

Spain: Dozens of casualties after police attack striking shipbuilding workers

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Nearly 60 people were injured on February 17 when Spanish riot police clashed with hundreds of striking shipbuilding workers outside several shipyards belonging to the state-owned Izar.

According to eyewitnesses, 38 workers were hurt in Seville, with three hospitalised, after riot police used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up a protest of about 300. Striking workers used rocks, nails and tyres to defend themselves and a number of vehicles were severely damaged. Workers set up roadblocks in order to prevent the police from entering the industrial facility again. Slingshots were also used when police used force to disperse the protest. The morning before railway lines were blocked to prevent the movement of materials.

The main violence took place when police entered the yard. Local government officials put the total number of police injured at around 22. Another 10 police had been injured at another dockyard in Puerto Real in the southern province of Cadiz, they said.

Protests have also broken out at dockyards in the Basque region of Northern Spain and at Ferrol in the northwest region of Galicia. Subcontractors working at the ports also joined striking Izar employees. In the northwest city of La Coruna, many thousands of Izar workers marched peacefully through the streets.

Sporadic clashes between shipyard workers and police are continuing as well as demonstrations at the 11 shipbuilding concerns owned by Izar. Workers at La Naval shipyard in Sestao (Vizcaya) in the Basque country cut railway traffic between Santurtzi and Barakaldo and stopped traffic on the road between Bilbao and Santurtzi where it passes the shipyard installations. They later set fire to the barricades, creating a thick cloud of black smoke all over the area. They set up further barricades in the internal road

leading up to the shipyard works. The Basque police (Ertzaintza) moved in once again, charging against the workers using truncheons and shields.

Nearly 14,000 shipyard workers have accused Izar of refusing to honour agreements that promised work after the recent merger of military and civilian dockyards.

The conflict, which started at the Cadiz shipyards nine months ago when negotiations of a new collective bargaining agreement with management began, has spread out to Puerto Real and Seville in the South of Spain and Sestao and Ferrol in the North. Workers at Izar, which is part of the state-owned industrial holding company SEPI (State Society of Industrial Participation), are demanding no cuts in facilities or staff numbers for a four-year period. The employers want workers to sign an agreement that lasts only until 2006, with acceptance of arbitration as the means of resolving future conflicts.

None of these shipyards have any work at present and will not have any coming in when the present work ends. The president of SEPI, Ignacio Ruiz Jarabo, has told the unions that they have the possibility of obtaining the construction of four ships to be built in Gijón, Sestao, Ferrol, Puerto Real y Fene (A Coruña), if shipyard workers are prepared to reduce costs, ie., sacrifice wages and manpower in order to ensure work in these yards that have no contracts at present.

Workers are sceptical about the future of these yards and are therefore continuing their strike.

The unions, which have two representatives on the executive council of the company, have been desperately seeking an end to the dispute, offering to scale down their demands for a wage increase and to accept the company's wage offer of last year. Although the employers say that the total wage demand represents 6.8 percent, the unions state that they will

accept the 2.5 percent agreed by the government for the public sector for 2003, plus a further 0.8 percent tied to improved productivity.

After nine months of negotiations the dispute was put to a mediator but the employer rejected the conclusions, provoking the latest strikes and mobilisations. The truth of the matter is that the company is utilising the dispute to drive down wages, increase productivity and close down all the less productive shipyards.

The crisis that has now erupted in the Spanish shipyards goes back more than a decade when SEPI decided to merge public and private shipbuilding into one company, Izar, while a plan of public subsidies was established to modernise the new company and enable it to confront competition from the Korean shipbuilding industry.

The Spanish shipbuilding industry has been making big losses since then. Last week the government voted for a financial package worth up to 715 million euros (\$897 million) in order to make the country's shipbuilding sector more competitive. Izar, now Spain's only major ship builder, delivered 11 ships last year. In doing so it reduced its massive losses by 30 million euros to 90 million euros, down from 120 million euros in 2002.

The government money includes a 300 million euro credit line for building ships, 215 million euros in direct aid to research and development programmes in the shipbuilding area, and a further 200 million euros in loans, also for R&D purposes. "Spanish shipbuilding is going through a difficult phase, largely due to unfair competition from some Asian countries," the government said in a statement.

The government of Jose Maria Aznar has for a long time wanted to increase the competitiveness of the shipbuilding sector against its international rivals. The chairman of SEPI has blamed "unfair Asian competition and the euro dollar exchange rate" for the company's problems.

Last May the European Commission launched an investigation into 1.5 billion euros of state aid for Izar, and deepened an existing probe into the 515 million euros paid to help the firm restructure.

The dispute has again exposed the divisive role played by regionalism in Spain.

Rather than unite the shipbuilding workers, leaders of the regional governments involved are appealing

individually to the government for subsidies and policies that will bring production to their own particular shipyards.

After a meeting between SEPI, Izar and the trade unions on February 19, employers issued a press statement blaming the violent events of the last few days on the "union's strategy" and called on the union leadership "to use any measure at their disposal to suffocate the conflict". The statement issued the chilling warning that if the union leaders did not intervene to "put the breaks on this escalation of tensions" then some "fatal casualties" may result.

On February 26, union representatives walked out of their renewed talks with the employers, accusing them of being inflexible but saying that the talks would resume the following day. The unions are demanding the formation of a permanent body in which they will be represented to discuss the company's future.



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