

Spain: Opposition to universities reform law

Vicky Short
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The Peoples Party government has entered on a collision course with the Spanish education community over its new law to reform the university system. Mass protests organised by students, professors and university employees have won the sympathy and support of a large majority of the population: a recent poll showed two out of three Spaniards in favour of the government withdrawing the law.

The *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* (LOU—Universities Organic Law) completely overhauls the higher education system that was established following the transition from Franco's dictatorship to a bourgeois constitutional monarchy in the 1970s. The reforms are framed as a response to moves by the European Union to standardise the education system in each member state, so as to facilitate the exchange of students, lectures, researchers, information and employment. However, the measures being introduced by Prime Minister José María Aznar represent a significant step towards the privatisation of education, reshaping the universities to serve the needs of big business.

On December 1, some 350,000 students, lecturers and university employees marched through the streets of the capital Madrid, supported by parents, trade unionists and others, to demand the withdrawal of the law. The protestors also called for the resignation of Education Minister Pilar del Castillo and that there be proper consultation with various educational and political bodies.

Over the course of the previous month, hundreds of thousands of people had participated in a series of protest actions across the country. Angry demonstrations were held in Santiago de Compostela, Barcelona and other major cities, whilst students in Seville spent Christmas camped outside government institutions responsible for implementing the law.

Despite such widespread opposition, both Congress

and Senate approved the LOU on December 20, after the government made a few cosmetic changes in response to the mass protests.

The reform law was rushed through parliament with only very limited discussion. Some 800 amendments were dealt with by the Congress Commission in just two sessions, while the Senate took a mere 12 hours to debate a further 600 amendments.

The most controversial aspects of the law centre on university autonomy; management and structuring; teaching and research staffing, finance and staff representation.

Under the LOU, each university will be free to set up its own means of admission. These can vary from a general entry examination, or examinations in certain subjects or for particular degrees within the same university, an interview, secondary school qualifications, previous work record or no entry requirement whatsoever. The law does not specifically mention abolition of the national selection examination, which, if passed, presently guarantees entry into a university, but this is thought to be the next target.

Lecturers' conditions of employment are to be changed. In state universities, attended by over 90 percent of Spanish students, almost half of teaching posts will no longer be tenured.

The law also creates a new agency to evaluate universities. Student representation on state university bodies is to be curtailed. Greater numbers of politicians are to be drafted onto state university bodies and private universities are also to get an official role, further shifting the emphasis towards the private financing of university research. Many believe that this will result in a few elite universities receiving the bulk of funding, to the detriment of the rest. Spain already ranks among the bottom EU member countries in terms of its expenditure per student and methods of financing further education.

The broad majority of ordinary working people regard the LOU as a component part of the rightwing Aznar government's dismantling of essential public services. The size of the Madrid demonstration indicates the level of popular anger that exists towards the government, with banners and slogans also addressing a wide range of political and social grievances.

Although the reforms have now become law, some universities in Spain's autonomous regions such as Catalonia, are refusing to implement them. With other regions threatening to join them, the way is paved for further confrontations.



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