

Spanish air traffic controllers' union sabotages another struggle

Paul Stuart
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The air traffic controllers' union Unión Sindical de Controladores Aéreos (USCA) has overturned a 98 percent mandate for strike action, pushing through a deal supported by the employers and the government.

What would have been the first powerful counter-attack against the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government's wage cuts, productivity drives and privatisation has been sabotaged by USCA, which told its members there was no alternative to the deal.

The air traffic controllers' strikes, set for late August, were called off without any change in the stance of the airport authority, Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea (AENA). The move followed meetings with government ministers, who demanded that the trade union act "responsibly".

The head of communications for USCA, Cesar Cap stated, "The executive committee has decided not to exercise the right to strike during the month of August in order to demonstrate responsibility."

Although the details of the deal pushed through are sketchy, none of the most significant issues that provoked a massive vote for strike action have been resolved.

In February, the PSOE issued a decree cutting controllers' wages by 40 percent, increasing hours and reducing rest periods. The *Wall Street Journal* commented at the time, "Don't tell Mr. Zapatero, but in his drive to ground the union, the Prime Minister may be replaying Ronald Reagan's epic 1981 showdown with the air traffic controllers, when the Gipper fired 11,000 of them. Madrid earlier this month passed a decree that would allow the government to hire controllers from abroad and open air traffic control to private competition."

Development Minister José Blanco accused controllers on sick leave of organising an illegal strike

and threatened to sack them unless they returned to work. He then began training military personnel to replace civilian control staff in a planned strike breaking exercise.

The move underscored the growing tendency of the Spanish bourgeoisie to threaten workers fighting its austerity measures with military repression.

The previous month the Popular Party administration in Madrid threatened to deploy troops to maintain Metro services, after workers struck against a five percent pay cut and voted to reject minimum service agreements between unions and Metro management.

As the strike dates were announced, the clamour for the deployment of troops escalated. Ryanair, a budget airline, demanded troops be used to break the looming strike. A spokesman insisted, "We believe that the Spanish military should be drafted in to ensure that air traffic control services remain operating on the days of the proposed strike."

Threats to use the military were coupled with a hysterical media campaign, led by Blanco, accusing workers of being lazy and even of criminal acts. Controllers who wrote in to the *World Socialist Web Site* described the political atmosphere as one reminiscent of the type of anti-working class propaganda employed under the Franco dictatorship.

At no point was this campaign of vilification and intimidation opposed by the USCA, which has accepted that its members must pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism. In this way, an atmosphere was created which enabled the union to persuade a majority of air traffic controllers that the strikes should not go ahead.

The USCA's reasons for abandoning the strike were indistinguishable from those of the government and business leaders. USCA President Camilo Cela said, "We have been responsive to calls by various means

and our own conviction is that the only solution to this situation is an intensive and sensible negotiation that will bring an agreement which, even though it does not satisfy both sides, will secure the future for the workers and the company.”

Cela then went further, explaining that this was just one stage in the union’s efforts to deepen its collaboration with management and the government. “If we succeed,” he said, “we will be on the way to inaugurating a new stage in which the workers and the company will overcome their differences. As I have said more than once, it is not normal that we should be strangers in the company in which [we] work...Of course, this is the spirit that we want to transfer to the company, the Minister and the Prime Minister himself.”

The USCA’s actions have not reduced the threat of military intervention, but they have allowed Blanco to continue training military personnel to replace the air traffic controllers unhindered.

The USCA claims that its decision was made so as to avoid being pressed into the arbitration process that the PSOE was demanding. But there is little to suggest that the outcome of such a process—in terms of workers’ jobs and working conditions—would have been much different to the deal just agreed by the union.

When Blanco started training military controllers to work in civilian control towers, instead of issuing a broad appeal to the working class for the support, the USCA appealed to Blanco, asking him to reconsider such a “rushed” decision. USCA officials urged the PSOE to give them time to bring the dispute to an end and not to take such an explosive step that could bring the entire working class into struggle. Cabo begged Blanco, “We just ask for an hour of your time to explain ourselves... if we see a change in attitude we will reconsider the strike.”

At no time did the General Workers Union (UGT), the Stalinist influenced Workers Commissions (CC.OO) or the United Left (IU) and the Anti-Capitalist Left (IA) protest the threats of military intervention. Both the IU and the IA occupy leading positions in the union apparatus and are using these positions to suppress the class struggle in defence of the PSOE government.

During last July’s Metro strikes, the Anti-Capitalist Left issued a statement describing the conduct of the

union strike committee as a model to be applied to all future struggles. This was only days before the strike committee called off the strikes and imposed the company’s demands.

With regards to the air traffic controllers, IU deputy Gaspar Llamazares made no call for a general mobilisation of the working class. Instead, in one of just two comments he made on the dispute, he sought to turn anger away from the PSOE and toward “foreign” operators.

Speaking in July about the opening up of air traffic control to private operators, Llamazares stated, “We will have to be on the lookout on the specific procedures that these private providers will follow, the majority being foreigners, to obtain a license that enables them to do business in our country and how they meet the requirements.”

Just as the PSOE and the trade union federations see their essential function as being the stabilisation of capitalism and the bourgeois state, so the IU and the IA act as an auxiliary force, trying to prevent workers from breaking with these organisations. Their silence over the PSOE’s threat to use the military to break a strike by air traffic controllers indicates that they will not oppose repressive measures aimed against the working class.



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