Spain: Police repression against student protests

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The Spanish government of José Luis Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) is resorting to police repression in an attempt to silence students protesting its education reforms.

The protests are part of student action across Europe against the Bologna Treaty, signed in 1999, which aims at subordinating education to the needs of big business. Global action in defence of universal education is planned this week across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

Over several months now, students have been demonstrating and organising sit-ins and occupations at various universities around Spain. In the northeast area of Catalonia, students have staged occupations lasting several days and weeks. The longest took place at Barcelona's Central University where about 100 students occupied from November 2008 until March this year. The students had pledged not to leave the university until the authorities agreed to discuss their grievances regarding the Bologna plan.

In the event, no talks were agreed. On March 18, at 6.30 a.m., the Catalan police force, the Mossos d'Esquadra, moved into the university and violently evicted the remaining students. Spanish law forbids police from entering universities unless the dean of the university allows or demands it from the Ministry of Interior. Having refused to talk to the students the dean then proceeded to call the police in to evict them.

This is extremely unusual. The dean would not have done this without the approval of the regional authorities. In this instance, the autonomous government of Cataloni is a tripartite coalition of the regional social democrats (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya-Ciutadans pel Canvi), left nationalists (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya) and the Stalinists and Greens grouped in the Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Alternativa.

Five thousand students took part in demonstrations protesting the eviction. During sit-downs in the road, the police violently removed peaceful demonstrators. (See video.)

Demonstrations took place in the capital Madrid and other Spanish cities to protest against the violence used against the young people of Barcelona.

Writing on the education reforms in the daily *El Pais*, Ignacio Sotelo commented, "The central element in the new University model is the same as it is preached for the labour market, 'flexibility'."

Education Ministers of 29 European Union countries signed the treaty in 1999 in the Italian city of Bologna. They pledged to have its reforms implemented in every member country by 2010, through the formation of the European Higher Education Area.

The central aim is to enable European universities to compete against their US counterparts. While it has been trailed on the basis of harmonizing education across Europe, including reciprocal recognition of university degrees, the plan is bound up with transforming universities from centres of learning into business-friendly schools.

"Harmonization" is to be achieved through a new system of university credits, in the form of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), with credits assigned to theory classes as well as the student's work through seminars, assignments, work experience, study time, etc. Achieving compatibility will not be easy.

The Bologna document declares that the aim is to "renew the contents of the Universities Education programmes, graduate and postgraduate, *in accordance with the new social and economic demands"* (our emphasis). Students rightly believe that these reforms

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will pave the way for the privatisation and commercialisation of universities and the rise of education costs. The changes will mean that students will have to obtain a costly masters degree to win the same recognition level of educational achievement as previously with just a degree.

They also believe that the new system will lead to a reduction of public national budgets for education and the substitution of graduate and postgraduate scholarships for loans, and that corporations will make the decisions on the areas of education they will force the university to pursue—providing subsidies according to their business requirements.

Some idea of this can be seen on the website of the Autonomous University of Madrid. Sponsors include Abbott, Accenture, Baker & McKenzie, BBVA, Barclays Bank, Ernst & Young, Janssen-Cilag (Johnson & Johnson), Kellogs, Kraft foods and Manpower. Each company has a page on the university's website, selling themselves as a future employer and spelling out their education requirements.

Students have criticised the Bologna plans as a proposal to allow big business to decide which courses are "productive." As one student put it, "When I started university I was given a student card. Now I have a credit card with a bank logo."

The determination to implement these changes cannot be seen outside of the global economic crisis. Five years ago the EU Commissioner for Education and Culture, Viviane Reding, was already warning that the economic situation did not permit further significant investment of public monies. Instead, she insisted, greater efforts had to be made to get business funding. At the time, she noted, "US private investment in education represents one percent of GDP, in the EU it only amounts to 0.2 percent."

The economic situation is much worse now, and Spain has been particularly badly hit. Unemployment is predicted to climb to 15 percent by 2010. Angel Gabilondo, a former university chancellor, was appointed new Minister of Education in the recent reshuffle of the Zapatero Socialist Party government. On taking up the post he was quick to warn students that he will apply a "firm hand" in implementing the Bologna Treaty. He emphasised that the creation of a European Higher Education Area "will not be halted." As Spain falls with the framework of European Higher Education, he said, measures would be necessary to ensure comparability of qualifications across the whole European region. Universities complain that there will be less autonomy for faculties to grant intermediate or different degrees than those proposed by the Bologna plan.

Students' fears are totally justified. These reforms are accelerating the destruction of previous educational models. This is a concerted drive towards a system where only the rich will be able to achieve degrees and go into research.

Student protests are an encouraging development, but they will not defend universal education by themselves. The defeat of the ongoing assault on education requires a political struggle against the profit system itself, and the uniting of students and young workers internationally on a socialist perspective.

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