

Spain: PSOE government promises limited amnesty to immigrants

Keith Lee
11 October 2004

The new Socialist Party (PSOE) government has said it will offer full legal recognition to many of the 800,000 illegal immigrants already residing and working in Spain.

Immigration Minister Consuelo Rumi said that foreign workers with working contracts would be offered work permits and residency papers. Unregistered workers will have to prove that they have been employed for one year before they qualify for the legal status.

The reform of the standing immigration law will be presented to the Spanish Congress this month. Under the law employers will be able to register foreign workers into the social security system.

The new plan is something of a departure from the first six months of the PSOE's term in office, during which it had followed on from the outgoing Popular Party (PP) government's policy of allowing a small number of immigrants into the country whilst excluding the vast majority as part of its effort to consolidate a "Fortress Europe".

The PP attacked the move, warning that it would lead to a "permits for all" situation. It blustered that the plans go against the grain of other European governments' position on immigration.

The PSOE rejected the PP's comments and asserted its own anti-immigrant credentials. It countered that the government of Jose Maria Aznar had "left us in chaos. They didn't regulate the flow of immigrants, they didn't control the borders, and they sustained confrontation with Morocco, with whom we are trying to reestablish cooperation".

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Zapatero added, "We want the legislation to be the fruit of a political and social accord. We will consult others on this." The PSOE has called on the PP to collaborate with the

changes.

While the plans will make a small change for the better for some immigrants, they are at base an attempt by the PSOE to further the interests of Spanish capital both inside and outside of Spain, including stabilising relations with its African neighbours such as Morocco.

Much government talk is of the need to create order and regulation of immigration. The PSOE has made no changes to the massively militarised border with Morocco. Its new plans will seek to control the flow of immigrants from the African continent in a way that will suit the Spanish economy. In other words Spain will be able to cherry pick Africa's best and most skilled workers and secure access to a much needed regular supply of cheap labour on its terms.

To do this the PSOE will further develop a special economic zone in Morocco in order to facilitate the smooth flow of immigrant labour. In the past Morocco has been reluctant to bow to Spanish pressure over immigration controls.

The changes outlined by the PSOE will effect the Moroccan economy especially as the country receives close to \$4 billion in revenue every year from workers overseas. The remittances have been estimated at nine percent of GDP—up from five percent in the mid-1990s. Money transfers from workers abroad, mainly from Italy, Spain and France, have played a crucial role in Morocco's balance of payments. They are said to almost offset its trade deficit and have increased its balance of payment surpluses.

While the PSOE's immigration plans are designed to defend Spain's economic interests abroad, it is at home that the new changes will bring the most benefit. The Spanish economy has profited enormously from the growing numbers of cheap illegal immigrants in its building sector and agriculture. The PSOE's plans not

only promise a continuous flow of cheap labour, but address the complaint that the Spanish economy is missing out on vast amounts of untapped social security and tax money that at present immigrants do not pay.

Another factor fuelling the changes is the recognition that Spain is following the European trend of having an ageing population and a low birth rate. In 2000 the European Union's population only grew by 226,000 people, the smallest increase since the Second World War. Current projections are that the EU labour force aged between 20 and 30 years old will have contracted by 17 percent (nine million people) between 1995 and 2025.

Spain is perhaps one of the sharpest expressions of this trend. Its population is growing more slowly than ever. Its birth rates are at their lowest, with 1.07 children per fertile woman.

The United Nations has predicted that if nothing is done to solve this problem the population will have fallen from 40 million to 30 million by the year 2050. Many, including the PSOE, see the growing use of cheap immigrant labour as the answer to this problem. Immigration to Spain in any magnitude has been a recent phenomenon according to the website <http://www.humanrights.de/>:

“Spain's history of migration has its own distinct evolution, reflecting its historical position as a poor neighbour to the economies of northern Europe. Until the last ten years Spain was a migrant producing country (two and a half million Spanish citizens lived abroad). Spain's 720,000 legal immigrants form just 1.3 percent of its population, and this includes European pensioners and the like. The number of legal immigrants from poor countries has shot up ten fold in the last ten years, and now total 350,000 people”. (1)

Already in the past certain sectors of the Spanish economy, such as construction and agriculture, have taken advantage of the steady supply of cheap but illegal immigrants. But many sections of Spanish agriculture still face a massive deficit of workers—in Adulalusia this amounts to about 35,000. Up till now Spain has only let in 35,000 legal worker a year, but according to sections of business this is far from sufficient.

There is a recognition that changes must be made, best summed by the website *Barcelona Business*, which wrote, “The logic of the market dictates that empty jobs

will be filled, legally if possible, and definitely illegally if necessary, a situation which opens the door to further illegal labour, mafia racketing and plain exploitation. Instead we might start contemplating better integration programmes. We might make it easier for undocumented foreigners to get their situation regularised. We might try and provide them with any specific needs and protection required or desired.” (2)

Notes:

(1) “Paper to the CSE conference: Global capital and Global Struggles”, www.humanrights.de

(2) Ann Overbergh, “Invader or Invited”, www.barcalonabusiness.co.uk



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact