

# Spanish miners strike against unpaid wages and pit closures

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28 September 2010

A national miners' strike in Spain brought the industry to a standstill September 22-23. The strike is in support of workers at the Alonso and Vitoria mining corporations, who are demanding the payment of back wages and continued state subsidies for the sector.

Nine thousand miners work in Spain's remaining 17 pits, with another 40,000 in dependent industries. The strike was preceded by occupations, confrontations with police and burning barricades over road and rail links.

A message read from one occupied mine urged a general mobilisation: "We know that the miners here have lit up the torch of mobilizations that are taking place all over the country". The Comisiones Obreras, Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and General Union of Labour (UGT) trade union federations had urged miners to end their strike for "humanitarian reasons", but they refused. When miners erected burning barricades over the AP66 motorway, the general secretary of the Leon Industrial Federation of the CC.OO, Alberto González, disassociated the union from the actions.

The unions were forced to call a second strike, scheduled for September 28-29. This is the same day as the general strike call by the CC.OO and UGT against the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government's labour reforms.

On September 21, 200 miners started a "Black March" from Villablino to León, scheduled to arrive on September 29. This is the day European Union member states meet in Brussels to decide whether the Spanish government's 2009 Royal Decree, using state credits to force power companies to consume a percentage of local deep mined coal, is legal.

Prime Minister Jose Zapatero's decree will result in significant job losses, as power companies will only

need to purchase a percentage of coal to qualify for credits. If it is rejected the trade unions have said the marchers will continue on to Madrid.

The struggle began after 35 percent of miners had not been paid for two months. On September 1, 50 coal miners occupied Cuevas de Velilla mine, Palencia, ignoring efforts by the trade unions to lure them out.

Victorino Alonso, chairman of the employers' organisation Carburion, said that despite state subsidy to the mining sector they had no money to pay miners because they had not sold any coal since February. Coal-fired power stations have opted to buy cheaper coal from abroad. Coal still provides up to 30 percent of Spain's energy supply.

The European Commission has blocked the PSOE proposals, describing the Royal Decree as an unwanted interference in the operation of the free market. They are insisting that subsidies to deep coal mining throughout Europe be removed. After October 2014, all deep mines will have to close if they remain uncompetitive. Even with subsidies, deep coal mining in Spain cannot sell its coal competitively in the Spanish market.

Marlene Holzner, spokeswoman for Energy Commissioner Günter Oettinger, stated, "This is the final time that an exception is allowed... European coal is not competitive, and the European Union is very clear on this: We do not want to subsidize an industry that cannot survive on its own."

EU Competition Commissioner, Joaquín Almunia (former Spanish employment minister and chief economist of the UGT trade union), added, "Companies need to be viable without subsidies. This is a question of fairness vis à vis competitors that operate without state aid."

Last May, the European Commission refused any

extension on what it called a bailout for state subsidised industries. Deep coal mining throughout Europe has seen major closure programmes. In Belgium and Britain it is virtually extinct. France is preparing to close over half its remaining coal fired power stations by 2015. Germany, alongside Spain, is lobbying for an extension of subsidised coal.

Alongside the EU and the International Monetary Fund, the United States has been heavily involved in driving forward the pace of austerity in Spain. The *Wall Street Journal* commented, “If anything, the European Commission’s crackdown on coal-production subsidies is long overdue.... Rather than make the case that ending the subsidies will benefit all Spaniards and reduce a €1 billion drain on Madrid’s overstretched public treasury, Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has instead fed coal miners’ expectations of public charity.”

Twenty-five years ago, there were 50,000 miners in Spain. Now there are around 9,000. The PSOE and the trade unions have placed the fate of miners’ livelihoods in the hands of the European Commission and the financial elite, whose austerity policies have driven entire economies to the brink of bankruptcy and their populations into rising poverty.

In Spain, unemployment is twice the EU average, at 20.9 percent. The PSOE government has agreed and implemented every demand for austerity of the EU, the IMF and international investors.

In a deliberate effort to divert miners from uniting with workers throughout Europe facing similar attacks, Carlos Mesa, a UGT regional secretary, urged miners instead to “make a common front” with the employers and government to pressure the European Commission. In a September 14 letter, Cayo Lara, the leader of the Stalinist-led United Left (IU), urged miners to support such a formation, aimed at suppressing the independent interests of the working class, as “the opening of a door to hope”.

The decision the EU makes will be in the interests of the financial elite, not the miners. Miners cannot protect their jobs based on an alliance with the employers, the PSOE and the trade unions to pressure the European Union to maintain subsidies. Protectionist measures in one country only encourage similar moves in another.

Miners must instead unite with their European and

international colleagues in the fight for socialist policies and a coordinated energy policy. This must be determined through the democratically expressed interests of working people and guarantee that jobs lost in one industry are taken up elsewhere.



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