

Spain: Strikes and protests greet PSOE austerity measures

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On Tuesday, around 2 million public sector workers participated in strikes and demonstrations against the austerity policies of the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero.

Tuesday's strike was the first against the PSOE's imposition of an initial €15 billion austerity package. This includes a 5 percent pay cut taking effect this month and a pay freeze in 2011. Workers speaking to the media made clear they were striking now to resist not only wage cuts, but the imposition of new labour laws demanded by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Union and Spain's financial elite.

Zapatero's "labour reform" bill is a declaration of war on social protection legislation for workers. It would lead to dramatic cuts in redundancy costs for companies, reducing the payment that sacked workers on long-term contracts receive for each year they have been employed with the company. This is combined with a major attack on collective bargaining, which currently prevents employers from imposing individual contracts on workers.

Tuesday's strike followed a national rail strike on May 28 against the imposition of changes to working conditions, in line with the general thrust of PSOE attacks on the working class, by the employer RENFE. A "professional development" agreement was imposed by the employers on June 1. It was described by the Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) trade unions as "disguised labour reform." During the action, 500,000 passenger services were affected nationwide. Other unions including the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) boycotted the stoppage.

The strikes took place amidst growing social

inequality and poverty. A million Spanish households do not have a wage earner, whilst the official unemployment rate is set to rise to 22 percent. Total unemployment now stands at 4 million, with youth unemployment at 40 percent.

BBVA, one of Spain's largest banks, predicted the economy would contract 0.6 percent this year.

The two largest unions, the UGT and the CCOO, claimed that 75 percent of civil servants, or 2.3 million workers, joined Tuesday's action.

Significant efforts have been made by the government and sections of the Spanish media to downplay the impact of the strikes. In an attempt to reassure the major banks about their ability to confront the working class, Consuelo Rumi, deputy minister in charge of the civil service, described the protest as a day of "normality" with few incidents. "This strike has had a limited reach," she said.

Protests took place in towns and cities across the country, the largest in Seville in Andalucía. In this region, support for the action was higher than the national average, with 95 percent of university workers, 83 percent of justice workers, and 81 percent of local authority workers participating. In Barcelona, 150,000 marched through the streets, according to the UGT trade union. Strikers blocked the Diagonal Avenue in central Barcelona using burning tyres. The Port of Barcelona was closed by pickets causing 4 kilometres of tail backs.

Press reports stated that a third of airport workers nationally joined the strike, causing significant disruption. Firefighters across Spain also joined the stoppage. Buses and regional train services were halted or suffered long delays across the country, hospitals in some areas treated emergency cases only, courts were closed nationally, and refuse went uncollected.

Press interviews of demonstrators testified to the build-up of explosive social tensions. Elisia Deoran stated, “We are very angry because this is not only an attack to our rights and to our salaries—there is an attack to the welfare.”

At the protest outside Finance Minister Elena Salgado’s offices in Madrid, Pepe Molina, a 50-year-old worker, wore a placard referring to how much his monthly salary had been reduced. “I have been robbed of €80. How about you? Lowering a person’s salary is the worst thing you can do to them. It’s an attack on all the public services.”

Maria Zaragoza, a civil servant in Valencia, asked: “Why should we pay for the worldwide financial crisis?”

Carlos Gomez, a civil servant who attended the Madrid protest, said: “We’ve suffered five wage freezes, now a five-point cut. Next year will be the sixth freeze in the 25 years I’ve been a civil servant. In 25 years, my purchasing power has fallen 30 percent behind inflation.”

Ahel Manuel Moreno, a university law professor in Madrid and a public sector employee for 22 years, said, “I will be losing around €300 starting in June, and my wife another €300. That makes €600 less at the end of this month. The message is that not only are we having our salaries reduced, but that something worse may come. So the fear is that maybe it’s just the first bad piece of news.”

Workers’ opposition to the PSOE’s austerity measures contrasts sharply with the policies of the trade unions. The Stalinist-influenced CCOO federation and the pro-PSOE UGT eventually called the strike against the biggest social attacks in the post-Franco era, in order to divert growing anger into safe political channels.

The unions supported the PSOE in elections and seek to protect it from a political movement of the working class against capitalism.

Prior to the action, the union agreed to a skeleton service for the public sector, urging sections of workers, notably in hospitals and education, not to strike. The state took advantage and in many cases insisted that work schedules be covered 100 percent. The unions, instead of urging workers to resist and oppose the government’s ploy, allowed the quotas to pass.

Previously, the federations threatened one general strike after another and refused to set a date. When a date was set, the proposed action was called off in order to embark on talks with a government that is determined to impose the demands of the financial aristocracy. On May 13, the UGT urged all public sector workers to “observe a general strike on June 2”. The CCOO said it would only consider the question of whether they would support a strike. The strike was then called off, while the unions continued talks with the PSOE and employers.

On May 21, CCOO head Ignacio Fernandez Toxo told reporters that any industrial action was related to its negotiations with the government. “Probably we will have one.... It depends on the government whether it happens or not.” Along with his UGT counterparts, Toxo refused to set a duration for the length of a proposed strike. According to Deutsche Welle, a CCOO spokesman said such actions usually lasted only one day.

In reply to the planned imposition of labour laws presented to parliament on June 9, Javier López of the CCOO stated: “If it is done by decree, then the reply will be at that level.” He added, “We will reply to each and every attack.”

This statement characteristically combines superficial bravado with a cynical acceptance of the inevitability of Zapatero’s cuts. The unions have made clear that their “reply” to social cuts will involve brief, isolated strikes that the PSOE government will wait out, while negotiating the details of the cuts with the unions.

After Tuesday’s stoppage, the unions refused to set a date for further strikes and instead re-entered negotiations with the government and employers. This was despite Zapatero’s response to the general strike: “There will be no change, nor any deviation from the adopted path”, he said.



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