

# Abortion referendum in Portugal

Saturday 20 January 2007, by [SOUSA Alda](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2007).

**February 11<sup>th</sup> will be a major day in Portuguese political and social life. A second national referendum will take place around the issue of abortion.**

Portugal still has a restrictive law concerning abortion. Up to 1984, abortion was considered a criminal offence and women who had had an abortion could face up to 8 years in prison. Ten years after the Portuguese revolution a small change was introduced into the penal code. If a woman asked for an abortion when she became pregnant as a consequence of rape, in case of probable birth defects or serious illness of the child to be or in case of danger to the women's health, abortion was no longer to be considered as a crime.

But abortion on women's demand up to 10 weeks of pregnancy was only discussed in Parliament much later, in 1998. Although the proposal won by one vote, both the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party agreed that the issue should be resolved by a referendum and not by Parliament.

The referendum took place in June 1998. The right wing parties called for a NO vote, the hierarchy of the Catholic church waged a terrorist campaign, showing images of foetuses as if they were nearly full-term babies. The Socialist Party was split between its youth (and most MPs who called and campaigned for the YES) and the prime minister, Guterres, who declared he was against changing the law.

Only 31.9% voted, a massive abstention for Portuguese standards: The NO had an extremely narrow majority, 50.07% NO, 48.28% voted YES. Thus, the law did not change.

At that time, one of the main and strongest arguments used by the right was that, in spite of abortion being considered a criminal offence by law, no women had yet been put to trial.

This has no longer been the case since then. We have seen the unbelievable. Women (mostly working class women), in some cases also their partners or other relatives, have been brought to trial in three places: Maia, Setubal and Aveiro). So far, the women have not been convicted, although the Aveiro trial is still waiting for a final sentence after the appeal.

The question put to referendum now is exactly the same as in 1998: "Do you agree with decriminalisation of abortion when requested on women's demand, up to 10 weeks of pregnancy, and performed in an authorized clinic?"

There are a lot of differences now with the situation we faced in 1998.

First, the only political party clearly campaigning for the NO are the Christian Democrats. The Social Democrats (liberal) argue that each of their members or MPs are free to take their own position, and the Socialist Party is engaged, this time, in the YES campaign, with the personal involvement of the prime minister Socrates and several members of cabinet.

Second, although the NO has been able to mobilize the conservative country and the church is still

doing an aggressive anti-choice campaign, several pro-choice movements have been set up; these are very active and will have legal right to take part in the campaign: one brings together feminists and several leading Catholics; another ("doctors for choice" has brought together, for the first time, many physicians, other health professionals and researchers; another is mostly addressing the youth and, besides artists (singers and actors), has also young members of the Social Democrats, Socialists and Left Bloc; another one has main cultural and political figures, amongst whom over one hundred MPs from Social Democrats, Socialist Party and Left Bloc. The Communist Party decided to create its own movements, with no one else's involvement. Also, 17 out of the 24 Portuguese Members of European Parliament have called for a YES vote.

Besides that, the Left Bloc is having its own campaign as a party, with hoardings all over the country and hundreds of thousands of leaflets, in a campaign aiming at direct contact with the population, and centred on the question of the trials: PUT AN END TO WOMEN'S HUMILIATION. As a matter of fact, this is the only argument the NO is unable to answer: how to end the trials, while keeping the present law.

During this coming month, we will have the most difficult campaign since the formation of the Left Bloc. A lot is at stake.

The victory of the NO would mean a return to a medieval society.

The victory of the YES will not only mean a huge victory for women's rights, but also the possibility of the first victory for the working class, after so many years of defeats. This could also start a new era of a different mood for the workers and the left.

More details (in portuguese) at the Left Bloc website.

---

## **P.S.**

\* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n°385 - January 2007.

\* Alda Sousa is a member of the national leadership (Mesa Nacional) of the Left Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Political Association (Portuguese section of the Fourth International), and a member of the Fourth International's International Committee.