

Spain: Socialist government turns on immigrants as economy heads for recession

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Spain's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government is turning on the country's immigrant population as the economy heads towards recession. The PSOE administration headed by Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero was once regarded as Europe's most liberal, left-leaning administration, but it today allies itself with the most right wing elements in the European Union (EU). One could go further and say Zapatero and his ministers are now leading the xenophobic pack.

When Spain was experiencing high annual economic growth rates, immigrant workers were welcomed into the country. Immigration, even illegal immigration, was promoted as a "win-win" situation in which Spanish businesses got cheap labour and the immigrants' home countries benefited from the money the immigrant workers sent back.

However, in recent weeks panic has set in as the economy has started to nose-dive. Zapatero went on TV in early July to admit there is a "crisis". Economy Minister Pedro Solbes called the situation "the most complex crisis we have ever faced" and Industry Minister Miguel Sebastián said the country is "almost in recession".

In an assessment made last month the International Monetary Fund indicated Spain will be amongst the nations worst affected by the worldwide economic downturn and predicts a 1.8 percent growth rate compared to nearly four percent in 2007. Even this figure now seems optimistic; the government has revised its own forecast to one percent this year. As Susana Garcia of Deutsche Bank noted, "The slowdown was inevitable. What has been shocking is the speed at which it has hit."

The construction industry on which Spain depended so much for its growth has come to a standstill. Home sales dropped 32 percent in the first quarter, leaving 650,000 properties unsold. This week real estate company Martinsa-Fadesa became Spain's biggest-ever corporate collapse after it failed to secure a 150 million euro loan as part of a refinancing package for debts worth seven billion euros.

The construction industry has also been mainly responsible for the dramatic leap in unemployment from 9.6 percent in the first quarter to 10.4 percent in April-June 2008. Amongst immigrant workers it is even higher, at over 15 percent. Dominic Bryany of BNP Paribas said, "This looks pretty bad. But when once considers the unemployment rate usually falls in the second quarter-by an average of 0.6 percentage points in the last five years-the figure looks truly terrible."

In the four years after the PSOE gained power in 2004, Spanish businesses brought in 727,821 immigrant workers on contracts. In 2005, Zapatero granted a further 600,000 workers work and residency permits in an amnesty that earned him the wrath of other European governments. The then French Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, called the Spanish government the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" and Otto Schilly, the German Interior Minister, said Zapatero had "created a

flammable precedent for all Europe."

According to the latest data from the Ministry of Labour and Immigration, at the end of March 2008 there were 4,192,835 legal immigrant workers in Spain—just over 11 percent of the population. Some 1,849,000 workers are from South America (mainly from Ecuador, Colombia and Peru), a million are non-European Union Europeans (mostly Romanians) and 702,000 are from Africa (mainly Moroccans).

Less than five percent of immigrant workers have entered Spain via the sea crossing from Africa to the Canary Islands, but the PSOE government has used the public outrage over the rising number of emaciated corpses found in boats drifting in the Atlantic Ocean to demand more controls. Immigrant workers have been forced to attempt the perilous sea crossing from the West African countries of Mauritania and Senegal to the Canary Islands as the shorter, safer routes from North Africa (Morocco and Algeria) have been closed down by sea patrols. Zapatero has been demanding the EU dedicate a substantial part of its 2007-2013 frontier control budget to the southern border and is the driving force behind the creation of the new Europe-wide border agency Frontex.

Zapatero sought to absolve his own government of any responsibility for this tragedy on the coastline and to shift the blame onto criminal gangs who "exploit" immigrant workers. "We have to tighten our control again", he said.

To that end Zapatero and his ministers have been flying back and forth to Africa putting pressure on the continent's governments to adopt further measures to control emigration. After meeting Zapatero, Moroccan Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi was quick to stress, "We make enormous efforts and huge sacrifices, especially at the financial level, to fight the flow of illegal migrants."

Zapatero reminded his host that 600 companies from Spain are operating in Morocco, which underlined the need for both countries to maintain "close relations".

Zapatero has made great play of his proposals that EU countries should set aside 0.7 percent of their GDP for development aid to poor countries—as he promised Spain would do by 2012—and that this was the most effective way to curb a wave of illegal immigrants.

Three things should be said about Zapatero's proposals. Firstly, the 0.7 percent is a feeble amount that will barely scratch the surface of the problems facing the inhabitants of the recipient countries. Secondly, aid will be tied to the promotion of the donor country's geopolitical ambitions and business interests. Lastly, Zapatero's humanitarian concerns are a smokescreen for the introduction of more repressive EU measures against immigrant workers, which the PSOE, by its support, has made more credible. Even the pro-PSOE *El Pais*

criticised the “rightward shift” in government policy and accused it of “opportunism”.

Zapatero has provided vital support to the European Immigration Pact, and enhanced the credibility of its sponsor, French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The pact, which was approved by EU interior ministers last month, calls for stricter border controls including a beefed-up Frontex and the use of biometric visas by 2012 for every person entering or leaving the EU. It calls for “putting the accent on respect for the identities of the member states” and requires immigrants to learn the language of the country they go to. Whether family members will be allowed to join them will depend on “the capacity of the governments” or the “immigrant family’s resources and ability to integrate itself”. The pact “guarantees” that undocumented workers will be repatriated to their countries of origin or transit, voluntarily or by force.

The PSOE has also backed the new Returns Directive, which extends the length of time for which undocumented workers may be detained to 18 months, and bans them from re-entry for up to five years if they fail to return home voluntarily within a month.

Liberal commentators have tried to justify Zapatero’s capitulation by saying Sarkozy’s proposals would have been much worse if Spain had not climbed on board. They say that PSOE officials watered down French proposals for “integration contracts” that immigrants would have to sign as a condition of residency and which about half of EU countries already operate. The opposition right wing Popular Party included proposals for such a contract in its last election manifesto. The contract would force immigrants to promise “to obey the laws, to learn the language and to respect Spanish customs” and require them to return home if they lost their jobs.

The claim that the PSOE government was acting as a brake on these developments is completely undermined by a speech Zapatero made to a meeting of Spanish think-tank leaders in early July.

In a sign that the worse is still to come, he told his audience, “For the time being all we see is a fledgling effort to harmonise policies and build a common EU [immigration] policy. The latter started in 2005, largely through pressure from Spain. It is often forgotten that when we began the process of normalisation, that European framework did not exist and that Spain was the main driving force behind it.”

Directly after winning the election in March this year Zapatero appointed Celestino Corbacho as Labour and Immigration Minister. Corbacho shot to prominence as a “law and order” mayor of a Catalan PSOE-led coalition in L’Hospitalet de Llobregat on the outskirts of Barcelona. He and his officials boasted about “disciplining immigrants”, who comprise nearly a quarter of the town’s population, and about the introduction of new control measures including a special police unit.

Once installed as the new immigration minister Corbacho declared, “Can Spain take in everyone? The answer is no.” He proposed repatriation of unemployed workers in a “programme of voluntary return” in which those who have lost their jobs can collect 40 percent of unemployment pay now as a lump sum and the remainder once back in their countries of origin. Corbacho originally thought that over a million workers would take up the offer, but the figure has fallen to 100,000 and may turn out to be less than 20,000. A recent survey showed how integrated immigrant workers actually become—only two percent of those living in Spain for more than ten years would ever consider the offer.

Migrant workers organisations have reacted strongly to Corbacho’s

proposals. Antonio Alfonso Sánchez, president of the national federation of immigrant support organisations, Red Acoge said, “It’s not a positive solution. The government has been trying to reactivate the labour market. But these are people who have been working up until now. They should be treated the same as Spaniards. No one is telling a worker in Madrid from Zaragoza that he has to go back to Zaragoza just because he’s out of work.”

Catalonia has also been the testing ground for other anti-immigrant policies. The regional PSOE government has started a pilot scheme in the cities of Reus and Vic where the children of immigrant workers are “encouraged” to attend special educational centres for two months before joining mainstream education. Carbacho has publicly backed the scheme, calling it “brave”.

Ombudsman María Luisa Cava de Llano said, “under no circumstances do I want this to turn into a tool for segregation” and warned that it would “terrible” if ghettos were the result. The anti-racist organisation SOS Racismo declared, “This eliminates the notion of integration from within the education system. What needs to be done is to reinforce existing resources in schools and hire more teachers if necessary.”

The trade unions have also been complicit in the attacks on immigrant workers. A report published in May by Carlos Martín Urriza of the Federal Technical Committee of the Spanish Communist Party-influenced Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras, CC.OO) reveals the close thinking that exists between the PSOE elite and the trade union bureaucracy.

Urriza does disclose some important facts. The number of workers, for example, earning less than 16,000 euros in real terms increased from 6.6 million in 1994 to over 11 million in 2004. His research shows that “significant wage competition is beginning to emerge at the lowest wage levels ... forcing Spanish men to be more flexible when it comes to accepting pay cuts.”

What is Urriza’s solution? In the language of the PSOE he calls for visa requirements to be toughened, a boost in resources earmarked for border controls, a stronger Labour Inspection Directorate to investigate illegal hiring of foreign workers and a cut in the number of dependents immigrant workers are allowed to bring into the country. He says the immigrants allowed in should match the employment needs of Spanish businesses.

This perspective is disastrous for all workers in Spain. Back in 1984, when an economic crisis raged and inflation reached 25 percent the PSOE government, big business and the unions agreed to labour reforms, a major aspect of which was the introduction of temporary contracts. Everyone promised things would return to normal after the crisis passed, but instead the contracts have spread like wildfire and now make up 30 percent of the total. They are largely responsible for the terrible conditions that workers endure and to which Urriza alludes.

When Solbes says the main task today for the Spanish ruling elite is a “readjustment of the domestic labour market”, this can only mean an assault on the conditions of all workers in Spain is underway.



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