

Spain: Mass demonstrations against government's right-wing policies and warmongering

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Spain's Prime Minister José María Aznar, head of the Popular Party, is one of the most vociferous advocates of a US-led war against Iraq. But while he is travelling around the world as one of US President George W. Bush's ambassadors to drum up support for war, mass demonstrations against both his international and domestic policies are taking place at home.

During the weekend of February 15-16, some 2 million protested against war in Barcelona, 1 million in Madrid, and hundreds of thousands in other towns and cities across the country. Opinion polls show opposition to war, even with the support of the United Nations, reaching as high as 90 percent.

Within just one week, another 1 million were on the streets of Madrid on February 23. This time the protest was directed at the government's mishandling of the oil disaster in Galicia and its devastating social consequences for millions of people in the area. The 979-foot, 26-year-old, single hull Prestige oil tanker was reportedly on route to the Far East when, on November 13, it began to list just 31 miles off the Spanish northwestern province of Galicia. It finally sank on November 19 after disgoring oil into the sea, reaching the Spanish coast.

The Aznar government was held responsible for the disaster, after it had forced the damaged vessel out into the high seas opposite Galicia. It was estimated at the time that the tanker had discharged 20,000 tons of its 77,000 ton cargo, affecting 92 beaches with 40 totally covered. [See "Thousands of tons of oil pollute Spanish coast" <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/nov2002/spa-i-n30.shtml>]

The affected area was famous for supporting a rich and diverse fishing and aqua culture industry, as well as

providing habitats of international importance for birds. Today, oil slicks are still devastating some areas of Galicia, as well as Asturias and parts of France and Portugal nearly four months on. Scores of families have been deprived of their livelihoods. Despite assurances by the government, the tanker continues to discharge oil with some two tons escaping daily. So far it is estimated that more than 40,000 tons of oil have reached the coastline.

Last Sunday's demonstration was organised by an ad hoc coalition of those affected by the oil spills and supporters under the name "Nunca Mais" (Never Again). Over 1,000 coaches, several trains and thousands of private cars and aeroplanes transported 200,000 protesters from the affected area alone, to demand explanations and the resignation of those government officials responsible for the disaster. Many thousands more came from Asturias, Cantabria, the Basque Country, Catalonia, Valencia and even Portugal. They were joined by hundreds of volunteers who helped clean up the oil, wearing their white overalls stained with oil.

Hundreds of thousands of residents of Madrid joined the Galician demonstrators, holding the same banners and placards they had carried during the earlier antiwar protest. Many made explicit the connection between Aznar's support for war against Iraq and his domestic policies, such as "If you want oil go to Galicia, it is free". Some of the demonstrators poured oil over themselves and held up placards reading "No a la Guerra".

The demonstration had been planned to be led by a Nunca Mais banner spread across the street, behind which would march politicians from the different

opposition parties, trade union leaders, community associations, ecologists and heads of big fishing associations, commercial enterprises and middle men. The route covered two kilometres. In the event, however, the scale of the response meant that half an hour after the protest was due to start thousands of people were spread out along the route, some reaching the Puerta del Sol, where the march was to culminate.

According to the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, the march organisers took over two hours to complete the route by which time thousands of people had already dispersed. When the head of the march reached the end, the last marchers were stuck halfway, unable to move for lack of space, causing the newspaper to comment that the mussel gatherers, fishermen and their supporters were the real protagonists for the demonstration, relegating to the background the political and trade union leaders.

Two manifestos were read at the end of the demonstration. One condemned the government for acting “late and wrongly”, demanding “a proper plan for the cleaning of the coast and the sea, with definite dates and resources” as well as the resignation of the minister of Public Works and Agriculture, Francisco Alvarez Cascos, and the president of the Galician autonomous government (Xunta), Manuel Fraga (an 80-year-old who was a minister in the fascist Franco regime). The manifesto also demanded action by the European Union to help provide a solution for the sunken vessel. The Galician writer Manuel Rivas, who read the manifesto, said, “This is a war that the government wants to avoid,” ending with the wish of the demonstrators to “shake off the nepotism, despotism and clientelism that is crippling our country.”

The second manifesto, read by actors Juan Diego Botto and Luis Tosar, extended the demand for resignations to that of the vice president, Mariano Rajoy, Minister of the Environment Jaume Matas, and European Commissioner Loyola de Palacio. It called for mechanisms to be put in place to discover the truth behind the tanker’s sinking, as well as provide reparations to those affected and penal charges for the implicated companies and institutions.

The appearance of millions onto the streets has caused several newspapers to speak of the “political class” being left exposed before ordinary people. They

note the growth of mistrust towards the traditional parties whilst at the same time people are becoming more “participating and demanding”.



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