

Towards an assessment of Portuguese union strategies in the context of austerity and adjustment: union leaders' discourse meets sociological and political analysis

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The economic-financial crisis of 2008-09 and the following sovereign debt crisis, which climaxed with the signing in 2011 of a Memorandum of Understanding with the *Troika* and acceptance of outside intervention, have brought about a radical reconfiguration of the underlying ideology of Portuguese employment relations and a concomitant deregulation of industrial relations. These transformations came in the wake of two decades of progressive whittling away at the pattern of industrial relations established with the Portuguese revolution and democratic consolidation in 1974-76. However, in this critical situation of visible breakdown, the ability of Portuguese trade unionism to develop effective defensive strategies has been limited by its internal ideological and political competition. In this context the union confederations have maneuvered between divergence and convergence in action. The CGTP generally continued on a path of radicalized discourse and politicized mobilization. The UGT kept itself within the hegemonic block through the negotiation of concessions while attempting to establish the limits and price of its cooperation with the politics of adjustment. To maintain intramural cohesion, both confederations have had to placate loyal oppositions within their leadership. In this way, the union confederations have been able to assure their role as relevant actors in the processes but neither confederation's strategy and their consequent joint action have managed to put a stop to the liberal deregulatory revolution with more than residual effects upon its outcomes. It can be argued in fact that judicial and court action, more than by trade union resistance, have been crucial to holding back the completion of this radical transformation. In these circumstances it is therefore incumbent upon industrial relations research to reveal the sources and repercussions of what amounts to a historical defeat of Portuguese trade unionism.

This paper will report upon recent interviewing of select leaders of the two representative Portuguese trade union confederations that had as its aim the sounding

out and recording of their own assessments of union strategy and action in this historical period. Leaders were asked to evaluate trade union goals and the extent to which they were achieved as well as how the successes and failures of this period will have repercussions upon the short and medium term prospects of trade unionism in Portugal. The paper will conclude with our own assessment of the effectiveness of union strategy in this conjuncture and the emerging prospects for union revitalization.