

Madrid subway shut down by mass strike

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Striking train drivers shut down the Madrid subway yesterday, ignoring minimum service rules imposed by the Madrid regional government. Traffic jams rapidly spread throughout the city. The subway network carries 2 million passengers daily; bus and taxi services were overwhelmed as commuters tried to get to work.

After the Madrid regional government led by Esperanza Aguirre of the right-wing Partido Popular (PP, People's Party) demanded a 5 percent wage cut for Metro workers, workers gathered in an assembly on June 22 and voted for a three-day strike proposed by the unions, starting on June 28. Aguirre's cut violates a collective contract negotiated last year. Workers demonstrated before the Madrid regional Assembly on June 24, chanting, "Out! Out!" and clashing with National Police.

After the first day of strikes—when minimum service rules forced workers to maintain 50 percent of normal service levels—a workers' assembly including 4,000 of the 7,500-strong workforce voted for a total strike for yesterday. Workers voted yesterday to extend the total strike to today and to meet this morning to decide on whether to extend the strike.

Workers mounted effective pickets around stations and train depots. Pickets foiled an attempt by Metro management and the authorities to re-open line 8, which connects the airport to government ministries and the downtown area, with strikebreakers escorted by police.

Metro management decided yesterday to close all of its train stations, noting the "non-fulfillment of minimum service on the entire network." It is reportedly asking private bus companies to coordinate their fleets as a strikebreaking service, should Metro workers vote tomorrow to extend the strike.

Teodoro Piñuelas, general secretary for Madrid-Metro of the Unión General del Trabajo (General Union of Labor, UGT), called yesterday's strike a "success." He told *El País* that pickets are "more informative than ever" and that strikers "do not require any arguments to support the stoppages."

Representatives of the UGT, the CC.OO (Comisiones

Obreras, Workers Commissions trade union) and the Conductors' Union met with Metro and regional officials yesterday. After the meeting, trade union officials said they had received no concrete proposals on wages.

Madrid officials made hysterical denunciations of strikers, threatening to examine the files of workers who did not report for minimum service duty. Madrid Transport Councillor José Ignacio Echeverría said the "strike is already not a strike," but "non-fulfillment of minimum service rules, which is a crime." He added that the strike is "political" and that there would be "no negotiations while minimum service rules are not respected."

Officials of the national government, led by Prime Minister José Rodríguez Zapatero of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers Party), also opposed the strike. Labour Minister Celestino Corbacho insisted that "the right to strike must be put in relation with the mobility rights of other citizens." Similarly, Economy Minister Elena Salgado demanded adherence to minimum service rules, while claiming to respect the right to strike.

This position is both deceitful and absurd: minimum service rules inherently violate the right to strike, since the requirement that a minimum number of workers be on the job prevents all the workers from simultaneously exercising their right to strike. Salgado also implicitly threatened strikers with legal action, saying that courts should decide if workers had launched the strike in an "abusive" fashion.

Salgado added that, throughout the economic crisis, the unions had shown "an absolutely responsible attitude." She said that she was convinced that this conduct "would maintain itself in the future."

With this evasive comment, Salgado indicated that the trade unions, the PSOE, and its allies in the petty-bourgeois left all are relying on each other to prevent the strike from getting out of control and mounting a political challenge to austerity policies that are hated throughout Europe. Indeed, the current strike broke out and stopped

the subway system only because workers organised mass meetings and demonstrations, which the unions could not control without calling strikes.

This testifies to the rising sentiment among workers for opposition to austerity policies—a position that places them in opposition to unions hostile to political struggle against the PSOE government. Indeed, the UGT is traditionally affiliated to the PSOE, while CC.OO is politically close to Izquierda Unida (United Left), an umbrella group including the Communist Party that is close to the PSOE.

The Madrid strike underscores that the formation of independent workplace organisations, based on political opposition to the government, is now critical to the expression of real working class opposition to austerity policies.

To the extent that these struggles do not base themselves on a socialist perspective to take power, however, and remain tied to the political establishment and the unions, they are bound to suffer defeat. The unions have worked with Zapatero ever since the outbreak of the European debt crisis to impose the same austerity measures that politicians and the banks have demanded in Greece, Portugal and throughout Europe.

In January, Zapatero met secretly with UGT leader Cándido Méndez and CC.OO chief Ignacio Toxo to prepare his government's austerity plan. This involved cuts of at least €50 billion in state spending, as Zapatero aimed to reduce the budget deficit from 11.4 percent to 3 percent of GDP in the next three years. Zapatero also planned a two-year increase in the retirement age, to 67. With these measures, the PSOE and the banks sought to loot a working class already devastated by decades of right-wing policies and the fallout of a recently burst housing bubble. Unemployment stands at a staggering 22 percent, and youth unemployment is estimated at roughly 40 percent.

Nonetheless, the unions did not call a strike until late February, when they organised a toothless one-day strike, on a perspective of asking the government to soften its policy. At the time, Méndez said, "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."

The strike did nothing to halt social cuts in Spain. However, they did allow the banks to gauge the political situation. Reuters noted: "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."

As working class anger against cuts has grown, international banks have progressively cut off lending to Spain. While there has been increasing discussion in Spain of a general strike, the trade unions are pressing to delay action for nearly three months, until a mass demonstration on September 9, and then a European day of action on September 29. These proposed actions, however, are not fundamentally different from the February strike.

The trade unions deeply fear and oppose a political confrontation between the working class and the government. In a joint news conference on June 15, CC.OO chief Ignacio Toxo and Méndez declared that the September 29 action "is not to change the government" but to make it alter direction. Earlier, Toxo had warned: "A general strike would be the worst thing to happen to Spain."

Similarly, Vicente Rodríguez, the Conductors Union secretary leading the ongoing Metro strike committee in Madrid, told *El País* yesterday: "The Metro workers never have wanted to mix politics with the trade-union movement. We want to get results in June and not leave anything for September." However, a perspective of settling for what management will temporarily give under pressure, and avoiding all appeals for political support in the rest of the working class, is a recipe for further defeats in Spain and internationally.

With governments and corporations everywhere expecting continued economic decline, the most the unions will negotiate are temporary postponements and reductions in cuts. After workers protested a May 26 announcement that Madrid authorities would slash garbage workers' conditions—including cutting 200 jobs, an unspecified wage cut and modifying the rest schedule—the UGT and CC.OO called for an indefinite strike starting on June 21. The unions then negotiated a last-minute sellout to avert the strike, which included a wage freeze and postponing the job losses for two years.



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