

Spain's fuel tax protests met with brutal repression

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Rubber bullets, teargas and fire cranes were used last weekend, as the Spanish government mobilised large contingents of police against groups protesting at increased fuel costs. Scores of demonstrators were injured and several arrests were made.

Protests in Spain have continued unabated since they first began following similar actions throughout Europe. Road hauliers, farmers, fishermen and taxi drivers blockaded fuel depots at the weekend in several cities. The biggest demonstrations took place in the Catalan cities of Barcelona, Tarragona and Gerona. Pickets were also mounted in Seville, Cádiz and Málaga in Southern Spain, Castille and León in central Spain and Alicante, Valencia and Castellón on the southeast coast. Trouble also flared up in the Basque Country, where three union leaders were arrested in Vizcaya.

In Lérida, 3,000 farmers kept the access to the fuel distributor, Compañía Logística de Hidrocarburos, blocked with 1,000 tractors. In El Puerto de Santa María (Cádiz) fishermen cut the traffic by lighting fires on the road. Fishermen in Málaga prevented the unloading of fish and its distribution to markets and restaurants, many of which were forced to close down. Ports in Cartagena and Escombreras were being blocked and fishermen from Granada spent the night in the harbours to prevent oil tanker ships unloading their cargo.

A fisherman in Barcelona said that a year ago the price of diesel oil was between 20 and 24 pesetas per litre. Now it is 60. The income from his boat “Mar Vella”, which uses 1,000 litres a day, has gone down by 25 percent.

The Peoples Party government of José María Aznar initially took a hard line position similar to that of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and declared that no

reduction of fuel tax would be implemented, in accordance with European Union directives. However, in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent further actions it decided to negotiate concessions with sections of the protesters. Three Ministries were involved in the negotiations: Finance, Public Works, and Agriculture & Fisheries, and involved some reductions in income tax contributions along with increases in sales tax on agricultural products. In addition, the government promised the creation of so-called “professional” diesel oil—sold at cut-price rates. The offer also includes low interest credits, plus reductions in the social security contributions until December.

Several unions have signed up to the agreement, but this has created a split amongst farmers, fishermen and hauliers of different regions and unions. The fishermen in Catalonia refused to sign the agreement and have continued their protests. Meetings are still to be held between government departments and the hauliers.

Another trouble front has opened up with the announcement of a 17.5 percent increase in the price of butane gas. Twelve million people all over the country—mainly working class families—are not yet connected to town gas and rely on butane gas bottles for cooking and heating.

Several national strikes of fishermen, farmers and road hauliers are due to take place in the coming days and weeks. In the first one, which started yesterday, road hauliers blockaded the two most important border crossings between France and Spain, La Junquera and Irún. Queues of lorries, up to 10 kilometres long, built up, while cars were allowed through.



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