to the emergence of rifts and sources for social conflict, previously concealed, which have taken on a more significant role since the 1960s, especially in the central capitalist countries.

May 1968 can be viewed as a pivotal moment. It comprises three dynamics possessing a differentiated range and temporality: the beginning of the United States' long decline in the inter-state system; the end of an extraordinary economic growth cycle that commenced after the Second World War; and the depletion of traditional anti-systemic movements which, in central capitalist countries, were associated to the “Old Left”.⁸ These countries were based on so called “affluent” societies wherein, due to an unprecedented combination of democracy and capitalist economy,⁹ their conflicts would no longer be governed by the conditions which had characterized the nineteenth century. However, these societies were not free from criticism and contradictions. The late 1960s and early 1970s formed a period marked by a phase of strong collective mobilization, which lost its momentum roughly around 1973, but nonetheless left an indelible imprint.

Zooming in on labour, during the period between 1968 to 1973 there was a simultaneous peak in labour conflicts and grassroots militancy, often taking place outside of the institutions of industrial relations, accompanied by open criticism of traditional union leaderships. As a consequence, the heterogeneity of the working class was made evident, as was the protagonism of social critique and artistic critique, and sometimes its fusion, even in sites of

⁷ [WALLERSTEIN, I. “New Revolts Against the System”. *New Left Review*. Nov-Dec 2002. pp. 29–39.](#)

⁸ [ARRIGHI, G.; HOPKINS, T. K.; WALLERSTEIN, I. *Antisystemic movements*. London: Verso, 1989.](#)

⁹ STREECK, W. “The crises of democratic capitalism”. *New Left Review*. Sept-Oct 2011, pp. 5-29.

production.¹⁰

The consensus around democratic capitalism had been shattered by the critique of the institutional “Old Left” - including the trade unions. Nonetheless, this also concurred with freeing the right wing from this commitment to the consensus. The first response by the employers was a reinforcement of negotiation mechanisms with unions, on a company level, and the development of neo-corporatist arrangements, at a macro level. Yet additional costs attributable to the concession of new benefits to workers, together with an ever-increasing difficult economic situation, lead to a search for new solutions that would restore profit rates. It was within this context that neoliberalism arose as a political alternative, which implied a great deal of “creative destruction” and the rise of a new subjectivity.¹¹

A key element towards neutralizing social critique was the weakening of organized labour. Economic globalization reasserted the classical disjunction between capital mobility and labour localization¹² while the “new spirit of capitalism” was built by incorporating elements from the artistic critique, creating a second individualist revolution.¹³

The 1980s and 1990s saw a consolidation of these processes. Deconstructing the Fordist wage relation led to a weakening of the power bases of the unions: the restructuring of production contributed to the demise of big industrial concentrations, thanks to spatial and technological fixes, the accelerated economic shift to the service sectors went along with particularities which rendered collective workers' organization harder; and pressures for the flexibilization of labour relations increased. Overall strike activity declined¹⁴ and the public sector became the new “bulwark” for unions.

Although it was not a process of historical decline, the crisis of a specific type of unionism – industrial/national¹⁵ – moved the unions' capacity for strategic reflection and change to the top of the agenda in order to regain the ideological initiative, enlarge the playing field¹⁶ and regenerate solidarity to overcome fragmentation and the radicalization of differences.¹⁷ It is within

¹⁰ BOLTANSKI, L.; CHIAPELLO, E. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2007.

¹¹ HARVEY, D. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹² TILLY, C. “Globalization threatens labour's rights”. *Internacional Labour and Working Class History*. Vol. 47, 1995, pp. 1–23.

¹³ BOLTANSKI, L.; CHIAPELLO, E. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Op. Cit., p.199.

¹⁴ GALL, G. “A review of strike activity in Western Europe at the end of the second millennium”. *Employee Relations*. Vol. 21, n. 4, 1999, pp. 357-377.

¹⁵ WATERMAN, P. “Social Movement Unionism: a new model for a new world order”. *Review*. Vol. 16, n. 3, 1993, pp. 245-278.

¹⁶ WEVER, K. S. “International Labour revitalization: enlarging the playing field”. *Industrial Relations*. Vol. 37, n. 3, July 1998, pp. 388-407.

¹⁷ HARVEY, D. *Justice, Nature & the geography of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; HYMAN, R. “How can trade unions act strategically?” *Transfer - European Review of*

this scope that new strategies for union revitalization¹⁸ were experimented with, focusing, among other things, on organizing, on coalition building and on international solidarity.

Portugal is usually seen as an intermediate-developed or semi-peripheral society. The democratic advent of the 25 April 1974 was the historical turning point which led both to the end of Portuguese colonialism and to a break with a nearly five-decade long authoritarian political regime. This had made Portugal a country with a late and incipient industrialization process, an economy dependent on the colonies' raw materials and markets, the restriction of public freedoms, unions controlled by the corporatist regime and a practically non-existent welfare system. In the next 40 years, but in a more concentrated fashion during the first fifteen years of democracy, Portugal lived through a historical short-circuit in which different types of social regulation were rehearsed during a short period of time: from the fascist corporatist state it transitioned to socialism, then to Fordist regulation and, since its 1986 membership in the European Union, to neoliberal regulation.¹⁹ The institutional changes associated with the integration in the Economical and Monetary Union (EMU) and the financialization of the economy²⁰ precipitated a process of "peripheralization" in relation to the centre of Europe and particularly Germany. Similar mechanisms have been verified in such processes in other Southern European countries.²¹

Portuguese unionism also developed in a counter-cyclical fashion in relation to the central countries of Europe, but followed the same temporal pattern of Spain and Greece: 1) it experienced a period of rising collective mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s in an authoritarian regime; 2) during the second half of the 1970s, while tripartite social negotiations were the common rule in Europe and mass layoffs started in the industries of central European

Labour and Research. Vol. 13, n. 2, 2007, pp. 193–210.

¹⁸ FREGE, C. M.; KELLY, J. (eds.) *Varieties of Unionism – strategies for union revitalization in a globalizing economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁹ SANTOS, B. S. "Teses para a renovação do sindicalismo em Portugal, seguidas de um apelo". In: ESTANQUE, E. et al. (eds.), *Relações labourais e sindicalismo em mudança – Portugal, Brasil e o Contexto transnacional*. Coimbra: Quarteto, 2004, pp. 161-180.

²⁰ REIS, J.; RODRIGUES, J.; SANTOS, A.; TELES, N. "Compreender a Crise: A economia portuguesa num quadro europeu desfavorável". In: *Anatomia da Crise: Identificar os problemas para construir as alternativas* [Internet]. Observatório das Crises e Alternativas. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES), 2013.

²¹ GAMBAROTTO, F.; SOLARI, S. "The peripheralization of Southern European capitalism within the EMU". *Review of International Political Economy*. Vol. 22, n. 4, 2015, pp. 788-812.

economies, Portuguese unions were experiencing their greatest moment of collective mobilization and action under the influence of a class-oriented discourse; 3) “old” social movements were young, having been established after the democratic advent, while the arising “new” social movements were weaker; 4) finally, since the 1980s – when macro-economic regulation mechanisms fell into crisis, neoliberal discourse emerged and the state attempted to deregulate and distance itself from the historical compromise of social negotiations – social accords were institutionalized in a period where production relations were already increasingly flexibilized.²²

Portuguese unions have been historically divided by a political and ideological schism. The majority of the trade union movement is affiliated to two central trade unions: the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses – CGTP) and the General Workers’ Union (União Geral de Trabalhadores – UGT). CGTP displays a profile of classist unionism. It was created as its predecessor Intersindical, still during the “Estado Novo” (“New State”) dictatorship in 1971, and is strongly influenced by the Communist Party (PCP). The UGT, on the other hand, favours a social partnership unionism, seeking to promote workers’ social integration. It was created in 1978 by a group of unions which drifted away from the CGTP, with links to the Socialist Party (PS – Partido Socialista) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD – Partido Social Democrata).²³

As to international affiliations, both are members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), established in 1973. UGT became, shortly after its birth, a member of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions ICFTU (1979), the ETUC (1983) and later the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). As for the CGTP, it has kept close ties to the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), although it was never formally a member. The trade union’s membership in ETUC was attained only in 1995²⁴ and it has so far not joined the ITUC.

Union membership and union density achieved their peak in 1978. Union density fell from 54.8% in 1980 to 32% in 1989 and, during the 1990s, the drop was less drastic due to the increase in public sector union membership. According to OECD data, between 1999 and 2000 union membership rates

²² SANTOS, B. S. “Teses para a renovação do sindicalismo em Portugal, seguidas de um apelo”. Op. Cit. pp. 161-162.

²³ ROSA, Teresa. *Relações Sociais de Trabalho e Sindicalismo Operário em Setúbal*. Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1998; SANTOS, B. S. “Teses para a renovação do sindicalismo em Portugal, seguidas de um apelo”. Op. Cit. p.171.

²⁴ COSTA, H. *Os desafios da globalização ao sindicalismo: contributos para uma perspectiva portuguesa*. (Tese de Mestrado em Sociologia). Coimbra: Faculdade de Economia, 1997.

fell from 22.5% to 19.3%, rising again to 20.5% in 2012. The CGTP is still the largest trade union, claiming 537,000 members in 2008, compared to UGT's 210,000 members.²⁵

Strikes are one of the fundamental elements of a trade unions' collective action repertoire. Halting production – or threatening to do so – is the ultimate instrument to act against an unfair situation and to exert pressure on behalf of a favourable solution for workers. The right to strike was gradually recognized, not without resistance, and embedded in the national system of industrial relations. Formal restrictions to its exercise have been increasing and its use has been made more difficult thanks to the growing informality and precariousness of labour relations. This does not signify that strikes have not occurred, even outside the legal framework. Protests and political general strikes, on the other hand, have largely targeted the state when it instituted changes corresponding to a significant shift in labour and production relations.

Portugal saw strikes reach their historical apex in 1981, decreasing from then on to the historical minimum in 2007, although the available statistical data underestimates the numbers by excluding public sector strikes. The years after 2010 witnessed a growth in labour conflicts, noticeable with the rise in the number of strikes and of striking workers, in what might constitute an inversion, albeit temporary, of the historical tendency to decline.²⁶ Between 1975 and 2009 there were only five general strikes: on 12 February and 11 May 1982, both called by the CGTP alone; on 18 March 1988, by both trade unions; 10 December 2002 and 30 May 2007, called solely by the CGTP.²⁷ Resorting to political general strikes has characterized the unions' action in the age of austerity in Portugal and other Southern European countries, albeit with a mainly defensive character.²⁸ When the strike is carried out in the

²⁵ EurWORK. Trade union membership 2003–2008, 2009. (2015). [<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/comparativeinformation/trade-union-membership-20032008>]

²⁶ COSTA, H. A.; DIAS, H.; SOEIRO, J. “As greves e a austeridade em Portugal: Olhares, expressões e recomposições”. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*. n.103, 2014, pp. 173-202.

²⁷ ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. “‘Mild Mannered’? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013”. *Op. Cit.*

²⁸ GALL, G. “Quiescence continued? Recent strike activity in nine Western European economies”. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. Vol. 34, 2013, pp. 667-691; ORTIZ, I.; BURKE, S.; BERRADA, M. & CORTÉS, H. *World Protests 2006-2013*. *Op. Cit.*; NOWAK, J.; GALLAS, A. “Mass Strikes Against Austerity in Western Europe – A Strategic Assessment”. *Global Labour Journal*. Vol. 5, n. 3, 2014, pp. 306-321; , 2014. CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. “Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de austeridade: da ação colectiva à participação individual no protesto social”. **Op. Cit.**

traditional way of paralyzation at the entrance to the factory, it is limited by the increasing difficulties in using its structural and associational power²⁹ due to the exclusion of a growing number of people from formal wage relations.

The “new” social movements, fragile or nonexistent in the 1960s and 1970s, also saw an upsurge in Portugal in a counter-cycle when compared with the central countries of Europe. Although it already had a long story, the feminist movement increased its social weight from the 1990s onwards³⁰ and achieved an historical victory (through a referendum) when abortion was decriminalized in 2007 – i.e., on the eve of the financial crisis. The same can be said for the LGBT movement which, having been marginalized for several decades, was able to emerge at the turn of the millennium, as a way of practicing a sexual citizenship.³¹ Anti-racist mobilizations, which had gained momentum when confronted with skinhead attacks in the early 1990s and the discrimination against gypsy populations, was, meanwhile, faced with a new and thriving grassroots immigrant movement, against “Fortress Europe”, which demands, as it does all across Europe, “papers for all”. An anti-systemic ecologist movement also arose, mobilizing against genetically modified organisms and denouncing the climate crisis.

Europeanization, as a project of the elites, was met with increasing pressure from below,³² a fact that was also reflected in domestic activism and politics. Propelled by the new internationalism born somewhere between Chiapas and Seattle, transnational mobilization reached a peak in Portugal with the movement against the war in Iraq in 2003. And, similarly to what happened across Europe, it was in counter summits and social fora that the Global Justice Movement (GJM) aimed to nourish its social bases. This process was not without its contradictions and was characterized by the simultaneous emergence, vitally, of two types of significant tensions in the reticular logic of the “Movement of movements”³³: local vs global and unity vs diversity. The incapacity to build unity in diversity involving movements with fairly different dimensions, cultures and organizational weight ended up in the failure of the Portuguese Social Forum after two editions – 2003 and 2006.

This failure resulted in important problems on the side of the trade unions.

²⁹ WRIGHT, E. O. “Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests, and Class Compromise”. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 104, n. 4, 2000, pp. 957–1002.

³⁰ [TAVARES, M. *Feminismos: Percursos e Desafios \(1947-2007\)*. Lisboa: Texto Editora/Leya, 2011.](#)

³¹ SANTOS, A. C. *A Lei do Desejo. Direitos Humanos e Minorias Sexuais em Portugal*. Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 2005.

³² Della Porta, D.; CAIANI, M. *Social movements and Europeanization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

³³ PEREIRA, I. “Movimentos em rede: biografias de envolvimento e contextos de interação”. (Tese de Doutoramento em Antropologia). Lisboa: ISCTE-IUL, 2009.

Firstly, because a three-decade long increase in social inequalities and the prevalence of individualization-fragilization over individualization-emancipation³⁴ had tabled the urgency to renovate sources of indignation, implying mutual recognition and alliance-building capacity. Secondly, because it left a blurry dispute between “class” and “identity” which recalls the persistence of the problem in demarcating borders in the formation of class identities³⁵ – a particularly noteworthy issue when political, economic and social changes had destabilized the prior identities.³⁶ So the “reencounter” of both trade unions and new dynamics of collective action in contentious anti-austerity politics had problematic contours and was not at all taken for granted by the actors involved.

3. Anti-austerity protests, 2010-2011. From union struggles to the emergence of new actors

If the financial crisis constituted a factor in the intensification of disgruntlement, austerity was the *leitmotiv* in the mobilizations that shook Portugal between 2010 and 2013. After a brief expansionist phase, austerity was inaugurated in Portugal in March 2010 by the announcement of the PS government to follow a Programme for Stability and Growth 2010-2013 (PEC-I) which indicated, on the one hand, the constitution of wage deflation as a political instrument and, on the other, a radical and impressive suspension of public investment and an equally impressive extension of privatization.³⁷

Unions were active in the first signs of resistance and resurgence of protests. Initially, the private sector had taken on a higher profile in protests over pay and layoffs.³⁸ Yet the public sector still played an important role in mobilisation, initially in education, and there were some signs, although fluctuating, of an uncoordinated cooperation between unions affiliated both

³⁴ FITOUSSI, J.-P.; ROSANVALLON, P. *Nova Era das Desigualdades*. Oeiras: Celta, 1997.

³⁵ SILVER, B. *Forces of Labour – Workers’ Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

³⁶ POLLETA, F; JASPER, J. M. “Collective identity and social movements”. *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 27, 2001, pp. 283–305.

³⁷ COSTA, A.; CASTRO CALDAS, J. A. “União Europeia E Portugal Entre Os Resgates Bancários E a Austeridade: Um Mapa Das Políticas E Das Medidas”. In: *A Anatomia Da Crise: Identificar Os Problemas Para Construir as Alternativas*. Observatório sobre Crises e Alternativas. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Sociais, 2013, pp. 72-107.

³⁸ ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. ““Mild Mannered”? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013”. Op. Cit.

to CGTP and UGT,³⁹ the most visible being the national public sector strike on 4 March 2010. The protests escalated and extended, which was visible on the streets, and the 29 May 2010 protest called by CGTP stands out as one of the largest demonstrations that has been organized in Portugal so far. At this point, in the Portuguese Parliament the austerity packages were strongly contested by the left wing parties, the PCP and the Left Bloc (BE – *Bloco de Esquerda*).

Late 2010 and early 2011 were marked by important shifts in the structures of political opportunity.⁴⁰ A first factor for such changes arose precisely from the field of the unions. Still in 2010, after the summer, a new package of measures (PEC-III), to be included in the State Budget for 2011, was announced. PEC-III was opposed by CGTP and UGT and constituted the basis of the 24 November general strike in 2010 – the second general strike called by the two union confederations in 20 years, and the first to be called by UGT against a PS government.⁴¹ This would be the first general strike in a series of five in less than three years – from November 2010 to June 2013 – a number larger than that of all the general strikes that took place in the previous three decades (1975-2007). It also reveals the emergence of a new cycle of union protests, characterized by the scaling up and spread of labour conflicts, the politicization of the unions' agenda and the emergence of internationalist momentum.⁴² By early 2011, there was a new surge of strikes which involved both the public and the private sectors.⁴³

The turbulent internal context was accompanied by the worsening of the crisis in the Euro Area and the introduction of new institutional innovations aiming to increase budget discipline and control, which, combined with successive

³⁹ STOLEROFF, A. "Employment Relations and Unions in Public Administration in Portugal and Spain: From Reform to Austerity". *European Journal of Industrial Relations*. Vol. 19, n. 4, 2013, pp. 309-323.

⁴⁰ ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. "'Mild Mannered'? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013". *Op. Cit.*

⁴¹ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. "Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de austeridade: da ação colectiva à participação individual no protesto social". **Op. Cit.**

⁴² *Ibid.* A few days before the general strike, the Portuguese Finance Minister Teixeira dos Santos stated to the *Financial Times* that it was possible that Portugal would have to request the EU's financial aid. The declarations opened a long period of speculation and agitation around that possibility, as the capacity for public debt refinancing deteriorated. DEGRYSE, C. *The New European Economic Governance*. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute, 2012. With the bailout of other peripheral countries – Greece (May) and Ireland (November) – as the background, the threat of external intervention became part of the national political agenda.

⁴³ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. "Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de austeridade: da ação colectiva à participação individual no protesto social". **Op. Cit.**; ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. "'Mild Mannered'? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013". *Op. Cit.*

speculative attacks, intensified the pressure to apply austerity measures.⁴⁴ The PS government replied to the double pressure – both external and internal – with a dual approach which combined collective bargaining and unilateral decisions⁴⁵: the government achieved a written compromise with all the employers’ organizations and UGT – leaving aside CGTP – on the pact on employment and competitiveness and, on 12 March 2011, on the day of the “Geração à Rasca” protest, it announced a new austerity package (PEC-IV).⁴⁶

The rejection of this new austerity package by a broad variety of social and political sectors, and an increasing division within the political elite precipitated a political crisis. On the streets, unions were no longer the only ones to demonstrate. The rise of new actors – as seen on 12 March –, even if somewhat unclear as to their political standpoint, characterized the mobilisation. As to the unions, both confederations opposed the austerity package, voiding the mini-agreement made a few days earlier. Lastly, contrary to what had happened with previous PECs, the PS government could not count on the largest opposition party, the right-wing party PSD, to pass a new austerity package. On 23 March 2011, Prime Minister José Sócrates had to face the rejection of PEC-IV in parliament and he announced his resignation. On 6 April, faced with the national banks’ denial to finance the state, the resigning Prime Minister announced he had called the European Commission (EC) for financial assistance, as a last chance solution.⁴⁷ The “Memorandum of Understanding on specific economic policy conditionality” (MoU), backed by the PS, PSD and the Popular Party (CDS-PP, CDS Partido

⁴⁴ DEGRYSE, C. *The New European Economic Governance*. Op. Cit.

⁴⁵ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. “Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de austeridade: da ação colectiva à participação individual no protesto social”. **Op. Cit.**

⁴⁶ “Geração à Rasca” (“The Desperate Generation”) was a protest called through a Facebook event by four young persons, that took precariousness and unemployment as central issues. For a detailed analysis of this movement see BAUMGARTEN, B. “Time to get Re-Organized! The Organizational Structure of the Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protests”. Unpublished paper based on the presentation *Social movement organizing and protests against austerity in Portugal*, University of Roskilde, Denmark, 28 April 2014, and ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. Op. Cit.

⁴⁷ For full analysis of the nature of the debt crisis see DEGRYSE, C. *The New European Economic Governance*. Op. Cit.; [LAPAVITSAS, Costas](#); [KALTENBRUNNER, A.](#); [LINDO, D.](#); [MICHEL, J.](#); [PAINCEIRA, J.](#); [PIRES, E.](#) & [TELES, N.](#) *Eurozone Crisis: Breaking Up? A Route Out of the Eurozone Crisis*. London: *Research on Money and Finance*, 2011; REIS, J.; RODRIGUES, J.; SANTOS, A.; TELES, N. “Compreender a Crise: A economia portuguesa num quadro europeu desfavorável”. Op. Cit.; [GAMBAROTTO, F.](#); [SOLARI, S.](#) “The peripheralization of Southern European capitalism within the EMU”. Op. Cit.

Popular) was signed by the outgoing Portuguese government and the “Troika” on 3 May 2011. Thus, Portugal became the third country to be subject to a joint intervention of a troika composed of the EC, the ECB and the IMF. On the 5 June 2011 Legislative Elections, the two right-wing parties (PSD and CDS-PP) achieved a majority in parliament and formed a government.

Considering the shifts that happened during this period, the acute reconfiguration in the political opportunity structures must be highlighted and how these visibly exposed the consequences of the rise of a political and regional system where sovereignty, traditionally based on the nation-state, is shared with, or dislocated to, a supranational structure. In that sense, there is a special resonance, today, of the question raised in 1996 by McAdam et al.⁴⁸: What would the contentious politics in such a structure look like? And how would it affect the essential heritage of the consolidated state, the national social movement (NSM)? In view of these conditions, the case in study – the 14 November 2012 general strike – motivates yet another question: since the general strike was directed at the state, what shape can that repertoire of collective action take within this framework of a reconfiguration of the political opportunities structure, heightened by the intervention of a troika comprised of agencies of that same supra-national structure (EC, ECB) and one of the main institutions for neoliberal globalization (IMF)? Before answering this question, we will explore new developments arising in collective action, mainly due to non-union actors.

4. From “*geração à rasca*” to the anti-troika mobilisations

The “*Geração à Rasca*” protest placed Portugal on the map of a new cycle of protest and demonstrations⁴⁹ with the emergence of new actors, a reconfiguration in the demands and organization of the mobilisations, as well as an innovation in repertoires of action.⁵⁰ Aside from the large influence exercised by the Internet, very open to transnational spaces,⁵¹ one can emphasize the growing visibility of “artivism” where creativity played a role

⁴⁸ MCADAM, D.; TARROW, S.; TILLY, C. “Para Mapear o confronto político”. *Lua Nova* (online). n. 76, 2009, pp. 11–48. [http://www.scielo.br/pdf/ln/n76/n76a02.pdf]

⁴⁹ ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. Op. Cit.

⁵⁰ BAUMGARTEN, B. “Time to get Re-Organized! The Organizational Structure of the Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protests”. Op. Cit.; SOEIRO, J. “A formação do Precariado: Transformações no trabalho e mobilizações de precários em Portugal”. (Tese de Doutoramento em Sociologia: Relações de Trabalho, Desigualdades Sociais e Sindicalismo) Coimbra: Faculdade de Economia da Universidade de Coimbra, 2015.

⁵¹ ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. Op. Cit. BAUMGARTEN, B. “Time to get Re-Organized! The Organizational Structure of the Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protests”. Op. Cit.

in personal and collective awareness raising.⁵²

This cycle of mobilizations resulted in a paradoxical reconfiguration of the structures of mobilization. On the one hand, it involved non-union social actors who, operating on the periphery of traditional unions and political structures, asserted themselves in previous decades based on post materialist values and identity-related issues, although what they placed now at the centre of their agenda of demands were materialist demands, namely those related to labour.⁵³ In Portugal, non-union actors turning to labour issues began in the second half of the 2000s⁵⁴ – especially due to the onset of an alternative May Day celebration and of precarious workers' organizations –, but soon grew in social and political impact. For example, one of the first initiatives that aimed to continue the debate and action after the “*Geração à Rasca*” demonstration was the launch of a petition against precariousness. On the other hand, considering their young age and social basis, with categories that unions have displayed less capacity to mobilize – such as precarious workers or the unemployed – as well as their impact on the Portuguese political scenario, unions had to rethink their relationship with these movements.⁵⁵

The contagion effect of the 15M movement in Spain could be seen in the protests' transnational imprint, which was consolidated through *brockage* mechanisms.⁵⁶ Transnational connections were simultaneously grassroots and mediated by the new media⁵⁷ as in the case of the occupation of Lisbon's

⁵² Mourão, R. *Ensaio de ativismo*. Lisboa: Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea - Museu do Chiado, 2014. Retrieved from [http://www.ruimourao.com/]

⁵³ ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. Op. Cit.

⁵⁴ SOEIRO, J. “A formação do Precariado: Transformações no trabalho e mobilizações de precários em Portugal”. Op. Cit.

⁵⁵ ACCORNERO, G.; PINTO, P. R. “‘Mild Mannered’? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013”. Op. Cit./ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P.; ARTILES, A. M. “Descontentamento na Europa em tempos de austeridade: da ação colectiva à participação individual no protesto social”. **Op. Cit.**

⁵⁶ Brockage refers to a production of a new connection between previously unconnected or weakly connected sites. Interestingly, the 15M movement in the Spanish state had previously been inspired by the “*Geração à rasca*” demonstration to create the framework of the “no future generation”. In the reverse direction, the influence included democratic and organizational experimentation with assemblies as the main organizational element. BAUMGARTEN, B. “*Geração à Rasca* and beyond. Mobilizations in Portugal after 12 March 2011”. *Current Sociology*. Vol. 61, n. 4, 2013, pp. 457-473; BAUMGARTEN, B. “Time to get Re-Organized! The Organizational Structure of the Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protests”. Op. Cit.

⁵⁷ DELLA PORTA, D. “Mobilizing against the Crisis, Mobilizing for ‘another Democracy’: Comparing Two Global Waves of Protest”. *Interface: a journal for and about social*

main square, *Acampada do Rossio*.⁵⁸ A particularly significant example was the international meeting, held in Lisbon in July 2011, promoted by *Acampada do Rossio*, which contributed towards the preparation of the global 15 October action in 2012.⁵⁹ This involvement in transnational mobilization also contributed to a “*framing transformation*” process⁶⁰ making way for a realignment with the Global Justice Movement and producing a *boundary shift* – the 99% against financial elites.

Immediately after the 15 October demonstration, the movement started focusing on a type of claim making that directly addressed the unions – e.g., to call for a national general strike and a public demonstration on the same day, which was done on 24 November 2011. They also adopted a national framework. Despite this convergence in demands, the mobilisations were characterized by earlier established mistrust between the different political and social actors. After 24 November, the internationalist momentum that had been seen throughout this period suffered a significant break. The October 15th Platform (15O) in Portugal went through fragmentation processes and internal splits – it ended up, a few months later, as an activist group⁶¹ and despite attempts aimed at promoting cooperation between (severely fragmented) groups, there was a period of demobilization.⁶² Large mobilizations returned in September, with the 15 September 2012 demonstration “Que se lixe a troika! Queremos as nossas vidas!” (“Screw the

movements. Vol. 4, n.1, 2012, pp. 274-277.

⁵⁸ Beginning on 20 May 2011, the *Acampada do Rossio* included a smaller (less than 100 persons) and more ephemeral occupation of public space (11 days) than the *Acampadas* in the Spanish State. It also did not achieve the popularity that the 15M movement gained in the Spanish state, but the assemblies held in the *Acampada* did have a considerable contribution to the claim making in this period - fighting for rights “against the constant oppression of the ruling economical-financial system” -, in the subjects of work, debt, housing or culture. It should be noted that in the social basis of *acampada* there was a strong presence of an estrangement from unions: “We aren't against politics but we don't represent any party or union”. *Acampada Lisboa*. First Manifesto of the Rossio Square, 22 de Maio de 2011, [<https://acampadalisboa.wordpress.com/manifesto/>].

⁵⁹ At the meeting, which brought together about 130 *Acampada* activists from several European countries and several national and international organizations, they declared “the will to carry out an international mobilization that will take thousands of people to the streets dissatisfied with the political and economic systems”. *Acampada Lisboa*. *Acorda Portugal*, 11 de Julho de 2011, 2011b [<https://acampadalisboa.wordpress.com/2011/07/11/940/>].

⁶⁰ BENFORD, R. D.; SNOW, D. A. “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 26, 2000, pp. 611–639.

⁶¹ BAUMGARTEN, B. “Time to get Re-Organized! The Organizational Structure of the Portuguese Anti-Austerity Protests”. Op. Cit.

⁶² The reasons for this significant break of the internationalist momentum are certainly an interesting topic for future research and analysis. A relevant focus would be on the 15O movement in four episodes (in addition to the 15 October) – the general strikes on 24 November and 22 January; the general strike on 22 March; and the Global Spring demonstration on 15 May –, demonstrating its insertion into contentious politics. *Ibid.*, gives some important insights concerning the bases of these social movements.

troika! We want our lives [back]!”). Called in August by a closed group of 29 activists, including artists and public figures, it displayed a more focused and strategic organizational plan. Thus, it aimed to avoid the trap of never-ending debates that had plagued the organizational process of 15O.⁶³ The goal was not to conquer participants in order to include them in an organizational process, but to ensure maximum mobilization for demonstrations. Despite this, initiatives taken beyond the organizational core grew and multiplied, as defended by the symbolic *framing* of *Que se Lixe a Troika* (QSLT). Later, in 2013, one of the more significant actions were the “grandoladas”, inaugurated during direct actions when a group of people interrupted the the Prime Minister by singing “Grândola”, a historically symbolic song associated with the 1974 Portuguese Revolution. In that sense and in spite of the international references in terms of opponents – the Troika – the demonstrations tended to use a national framing. A new effort towards the transnationalisation of the protest occurred in June 2013, which at that time was in a phase of demobilisation. Meanwhile, as the general strike gained wide social support, there was a concentrated, but significant coalition formed.

5. General strike: the People's Square, #14N and the European public sphere

When the national council of CGTP decided on 3 October 2012 to call a general strike for 14 November, it did not call for a transnational European demonstration. The action was aimed at the government, adopting a national class identity framing: defending the workers’ and people’s interests within the democratic regime and continuing the achievements of the April 1974 revolution. The EU was only superficially mentioned, as a part of “the foreign troika” with whom the memorandum, “truly a program of aggression against the workers and the People”, was signed. The call was strategically inclusive and aimed to encompass, without mentioning them, the new emerging actors and forms of action that surpassed the space of production: male and female workers, the retired, young people, the unemployed and various sectors, “along with all of those who, through their action in the workplace and presence in the streets, avenues and squares throughout the country, strengthen and give substance to the struggle”, which had “as its main goal to put an end to this policy and this government, before this government and this

⁶³ Ibid.

policy put an end to the country”.⁶⁴ Declaring their class identity, CGTP simultaneously addressed the society in general, the “People”, in what became the “symbolic footprint” of collective action of this period.⁶⁵

The European framing arose about a fortnight later, with the decision by the executive council of the ETUC to also schedule on the 14 November a day of action and solidarity, aiming to mobilize the European union movement. The *call* was far less antagonistic than CGTP’s, stressing the need for social dialogue and collective bargaining, but it paved the way towards a unique process of transnationalisation of a general strike, which had a very significant impact on contentious politics. The ETUC’s initiative placed the conflict on a multi-sector level, charging the EU and IMF with “miscalculation” which would have “an unmeasurable impact on daily life of workers and citizens that ETUC represents” and questioning the austerity policies promoted by the Budgetary Treaty and the Troika.⁶⁶ The Spanish *Union General de Trabajadores* (UGT) and the *Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) soon responded to the European call, announcing the first Iberian general strike in history.⁶⁷ Expectations for new endorsements by other organizations grew, allowing speculation as to the scale of the “general strike”. On the day of the protest, 40 unions from 23 countries, according to ETUC, endorsed the action although, other than in the Iberian dimension, there was no clear mobilization of organized labour that would make an European general strike out of this episode. This, however, did not stop the protests to become known online by the tag #14N – EUROPEAN STRIKE – with all the symbolic and relational weight that “online” had in this cycle of mobilization.

In Portugal, this process of transnationalisation of protests was important enough to widen the basis of social and political support for the use of this

⁶⁴ CGTP. Resolução do Conselho Nacional da CGTP-IN: contra a exploração e o empobrecimento; Mudar de política – por um Portugal com futuro, 3 de Outubro de 2012. [<http://www.cgtp.pt/trabalho/accao-reivindicativa/5539-cgtp-in-convoca-greve-geral-para-14-de-novembro-de-2012>].

⁶⁵ BENFORD, R. D.; SNOW, D. A. “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”. Op. Cit. This symbolic footprint became clearer at the rally held on 11 February 2012 that filled “[Palace Square](#)” ([Terreiro do Paço](#)), [one of the largest squares of Lisbon, at a time of demobilization of the social actors that emerged in the new global cycle of mobilization. The episode was a trial of strength led by the new leader of CGTP](#), Arménio Carlos, elected in January: “There is no surrender here” (*Aqui não há rendição*) and “The IMF does not boss around here” (*FMI não manda aqui*) are some of the most catchy phrases of his speech. About a year later, on 2 March 2013, it was the QSLT that filled the Palace Square in a demonstration under the moto: “Screw the troika! The People rule!” (Que se lixe a Troika! O Povo é quem mais ordena!).

⁶⁶ ETUC. ETUC day of action and solidarity for a Social Compact for Europe. 17 Oct 2012. [<http://www.etuc.org/a/10439>]

⁶⁷ It should be noted that these trade union confederations had proposed, as early as 2011, the holding of a European general strike.

instrument of collective action. In fact, and despite the deepening of the anti-labour element in the troika's program that justified the intensification of the struggle, the previous general strike, which had occurred in March 2012, had had few endorsements, and was criticized by several political and union sectors, particularly from the UGT, and included episodes of tension and mistrust. Additionally, the new emerging political actor (QSLT) had not taken the initiative to call for a general strike in September, as 15O had done in the previous year. Subsequently, after the CGTP had called the 14 November general strike, QSLT did not take a stand on the subject.

UGT at first declared that the strike of November 2012 called by CGTP was divisive and sectarian, but the evolutions in transnational collective action forced the UGT to reevaluate its stance, in a curious contortionistic exercise: it "will not join this CGTP strike", but would support the day of action and solidarity. Defining "austerity for austerity's sake" as the line that separates the terms of confrontation, it chides a government that is often "more *troikist* than the troika" and the pressures of the presidents of the IMF and France.⁶⁸ More than reasserting the transnational trait of the conflict, UGT's declaration seemed to point towards a strategy of externalizing the strike by introducing external targets. Nonetheless, there was an undeniable widening in the basis of support to the strike. In all, fourteen unions and four federations, members of UGT, and even its Secretary-General, João Proença, joined the strike.⁶⁹

The way QSLT ended up connecting with the general strike's contentious politics is particularly interesting. Using Angela Merkel's visit to Portugal as an opportunity, scheduled for two days prior to the strike, QSLT addressed an open letter to the German Chancellor, declaring her to be *persona non grata*. Resorting to a specialized and legally defined term used in diplomacy constituted an ingeniously creative way to turn the tables in the game of restraining transnational protest, usually played by the government: in this case, it was the social movement and not the government or the EU that defined who should be allowed in or stopped at the border. Moral legitimacy in this public statement was framed nationally, as the Chancellor was accused

⁶⁸ UGT. "Resolução Do Secretariado Nacional OE 2013 – UGT Contra a Austeridade Pela Austeridade." 24 Oct. 2012. [www.ugt.pt/SN_24_10_2012.pdf].

⁶⁹ João Proença justifies that "The Confederation gave to their trade unions the possibility to freely join the strike. Some trade unions have declared converging strikes, as was the case of my union. Whenever my union declares strike, I also strike". *Jornal de Notícias*, 2012.

of “interfering with the decisions of the Portuguese state, while not democratically mandated by its inhabitants”. Nonetheless, it did not derive from any nationalist or much less any chauvinist claim. The public statement connected concerns about democracy with economic worries, exposing the neoliberal agenda of the Chancellor and her business entourage. And, recalling how the so called “German Miracle” was built historically on debt relief and a brutal wage reduction, it constituted a salute to kindred European peoples to stand up and strike, collectively, against “the governments that betrayed the trust placed in them” and against austerity, imposed by the troika. The open letter, which was translated into Spanish, German, French, Greek, Italian and English and widely disseminated, also contributed to the expectations for a politicization of the conflict, placing it in the European public arena.⁷⁰ The document contends, therefore, that:

Your entourage may try to ignore us. The European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank may try to ignore us. But we are more and more, Mme. Merkel. Here and in all countries. Our protests will be stronger and stronger. We become more aware of reality every day. The stories you have all told us were always awkward and now we know they were full-out lies. We are awake, Mme. Merkel. You are an unwelcome guest.⁷¹

The 14 November 2012 strike was defined by CGTP as “one of the greatest Days of Struggle undertaken in our country until today and, surely, the largest General Strike in this century”.⁷² As mentioned above, after the historical low point of 2007, regarding the numbers of strikes and of striking workers, this tendency was reversed in subsequent years. In 2012, these numbers had grown back to the highest level since 1994. Reports confirmed the official strike numbers. In fact, the extent and dimension of mobilization for the strike on the 14 November was very comprehensive, indeed massive in all public sectors, but also quite significant in the state’s private and entrepreneurial sector. In the public transport sector, it was a record-breaking strike, with more than 85% of workers in the main urban centers on strike.⁷³

However, the distinctive and unique element here was the wide social support for the strike. Besides the unions and QSLT, new and old actors, from the most diverse sectors, supported the strike, whether in the mobilization process

⁷⁰ DELLA PORTA, D. “Reinventing Europe. Social Movement Activists as Critical Europeanists”. In: TEUNE, Simon (ed.) *The Transnational Condition. Protest Dynamics in an Entangled Europe*. New York: Bergham Books, 2010, pp. 113–128.

⁷¹ [QSLT. “Carta aberta a Angela Merkel”. 08 Nov. 2012. \[http://carachancelermerkel.blogspot.pt/\].](http://carachancelermerkel.blogspot.pt/)

⁷² [CGTP. Greve Geral afectou todo o país. Comunicado de Imprensa N.º 095/12. 19 Nov 2012. 2012b. \[http://www.cgtp.pt/informacao/comunicacao-social/comunicados/5838-greve-geral-afectou-todo-o-pais\].](http://www.cgtp.pt/informacao/comunicacao-social/comunicados/5838-greve-geral-afectou-todo-o-pais)

⁷³ [http://www.dn.pt/inicio/economia/interior.aspx?content_id=2884947&page=1.](http://www.dn.pt/inicio/economia/interior.aspx?content_id=2884947&page=1)

– featuring, notably, the affirmation of a strike not only as a legitimate right, but also as a citizen’s demand –, or in the great variety of actions that connected the space of production to public space, a hybrid public space, to adopt a concept used by Castells.⁷⁴

The Internet became an essential means for sharing and spreading information. Numbers, statements, photos and videos were published and spread within a viral logic that is uncommon in the classic repertoire. Practical information on how to participate in the strike and scheduled actions were shared, coercion and repression were exposed and numbers of strikers and strike related actions in multiple locations – from all European countries where the action and solidarity days were promoted – were presented.

Strike pickets, involving the solidarity and participation of activists from various social sectors, were held in many workplaces, from the night before the strike until mid-morning. This effort to cooperate was not new to this cycle of mobilization, as it had been tried the year before, but it was now broadened. The public space was occupied through the innovative combination of several repertoires: from strike pickets in workplaces and itinerant pickets on the streets to a march in Lisbon that aimed to bring unions and several political actors together.

Efforts to limit the right to strike appeared before the 14 November with the government imposing a malicious interpretation of minimum services. 14 November saw a more violent type of repression, as police intervention affected several strike pickets and the itinerant picket on the streets of Lisbon. At the end of the day, in front of the Parliament, in a strange scenario of contention, and responding to a group of about ten people throwing stones at the police barrier for more than half an hour, riot police began a general “sweep” operation over two kilometers, which resulted in several injured people – including elderly people – and the arrest of 120 persons. It remains unclear what the exact premises and circumstances were that led the police’s action during this episode, as well as who has political responsibility for the legal and police abuse of power.⁷⁵ But the episode had a tremendous impact

⁷⁴ ESTANQUE, E.; COSTA, H. A.; SOEIRO, J. “[The new global cycle of protest and the Portuguese case](#)”. Op. Cit.

⁷⁵ An inquiry of the General Inspectorate of Internal Administration (IGAI), released only in 2015, acknowledged that there were “abuses” and illegalities, including the fact that several people had been hit with batons on the head: some were bleeding and others fainted with trauma. Many young people were taken to police stations, searched and locked in cells without being detained.

on the politics of contention, feeding the fear and damaging opportunities for articulation between CGTP and other social actors for action in the public space.

6. Comments and conclusions

This article analyzed the 14 November 2012 general strike aiming, with reference to the Portuguese case, to explore its insertion into this period's contentious politics in regard both to its transnational dimension and the relationship between actors – particularly between the unions and new political actors involved. The unions' perception of their weaknesses and of the ability of new collective actors to organize massive mobilizations against austerity transformed the political opportunity structure and encouraged a shift in union strategy and action. Although resistance often walked separate paths, they sometimes converged, drawn together by two elements: the importance, for the new actors, of material claims and the recognition, although ambivalent, of these new actors by the unions. General strikes were times of convergence. In these moments of encounter, contention was expressed not only in the workplace but also in public spaces, resulting in common “symbolic frames”, crossing different collective action repertoires and generating “symbolic power”.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, these moments were not without reciprocal tensions and it is an open question whether this represents a sporadic collaboration or a possibility to generate structured and sustained alliances in the future.

Whereas it is hard to evaluate, in the short term, the impacts and results of this episode of collective action, to evaluate it in the medium and long terms is a particularly complex operation. The authors do not seek to definitely address these questions in this article, but formulate some theoretical and empirical questions for future study.

From a call that was clearly referenced to national political opportunity structures – affected by a “foreign troika” –, the strike went on to hold an international and, to a certain extent, transnational dimension. The result was a combination of various actions, including general strikes in the four Southern European countries of Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, although only Portugal and Spain witnessed an actual general strike on the day.⁷⁷ If it was not an European general strike, it surely fits with the definition of

⁷⁶ WEBSTER, E.; LAMBERT, R.; BEUIDENHOUT, A. *Grounding Globalization: Labour in the Age of Insecurity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

⁷⁷ [VOGIATZOGLOU, M. “Workers’ trans-national networks in austerity times: The case of Italy and Greece”. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*. Vol. 21, n. 2, May 2015, pp. 215-228.](#)

transnational European protest elaborated by Tarrow,⁷⁸ and was one of the more significant events, on a European scale, of the capital-labour conflict since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis.

Thus, in the short term and on the national level, it would not be unwise to state that its importance was historical, not only due to the number of participants, but also due to the social support it rallied. The strike also had an immediate outcome, which should not be belittled: it put an end to the government's plan to lower the employers' social security contribution – through a Single Social Tax –, which had been one of the sparks that led to the widening of the '5 September' QSLT demonstration, a project abandoned after the general strike. Multiple references to identity were articulated again in the flows of conflict dynamics, amplifying the social and political bases of collective action, within and outside the nation-state. The "we" side assumed a nationally framed class identity – the People's Square, a reference to Lisbon's "Palace Square" (Terreiro do Paço) –, which was later confronted with the need for a social contract in Europe. It then took on the shape of an Iberian alliance in the field of organized labour, albeit embedded in the transnational cycle of protests – the '#Nov14.' open letter by QSLT placed the conflict in a structure of multi-level opportunities, more complex than in CGTP's approach, yet more salient⁷⁹ to the lives of the people to be mobilized than ETUC's proposal.

Furthermore, it introduced a new element, connecting economic worries to democratic concerns within the logic of the politicization of the public, supra-national and European spheres.

A medium and long term evaluation points to a more strategic analysis. The most intense period in this cycle of protests came to an end in mid-2013, with the joint general strike – rallying CGTP and UGT – of 27 June 2013. The strategy aiming to topple the government was unsuccessful and unions and social movements were corroded, which led to a process of social demobilization. Since then, with the blocking of political opportunity structures, there has not been a regrowth of collective action.

The PSD/CDS coalition government stayed in office and it led a speedy implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding, instating an austerity

⁷⁸ TARROW, S. *The New Transnational Activism*. Op. Cit.

⁷⁹ BENFORD, R. D.; SNOW, D. A. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment". Op. Cit.

society.⁸⁰ In fact, a year after the MoU was negotiated, the situation had drastically worsened and the memorandum's effects were fairly noticeable. Besides its effects in job destruction and the rise in unemployment – unemployment rates had climbed to 16.9% in the fourth quarter of 2012, peaking at an historical 17.7% in the first quarter of 2013 –, the memorandum's plan imposed *beggar-thy-neighbour* policies resulting in a reconfiguration of the employment regime. It encompassed three breaks – on wage policy, on collective bargaining and on job and unemployment protection,⁸¹ likening it to a liberal regime.

Enforcing the MoU led to a further deepening in the country's peripheralization process within the Economic and Monetary Union,⁸² simultaneously adding to the national-European tensions, particularly because “the center demonised the periphery”.⁸³ Likewise, since then, a new European transnational protest, marked by labour issues, has not been attempted. Thus, nowadays, we are living in an apparent paradox: “The balance of power between capital and labour has been shifted towards capital and the Commission at the expense of labour and national legislators”.⁸⁴ However, “the new supranational EU regime”, consolidated since 2011, has also nationalized social conflict.⁸⁵ So struggles are nationalized, taking on the aspect of a national rebellion against European institutions (the most emblematic case being Greece), while the limits of merely national collective action become clear.

The current situation raises significant strategic debates, which should draw conclusions from the 14 November 2012 general strike. On the one hand, in a context where organized labour is being weakened, the emergence of new social mobilizations needs to go from a mere “meeting” logic to building social alliances between unions and (new) collective action movements, raising the levels of coordination.⁸⁶ On the other hand, there are substantial

⁸⁰ FERREIRA, A. C. “A Sociedade de Austeridade: Poder, Medo E Direito Do Trabalho de Exceção”. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*. n. 95, 2011, pp. 119-136.

⁸¹ CAMPOS LIMA, M. da P., FERNANDES, L. “A Austeridade, a Flexinsegurança e as Mudanças do Regime de Emprego em Portugal”. *Conferência Internacional “40 anos após o 25 de Abril de 1974”*. Lisboa: ISCTE-IUL. 8-10 Maio 2014.

⁸² GAMBAROTTO, F.; SOLARI, S. “The peripheralization of Southern European capitalism within the EMU”. *Op.Cit.*

⁸³ [LAPAVITSAS, Costas; KALTENBRUNNER, A.; LINDO, D.; MICHEL, J.; PAINCEIRA, J.; PIRES, E. & TELES, N. Eurozone Crisis: Breaking Up? A Route Out of the Eurozone Crisis. London: Research on Money and Finance”. *Op. Cit.* p.7.](#)

⁸⁴ BIELER, A.; ERNE, R. “Transnational solidarity? The European working class in the Eurozone crisis”. In PANITCH, L.; ALBO, G (eds.) *Transforming Classes. Socialist Register 2015*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014.

⁸⁵ ERNE, R. “A supranational regime that nationalizes social conflict: Explaining European trade unions’ difficulties in politicizing European economic governance”. *Labour History*. Vol. 56, n. 3, 2015, pp. 345-368.

⁸⁶ [VOGIATZOGLU, M. “Workers’ trans-national networks in austerity times: The case of](#)

difficulties in forging, on a European scale, a “common discursive frame of reference” that will provide a strong interpretation for coordinated collective action.⁸⁷ Overcoming the North-South divide, replacing the common sense narrative that penalizes the periphery by adequately framing and constructing connections between the attacks made by the European institutions and national governments to the working classes of different countries is certainly necessary, but difficult. Despite the difficulties, it is certainly necessary to build multi-scalar articulations and mobilizations, with both trade unions and new dynamics of collective action.

The space for national action is unquestionable. Nonetheless, any political strategy aiming to enforce alternatives to austerity can hardly advance without the capacity to forge transnational solidarity – that recognizes, *a priori*, the periphery’s specific difficulties – and without significantly altering the power relation on a European scale.

[Italy and Greece”. Op. Cit.](#)

⁸⁷ HELLE , I. “A new proletariat in the making? Reflections on the 14 November 2012 strike and the movements of 1968 and 1995”. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*. vol. 21, n. 2, May 2015, pp. 229-242.

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