

Spanish unions offer meek protests against pension reforms

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26 February 2010

Spanish workers demonstrated this week against the pension reforms proposed by the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero wants to raise the age of retirement from 65 to 67, implement 50 billion euros in austerity measures, place a freeze on public sector recruitment, and increase the value added sales tax (VAT).

The PSOE, and behind it the European Union and international finance, are intent on forcing the Spanish working class to pay the bill for the nation's crisis, one of the most severe in Europe. They are demanding a reduction in Spain's deficit to 3 percent by 2013, from 11.4 percent in 2009. In order to achieve these ends, financial institutions have targeted the country, while the International Monetary Fund has warned that Spain, together with Portugal and Greece, must make drastic cuts in a country where millions already live in poverty and one in five workers is jobless.

Spain's economy grew rapidly over the last decade through a speculative housing boom that benefited its financial elite. The collapse of the housing sector has brought unemployment to 20 percent—the highest by far in the eurozone. In response to this social crisis, the Zapatero government has offered no jobs plan for the working class. Instead it allocated 100 billion Euros to the banks through its *Fondo de Reestructuración Ordenada Bancaria* (FROB)—proportionally one of the largest bank bailouts in the world.

Estimates vary as to the size of this week's demonstrations, which were called by the Workers Commissions (Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras, CCOO) led by the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (Union General de Trabajadores, UGT) and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE). Unions claim 70,000 marched in Madrid, 50,000 in Barcelona and up to 30,000 in Valencia.

By most accounts the protests were much smaller. They indicated the “waning influence” of Spain's unions, according to one report, which represent only 16 percent of the workforce. Reportedly absent from the demonstrations were young workers, nearly half of whom are unemployed, and representatives of Spain's large immigrant population.

The unions have also slavishly supported the Zapatero government, making any pretense of opposition difficult to sustain. There can be little question that the unions deliberately kept the demonstrations low-key and tempered their criticisms of the government.

The protests outside the cities have been staggered throughout the week, and the march in the capital Madrid did not take place until the evening, after the working day had finished. Neither banners nor speeches recorded hostility to Zapatero and his ministers. Instead the union leaders directed what criticism they could muster at the governor of the Bank of Spain, Miguel Ángel Fernández Ordóñez, for his support for the pension changes and his continuous calls for reducing the costs associated with sacking workers and other reforms of the labour market.

UGT general secretary Cándido Méndez declared that “Social peace is everyone's asset and responsibility...We are not going to break it and we don't want to do so in the future, but it will depend on the government's proposals and positions.”

CCOO leader Ignacio Fernandez Toxo called the government's pension proposals “unnecessary and unfair” and said that the government “has acted unwisely”, sending a signal of generalised alarm about the future of pensions and putting in question the 1995 Toledo Pact between the government, employers and the unions on social security and pension reform.

Toxo announced no call for strikes, such as those seen in

Greece, against the PSOE's planned austerity measures. Instead he announced the union's readiness to collaborate with government in ending early retirement. "There is a cultural problem in this country," Toxo declared. "We need to get to a place where it's seen as bad to let people retire at, say, 54 years old."

Joining the leaders of the CCOO and UGT at the demonstrations were Communist Party (PCE) general secretary, José Luis Centella, United Left (IU) leader Cayo Lara and former IU leader Gaspar Llamazares.

Cayo Laro's response to the PSOE's attacks was to declare it necessary to mobilize in order to have "the government make a social and political U-turn to the left."

Before the demonstrations, Labour Minister Celestino Corbacho declared that the government would not be prepared to withdraw the pension proposals "even if it saw a social response strongly against it". He also said the government wanted to stop firms, especially those receiving government support, from letting people retire early.

"The government is not going to withdraw the proposal. It is necessary to have this debate," he declared. The world was "anxiously watching to see how Spain's social security reforms developed".

Indeed, global finance kept a close eye on the demonstrations. "The size of the protests, the first by the unions against Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, was being monitored by international investors for signs the government might struggle to contain social anger against the rise in the pension age to 67 from 65 and a 50 billion euro austerity plan," according to Reuters.

The Spanish ruling class has taken measure of the trade unions and believes they can be used to implement the cuts dictated by finance capital.

The major newspaper *El Pais*, which supports Zapatero, has demanded that the government press ahead with its reforms with an eye toward union collaboration. It counseled that it might be possible to postpone the attack on pensions if there is agreement on other economic and labour "reforms." These measures are more "urgent", while "pensions can be agreed with time and serenity."

The scarcely concealed aim of such a policy would be to provide political cover for the trade union bureaucrats by appeasing the anger of their rank-and-file, which is

comprised largely of older workers. After carrying out austerity measures that target other sections of the working class, the government could later raise the retirement age.

El Pais explained that the unions "have dug themselves into a ditch" with their "disproportionate" opposition to raising the retirement age, but went on to praise them for "having acted sensibly" in signing a wage pact with the employers' federation and being prepared to negotiate labour reforms.

The right-wing *El Mundo* dismissed this week's demonstrations as insignificant, saying that they did not have the same feeling as those in 1988 against the PSOE government of Felipe González, which led to a general strike. Noting the close relations between the unions and Zapatero it opined that "we might be witnessing a theatrical show, noisy and with plenty of balloons and banners, rather than a confrontation that does not exist."

El Mundo's confidence that the unions will contain working class anger is misplaced.

Spaniards are overwhelmingly opposed to austerity measures being prepared by the Zapatero government. A poll in the newspaper *Publico* earlier this month showed 49 percent of the Spanish population would support a general strike against the government's pension proposals. Another showed 84 percent are opposed to the austerity measures as a whole.

But this opposition can find no expression through the rotten trade unions and the ex-left political formations who defend Zapatero and therefore assume responsibility for his anti-working class policies.

Spanish workers must build a political movement independent of the entire existing political order and join their struggles with those of workers in Greece, Portugal, Europe, and around the world. This struggle can succeed based only on a socialist perspective that calls for the reorganization of the economy to meet social needs rather than the profit drive of the financiers. Workers and youth who share this view should contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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