

Thousands hold fresh protest in Portugal, demand cap on food prices

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Thousands of Portuguese protesters pour into the streets over the country's cost-of-living

crisis, in Lisbon, Portugal, March 18, 2023.

Lisbon, March 20 (RHC)-- Thousands of Portuguese protesters have poured into the streets in the capital Lisbon over the country's cost-of-living crisis, demanding higher wages and pensions. The protesters, who gathered in downtown Lisbon over the weekend, also urged government intervention to cap soaring food prices, which they said are strangling their already tight budgets.

Metalworker Paula Gonçalves, 51, said people are "protesting against low wages ... and for more justice" for workers, adding, "We, the workers, are the ones who produce, we give everything we have... and the profit is all for employers and nothing for us."

Since the beginning of the year, various social groups in Portugal, including teachers, have been holding regular demonstrations as they feel the pinch of the country's cost-of-living crisis. Portugal is one of Western Europe's poorest countries and according to official data, more than 50 percent of its workers earned less than 1,000 euros (\$1,067) per month last year, while the minimum wage is only 760 euros per month.

Data released by Eurostat shows that the minimum wage in Portugal stood at 681 euros a month in 2023, making it the 12th lowest among the 15 European Union countries that have minimum wages. It compares with 726 euros in Poland, 775 euros in Greece or 798 euros in Spain.

The march, which was called by the CGTP, a confederation of the country's main trade unions, came a day after a national strike by civil servants in support of higher wages. That action hit rubbish collection, schools and hospitals.

The CGTP wants the government to implement a package of anti-poverty measures, including price controls on essential commodities and action to limit soaring rents and the cost of property loans. CGTP General Secretary Isabel Camarinha told the crowd that the unions wanted pay rises of at least 10 percent, which would be above the inflation rate, and nothing less than an increase of 100 euros (\$108) for all workers.

Portugal's inflation reached 7.4 percent in 2022, which was the highest level in 30 years. Ignoring the CGTP's demand, Economy Minister Antonio Costa Silva on Friday ruled out any government intervention to stem soaring food prices, saying the market was the best price-setting mechanism.

As of January 1, civil servants' salaries were up by an average of 3.6 percent from 2022 levels, and those of the private sector grew by 5.1 percent, while pensions rose by a maximum of 4.83 percent, government data shows.

While the government says inflation slowed to 8.2 percent in February from 8.4 percent the previous month, prices of unprocessed food products, such as fruit and vegetables, surged 20.11 percent. A year after Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Costa won a majority in parliament, he is facing street protests and strikes by teachers, doctors, railway workers, and other professionals.

"Each time I go to the supermarket I see that the (prices of) products increase a little more every day and wages do not follow... it is urgent to cap the increase in the cost of living," said Ana Amaral, 51, a hospital administrative assistant.

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