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Portugal

Precarious generation on the march

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On Saturday 12 March 2011, shouting "With casualised jobs there can be no freedom!" 200,000 people gathered in Lisbon and 80, 000 in Porto. The protests marked an extraordinary mobilisation that spread to all 11 other cities across the country, and even to other European countries.

In Lisbon, a sea of people which never stopped growing filled the Avenida da Liberdade, from the Marques de Pombal Square to the Rossio.

Participation in the demonstration of the "breadline generation" far exceeded the numbers originally expected, with about 300 000 people taking part across the country, said Lusa Paula Gil, one of the organisers. "Hopefully it is the first step in a participatory democracy in Portugal," he said.

Thousands of people in several cities joined the protest of "the casualised generation," convened by four youths, in protest against the lack of a future for young people in Portugal. The announcement of the numbers participating to the crowds in Rossio Square, Lisbon, was accompanied by cries of "the street is ours".

The "ant on the path," a song by Zeca Afonso and a commercial slogan of a supermarket chain were taken up by the organizers of the protest of the "Generation of junk." The two songs were adapted to sing as the main theme of the demonstration and resistance. The songs were sung as a rap while leaflets were handed to the demonstrators outlining the criticisms of the current system and proposals for change. Then three of the organizers read the manifesto. First Alexandre Carvalho, with a red rose in hand, followed after John and Paula Gil Labrincha.

Jel and Falãncio, from the group Homens da Luta whose song the "The Struggle is Joy" is Portugal's entry to the Eurovision song contest, attended the event and were joined by singer and composer Fernando Tordo, who joined the group at Avenida da Liberdade.

On the street there were several generations, whole families or single persons, all sharing the idea that "the country is on the junk," as read the banner that led the march in Lisbon.

In Porto, the size of the crowd forced a plan B to bypass the protest parade on Avenue of the Allies. The demonstration was scheduled to end in square D. João I, but the influx of people was so great that the participants of all ages, went to the Avenue of the Allies, which had an extensive platform of speakers. One of the most exciting moments came when a 25 year-old sang the words of a song made famous by Simone de Oliveira who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1969.

In Coimbra a diversity of generations that came together marked the event. Students, teachers, parents or siblings of threatened workers, were taking turns to speak at Republic Square,. By mid-afternoon, they began a march chanting the slogan raised during the Portuguese revolution of 1974 : "The people united will never be defeated."

Hundreds of young people spontaneously joined the march in Rossio Square. André Carvalho, 18, told the Portuguese news channel why he was there: "Now I am carrying the weight of books on my back, but I want to contribute, as I can, so that tomorrow I will not have to carry on my back the burden of unemployment."

The protests spread to seven other cities like Faro (6000 people), Leiria (500 people), Guimaraes, Braga (over 2 000 people), Castelo Branco (200 people), Funchal and Ponta Delgada (400 people).

In other European cities, young immigrants have joined protests in front of Portuguese embassies in London, Barcelona and The Hague.

Deolinda, the band, whose song "Parva que sou" expresses the hopelessness of the young, poor and unemployed, sympathized with the protest of the "generation of junk, announced through Facebook that they would be present" in consciousness. The group members were on their way to Galicia for a concert.

This is the manifesto under which the march was convened:

The Precarious Generation Manifesto

We, unemployed, "five hundred-eurists" and other underpaid workers, disguised slaves, those who are underemployment or on fixed term contracts, self employed, casual workers, trainees, scholarship holders, working students, students, mothers, fathers and young people of Portugal.

We, who have up to now been complacent about the conditions imposed upon us, stand here, today, to contribute to a qualitative change in our country. We stand here, today, because we can no longer accept the situation that we have been dragged into. We stand here, today, because every day, we strive hard to be deemed worthy of a dignified future, with stability and safety in all areas of our lives.

We protest so that those responsible for our uncertain situation – politicians, employers, and ourselves – act together towards a rapid change in this reality that has become unsustainable.

Otherwise:

a) The present is betrayed because we are not given the chance to show our potential, thus blocking the improvement of the country's social and economic conditions. The aspirations of a whole generation, which cannot prosper, are wasted.

b) The past is insulted, because previous generations have worked hard for our rights, our access to education, our security, labour rights and our freedom. Decades of effort, investment and dedication, risk being compromised.

c) The future is mortgaged, and we foresee it without quality education for all and no fair retirement pensions for those who have worked their whole lives. The resources and skills that could put the country back on track of economic success will be wasted.

We are the highest-qualified generation in the history of our country. So do not let us down with the prospect of exhaustion, frustration or lack of future perspectives. We do believe we have all the resources and tools to provide a bright future for our country and ourselves.

This is not a protest against other generations. Quite simply, we are not, nor do we want to, wait passively for

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problems to sort themselves out. We protest because we want a solution, and we want to be part of it.