

Spain: Thousands march in support of immigrant hunger strikers

Vicky Short**1 February 2001**

Thousands of people have staged demonstrations across Spain in support of protesting immigrant workers. The immigrants are opposing their expulsion from the country under the new aliens' law, and are demanding residency and work permits.

The infamous law, *Ley de Extranjeria*, came into force on Tuesday January 23, sparking off widespread opposition.

An estimated 5,000 people took to the streets in Barcelona on Friday January 26. They were supporting some 400 immigrant workers, mainly Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Senegalese, who had locked themselves in several of the city's churches, where they have been on hunger strike for over a week. Five hunger strikers have already been hospitalised. Hundreds of people responded to their pleas for help by bringing water, sugar and blankets. Many signed petitions supporting the action.

About 50 immigrants who had locked themselves in the chapel of the "Chaminade" High School in Madrid abandoned their protest and were escorted out by students wearing white masks to show that the new law "forces immigrants to be invisible". The students guarded the workers against possible arrests after the law came into operation. Students also gave up their school dinner vouchers so the workers could use them.

Ecuadorian immigrants also staged demonstration across the south-eastern regions of Murcia, Almeria and Lorca, where 12 undocumented workers were killed a few weeks ago, when the van they were travelling to work in was hit by a local train at an unguarded crossing. "We are not illegals, we are people" they shouted, and set up pickets as a gesture of defiance. Rather than hiding, their public protests mean they run the risk of being deported. Moreover, the very act of striking and demonstrating is forbidden under the new legislation. When local police asked one of the pickets where he lived, he replied "in the church," and when they asked whom the other ringleaders

were they shouted in unison "All of us".

In other areas of the south-east, demonstrators blocked buses and vans as they were leaving for the fields, taking the largely immigrant workforce to pick fruit and vegetables, who then joined the protest.

Demonstrations also took place in the Spanish enclave of Melilla, in North Africa. About 200 immigrant workers, including women and children, continued their hunger strike at the Centre for Temporary Asylum. Some later gave up their protest to begin negotiations with a government representative, who suspended the expulsion order they have faced for over a fortnight.

Under the new legislation, foreign workers with no residency papers or work permit can be expelled from Spain within 48 hours without appeal. Their right of association, participation in public demonstrations or rallies and the right to join a trade union and take industrial action have all been removed. Businesses that employ them can be prosecuted and transport companies are now responsible for checking their passengers' papers, under the threat of hefty fines.

Spain's rightwing Prime Minister, José María Aznar, stated: "To give the same rights to both legal and illegal immigrants, that is something unthinkable." However, even those with residency papers have had many democratic rights taken away, such as being able to bring family members other than their wife and children to Spain for humanitarian reasons.

Caritas and another seven charity organisations connected with the Catholic Church stated that the law "violates the fundamental ethical principle that immigrants must be always treated with the respect due to the dignity of every person". Protests have also come from intellectuals such as the Nobel Laureate for Literature José Saramago, the Portuguese writer who lives in Spain, who said, "What's all this about being a 'paperless' [person]? Even when they don't have them,

they are human beings and as such, the first thing that has to be done is to give them a paper so that society can recognise them."

The employers are themselves unhappy about the government's interference in their ability to use cheap labour. Many of the agribusiness, particularly in the south-eastern vegetable and fruit farms, depend on undocumented immigrant workers.

The crisis is being further fuelled by the fact that the government plans to give priority to immigration from three particular countries in order overcome labour shortages in certain types of business, such as construction and agriculture. The countries are: Morocco, where one fifth of all non-EU foreign workers in Spain come from; Ecuador, where the majority of Latin American immigrants originate and Poland, which together with Rumania provides the majority of Eastern European immigrants.

Many organisations dealing with immigrants fear that this action will only intensify discrimination, xenophobia and racism.

When the Spanish government sent a representative to Ecuador to negotiate a bilateral immigration agreement, the angry relatives of those under threat in Spain met him. Placards reading "Make them legal", "Thank you Spain for helping us to repatriate our brothers who died in Lorca" and "Spain, mother country, open your doors" greeted the minister at Quito airport.

The Spanish government is proposing that immigrant workers, who failed to obtain papers by the deadline of July 2000, should return to their country of origin. Once there, they should apply for a proper visa and work permit before returning to Spain.

For thousands of Ecuadorian workers who have incurred massive debts, many selling their houses in order to raise the funds for a trip to Spain, this means ending back where they started, but with no money and no possessions.



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