

Spain: Striking Metro workers face military intervention and union betrayal

Paul Mitchell
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The vice-chair of the Popular Party-run Madrid regional government, Ignacio González, has warned that he is “not going to discard the option” of the military taking control of Madrid’s Metro system, which has been brought to a standstill by striking workers and brought chaos to the streets of the capital.

Metro workers walked out on June 28 on a three-day strike, incensed by the Madrid regional government passing an “Urgent Measures Law” that cuts the salary of employees of public companies like Madrid Metro by 5 percent. They voted almost unanimously at a mass meeting to ignore legal minimum service rules, which force workers to maintain 50 percent of normal service, greatly reducing the effectiveness of industrial action.

González called the strike an “an attack on the rights of citizens” and thanked the Socialist Party (PSOE) government’s interior minister, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, who would have to authorise the use of the army, for “his willingness to cooperate.” The last time the military was used in such circumstances was in 1976 in the dying days of the Franco Fascist dictatorship.

Madrid’s chief transport officer, José Ignacio Echevarria warned that “Metro will not negotiate as long as basic services are not respected, will not negotiate with whoever breaks the law.”

Members of the PSOE government, led by Prime Minister José Rodríguez Zapatero, declared their opposition to the strike. Labour Minister Celestino Corbacho insisted that “the right to strike must be put in relation with the mobility rights of other citizens.”

Economy Minister Elena Salgado demanded adherence to minimum service rules.

The action of the 7,500 Metro workers is a sign of the rising opposition to austerity policies and places them in opposition to the unions—the General Union of

Workers (Unión General de Trabajadores, UGT), which is traditionally affiliated to the PSOE, and the Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras, CC.OO), which is politically close to Izquierda Unida (United Left), an umbrella group including the Communist Party that is sympathetic to the PSOE.

Leaders of both unions have made it clear they are deeply hostile to any political struggle against the PSOE government. UGT leader Candido Méndez declared, “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,” whilst CC.OO General Secretary Ignacio Toxo said the aim of the unions “is not to change the government,” but to make it change direction. Similarly, Vicente Rodríguez, the Conductors Union secretary leading the Metro strike committee, said, “The Metro workers never have wanted to mix politics with the trade-union movement.”

To prevent a political struggle against the PSOE, the unions are hell-bent on reining in the Metro workers and preventing them from linking up with other workers such as those participating in Tuesday’s general strike in the Basque region of northern Spain, which shut down steel, car and other manufacturing industries.

The government is doing all it can to boost the authority of the unions. Deputy Prime Minister María Teresa Fernández de la Vega ordered the chair of the Madrid regional government, Esperanza Aguirre, to “exercise her responsibilities” and begin talks with the unions in an attempt to “channel the conflict”. She made an appeal to the trade unions to make sure that minimal services are provided and warned that the government is making contingency plans to guarantee them during the September 29 general strike.

Fernández de la Vega praised the unions for their “constructive attitude during the economic crisis”. They have been involved in secret talks with the government and employers and paved the way for the government to bring in a series of austerity measures including pay cuts aimed at reducing the budget deficit from 11.4 percent to 3 percent of GDP in the next three years.

The unions are emphasising that the Metro strike is not even against the central government’s decision to cut 5 percent of the salaries of civil servants, but against the Madrid government’s unilateral decision to extend it to employees of public companies in the region—i.e., without the agreement of the unions. What they want is for the Madrid government to “sit down with the strike committee to negotiate.”

UGT general secretary on the Metro, Teodoro Piñuelas, insists that the solution lies in “respecting” the collective contract that was only negotiated a year ago. “Now the ball is in the employers’ court. We have demonstrated that we can do what we say,” Piñuelas added.

Union officials persuaded Metro workers at a mass meeting yesterday to resume minimal services today and Friday and call off the strike for the weekend “to give the people of Madrid a rest.” A union official said, “We will respect tomorrow and Friday the minimal services for the citizens, not for the politicians or the management which is not qualified to negotiate. And if we have to blow up [Madrid] again, we will do it.”

One unnamed official declared that if there is no solution by Monday, “we are going to the death and if we have to go to the kill we will go to the kill.” Another stated that “We can again produce a total strike, let them know that you can’t play with the workers” and promised that “this gesture [the end of the all-out strike] will end the moment that a single worker is presented with a disciplinary notice.”

Metro’s directors have warned that striking workers will face disciplinary action or be fired.

The bureaucracy’s demagoguery is purely for show, while the media, government and trade unions increase pressure on the Metro workers before a vote on indefinite strike action takes place at the next mass meeting on Monday, July 5, at 10 a.m.

At mass meetings, workers have been regaled with

bombastic speeches from trade union bureaucrats demanding “unity” at the same time as they are organising a sellout along the lines of that imposed on Madrid garbage workers a couple of weeks ago. After workers protested a May 26 announcement that Madrid authorities would slash their conditions—including cutting 200 jobs, an unspecified wage cut and modifying work patterns—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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