

Spain: Zapatero government accused of directing anti-immigrant crackdown

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Last August the Socialist Party (PSOE) government proposed giving immigrant workers money to return to their home countries. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that this was only the beginning, and that as the economic crisis deepened it would lead to the forcible removal of immigrants.

This is now happening. Barely 1,000 of the anticipated one million immigrant workers took up the government offer, and the PSOE is now accused of setting the police arrest quotas for immigrants. Government officials claim that lower ranking officials misinterpreted their policies, but the police involved in the program are not alone in rejecting this excuse. Even the daily *El Pais*, a paper close to the PSOE, has acknowledged, "There is no doubt about the existence of this order, nor about its abusive character."

The quota policy first emerged in Madrid, where police in the working class district of Vallecas were given weekly targets for the arrest of immigrants. Spanish television has shown what it claims is an internal police document authorising the detention of at least 35 migrants without visas each month.

Meeting the targets has increasingly involved racial profiling and illegal arrests. The document shown on television said that Moroccans were the priority, as they could be deported cheaply and were received back by their home government with a minimum of fuss. The Association of Moroccan Immigrant Workers has warned that this will lead to people being harassed because of their physical appearance. A migrant detention centre in Vallecas is currently under investigation, following allegations of physical abuse by staff.

According to one report, if the police do not meet their targets they can pursue immigrants into areas

outside their jurisdiction. Initially the government denied the charge. Interior Minister Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba told Congress, "The Spanish police do not carry out illegal round-ups [of undocumented migrants]. Not this ministry, nor the secretary of state, nor the director general [of the police] has given any such order."

Rubalcaba blamed over-zealous officials for misinterpreting a law that in fact concerned criminal activity amongst "illegal immigrants." He argued that there was nothing wrong with such a quota system, but then said it had not been his government's policy, and that such practices were now banned.

According to *El Pais*, Rubalcaba told the parliamentary Interior Committee that no government political appointee (including the head of the police and his assistant) had ever issued such an order. He avoided any reference to the chief of police of Madrid. When opposition deputies demanded that someone accept responsibility for the order, Rubalcaba finally admitted last week that "someone has not handled things very well." Instructions have now been issued, he said, that "this policy is finished, and is not to be applied anymore."

This is a clear admission that the policy was previously in place.

Police unions described the issue of quotas as an established practice across the country. Police unions are widely reported as saying Rubalcaba had known about the quotas for immigrant arrests for weeks. According to one report, police officers had sent several queries to Rubalcaba and senior officers about the practice of "massive and indiscriminate stops without any reasonable suspicion of people for being young, for being in a certain area or for looking foreign."

A statement by three police unions said Rubalcaba had done nothing to stop the practice "until public opinion became a threat to his ministry."

The police are hardly innocent bystanders, nor do they want to take full responsibility for the round-ups. A national police statement said the guidelines were "established according to the population and crime rate of each district, in strict compliance with immigration laws obliging the police to sanction illegal immigrants."

The experience of immigrant workers testifies to the state-wide character of these repressive measures. Some 623,000 immigrant workers are now unemployed and are being scapegoated by the government. Abdel Kader, a 72-year-old Moroccan retiree who has lived in Spain for 40 years, told the press, "Here, you will never see an immigrant without papers. They are afraid to go out on the street."

Santo Aybar, a 33-year-old Dominican, said police "go to the subway station at seven in the morning and ask everybody for their papers. They ask to see my papers all day: at breakfast, at lunch and at dinner.... They treat us like trash, as if we were criminals."

If Rubalcaba's claims were true, they would indicate an entire branch of the state was out of control and pursuing reactionary policies in a direct challenge to the elected government. The PSOE's refusal to discuss the implications of such a profound threat to democratic rights would itself constitute a damning political indictment.

But the alleged connivance of lower ranking officials with the police to unleash repressive measures against migrant workers, who make up a substantial section of the working class, would still be based on a general interpretation of the PSOE's attitude to immigrant workers. The PSOE bears the responsibility for preparing the ideological and legal framework for such anti-immigrant campaigns with its Return Directive and the Voluntary Returns schemes that failed to elicit the response hoped for. Spain expelled 10,616 illegal immigrants in 2008, a 12 percent rise, according to the Interior Ministry's own figures.

The government faces mass unemployment and the threat of serious social unrest, particularly amongst immigrant workers in the building trades. It has issued edicts for the arrest and forced repatriation of immigrant workers, and now that this has been revealed it is trying to shift the blame to lower ranking ministers

and regional police officers.



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