

Union leader attacked during May Day demonstration in Spain

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This year's May Day demonstration in Madrid ended in a shambles. For the first time ever, closing speeches by the leaders of the two main trade union federations were not delivered.

The gathering was dispersed by the organisers after the general secretary of the Communist Party-linked "Comisiones Obreras" CC OO (Workers Councils), José María Fidalgo, was hit over the head by an irate member of his union.

The May Day demonstration started at 11:35 a.m. in Plaza de Cibeles but was unable to proceed for some 40 minutes because workers from Sintel, an ex-subsidiary of Telefónica, who have been fighting for their jobs for nearly seven years, blocked the road with a banner reading, "Sintel, in struggle for jobs". The Sintel workers had joined the May Day demonstration at the end of their own week-long protest march through Spain.

The demonstration had been tense from the start. Even as the demonstrators were assembling, the Sintel workers attacked the television cameras of TVE (Spanish Television) and Antena 3 with shouts of "Televisión, manipulación", "Telefónica asesina" and other epithets condemning the biased reporting of their struggle.

Throughout the entire route of the march, Fidalgo was the target of insults and condemnation by the Sintel workers, their families and supporters. They accused Fidalgo of being a traitor, shouting, "Fidalgo belongs to the PP" (the ruling right-wing People's Party), "Fidalgo, scab", "Where are the Sintel contracts?" and "Sintel lives, the struggle continues". Other trade union leaders were also rebuked and reprimanded, with some receiving kicks and punches.

At the end of the demonstration in the Puerta del Sol, when Fidalgo was being escorted to the platform to

deliver his speech, a group of workers protested and a melee ensued. The union official was struck with a banner pole, receiving a cut to the head. Fidalgo was taken to hospital where he received two stitches. Sintel worker Fernando García Pérez, 49, a father of two, was later arrested after the union reported him to the police.

Sintel was a subsidiary of Telefónica until it was privatised and sold in 1996 to Mas Tec, a firm belonging to the late Jorge Mas Canosa—the founder of the Cuban-American National Foundation, a virulent anti-Castro organisation linked to terrorist attacks on Cuba. Mas Canosa bought the firm for 4,500 million pesetas, which allegedly was never paid to the Spanish multinational. The firm employed 5,000 workers, 2,000 in Spain and 3,000 in several subsidiaries spread over Latin America. The Spanish workers ceased to receive any pay in April 2001 and have submitted their cases to an employment rights tribunal.

In protest, the workers set up tents in one of the busiest thoroughfares of Madrid, which they named "the encampment of hope". It lasted for six months and achieved an agreement between Telefónica and the government, mediated by the union. The agreement was based on a loan by the BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria) bank of 2,500 million pesetas to pay the wages owed to the workers, a programme of reemployment coordinated by Telefónica, which was due to begin September 1, 2001, and a "social plan" that included pre-retirement and incentive packages for the rest of the workforce.

To this day, only the pre-retirement plan has been implemented. As for the relocation of 700 workers, the government insists that offers have been made and not accepted, but the workers state categorically that there have been no real job offers.

At a press conference convened before giving himself

up, García Pérez said: “I had no intention of hurting anybody. I don’t know how it happened. How I could lose my head?”

By way of explanation, he added, “My situation is desperate. I feel deceived by Telefónica, the government and the trade unions.” He apologised for his action through the press to the general secretary and the workers at the demonstration “because of what May Day signifies,” but also announced his intention to resign from the union.

For his part Fidalgo declared to a Catalan radio that the blow he had received was an indication of the moral make-up of the attackers, “particularly their intellectual inducers”. In an attempt to equate the angry response of the workers with terrorism, he added: “In our country we know enough about this, because violence often affects our activities ... the unworthiness belongs to those people who sow hate among others, because they are incapable of sowing solutions to the problems”.

The Association of Sintel Workers, while condemning the attack, denounced the “untenable and agonising” situation that workers live in since they lost their jobs. Only as a result of that impotence “is it possible to understand, though not justify, an attack such as the one that took place.”

Sintel, most of the main political parties, the trade unions and the government joined in the denunciation of the Sintel workers. The Madrid federal executive of the Socialist Party (PSOE) expressed its “appreciation, esteem and respect” for José María Fidalgo and strongly condemned “the violent conduct exhibited by a group of ‘energúmenos’” (persons possessed by the devil). Prime Minister José María Aznar rushed to contact Fidalgo personally and express his concern for the union bureaucrat’s health. He blamed the antiwar movement for the violence on the May Day demonstration.

The incident could not have come at a worse time for the trade unions. The organisers of the May Day demonstrations—of which almost 50 were held across Spain—had gone to extreme lengths to patch up divisions between the pro-PSOE UGT and the pro-CP CC OO.

In the end, however, the marches gave expression to the explosive social relations that are growing in Spain, and the mounting hostility amongst workers towards the trade unions for their refusal to defend jobs or

genuinely oppose the Spanish government’s support for the US war against Iraq.



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