

Thousands march in Barcelona for legalisation of immigrant workers

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On January 31, 10,000 people marched through the streets of Barcelona to lobby the newly elected coalition government of Catalonia to overturn the notorious *Ley de Extranjeria* (Aliens Law). The right-wing Popular Party (PP) government enacted this law in January 2001.

The Aliens Law denies immigrants the basic democratic right to join political parties and trade unions, or to strike or participate in anti-government protests. The protest was attended by large contingents of undocumented immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as by many Spaniards.

The march was part of a Europe-wide day of protests organised by various organisations under the umbrella of the European Social Forum and the No-Border Network, demanding the legalisation of immigrant workers. Actions took place in 11 different countries at 50 locations.

According to figures from Spain's National Statistics Institute, immigrants now make up 6.2 percent of the population—the majority from Ecuador and South America.

Demonstrators chanted “No to war, no to frontiers, no deaths in the *pateras*” (*pateras* are small boats that regularly cross the Gibraltar Strait causing many deaths by drowning), “Work and papers for all,” and “No human being is illegal.” The marchers also demanded that the new Catalan government fight against the new anti-immigrant legislation and defend the equality of all peoples. *La Vanguardia* noted that the willingness of so many “undocumented” immigrants to participate in public protests, illegal under the Aliens Law, is a new phenomenon in Spanish politics.

A manifesto issued by the march organisers called for the regularisation of the situation of 850,000 illegal immigrants thought to be living in Spain—200,000 of

whom are thought to live in Catalonia. They also called for the closure of Spain's five internment camps, the granting of residency and work permits to women immigrants regardless of their civil status, and an end to the barbaric policy of repatriating children who arrive without parents.

The march was supported by several smaller trade unions and left political parties, the Federation of Neighbours of Barcelona (FAVB), and immigrant organisations. *La Vanguardia* explained that the main trade unions—the CC OO (Workers Commissions) and the UGT (General Workers Union)—did not participate because they do not agree with the perspective of the organisers.

The Popular Party government, while needing to regulate the flow of immigration, is also resisting legalising foreign workers and giving them the same democratic rights as Spaniards. When the Aliens Law was introduced, Prime Minister José María Aznar stated, “To give the same rights to both legal and illegal immigrants, that is something unthinkable.”

Aznar is aware that the majority of immigrants arriving in Spain are likely to support political parties opposed to his PP. Following a series of police raids on Bolivian workers' quarters, those arrested reported that while in detention police had told them the raids were aimed against left-wing immigrants.

The march is the second wave of immigrant protests to hit Catalonia. In Barcelona, in January 2001, 400 mainly Asian asylum seekers occupied a number of churches and went on hunger strike. They were resisting their forced deportation under the then newly introduced Aliens Law, which allows foreign workers with no residency papers or work permit to be expelled from Spain within 48 hours and without appeal. They won widespread support from workers in the region.



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