

Spanish general strike shuts down Barcelona

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Barcelona, Spain's second largest city, was paralysed by the September 29 general strike called by the two main trade unions, Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO) and Unión General de los Trabajadores (UGT). Nationwide, 70 percent of workers participated in the strike.

The protest of Barcelona workers against the austerity measures of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) government of José Luis Zapatero began at midnight. Throughout the morning, there were pickets in all the neighbourhoods and the main centres of the city. In some areas, including Gracia, Sants and Barceloneta, almost all shops were closed. The exception was the richer neighbourhoods like the Eixample and adjacent localities.

Workers in the industrial sector in the metropolitan area of Barcelona were almost 100 percent in support of the strike. In education, public administration and health, over half the workforce took part. In transport, a minimum service was in operation due to an agreement between the two main unions and the government. Some pickets tried to prevent buses and trains from leaving, but they were met with a violent response by the police and told to stop by local union leaders.

By midday, all the shops and banks had closed in and around the centre square, Plaza Catalonia, except for the big mall, El Corte Inglés. Pickets attempted to dissuade people from going inside and called on workers employed there to join them, but these attempts were disrupted by the police. Workers then moved onto the streets to picket the few shops that remained open.

Another protest started outside the Central Credit Banc in Plaza Catalonia. The building, empty since 2007, and next door to the Telephone Exchange—the headquarters of the uprising during the Spanish Civil

War (1936-39)—was occupied by anarchists and others on September 25. By 1 p.m., about 2,000 strikers from the central station in Sanz and the university districts joined the crowd in front of the bank and marched towards the main street in Barcelona, Las Ramblas.

The several thousand strong demonstration was blocked by the police, who declared that it could not go down Las Ramblas. Tensions were rising, as the police prevented strikers from freely moving around Barcelona. The strikers tried going through an alternative street and met up with an official union demonstration. When the demonstrators tried once more to march down Las Ramblas, violent clashes broke out as the police charged the crowd and fired rubber bullets. After this, barricades were erected with bins, large plant pots and tables in order to stop the police from charging through the crowds in their vans. Most protesters then headed towards a demonstration by the anarcho-syndicalist Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT), while others, mainly youth, clashed with the police. Some ransacked the fascist bookstore, Libreria Europa.

At about 3:30 p.m., twenty police vans surrounded the streets around the Central Credit Banc and stormed through the peaceful protest outside the building in order to evict those inside. The police did not have a legal warrant, required under Spanish law to evict occupied buildings. They set up a cordon around the bank with protesters shouting, "You are the pickets of the employers", "What will you do when you retire at 80?" and "We pay you to protect us not to beat us up." Even tourists were not allowed to go through the main plaza.

New clashes broke out in adjoining streets, especially in Passeig de Gracia and the main road, Diagonal, where the official demonstration organised by the UGT

and CC.OO was due to start at 6 p.m. Protesters stopped cars and called on the workers driving vans to join them. Bins were burnt and bottles and sticks thrown at the police vans. The police attempted to disperse the crowd and arrest the more radical elements before the official demonstration could start. Clearly the police had orders to “clean up” this area in order to prevent the crowd in Plaza Catalonia from joining the UGT/CC.OO demonstration.

The main demonstration was attended by an estimated 400,000 people according to the trade unions. Students, workers and pensioners made up the most significant part, but even self-employed workers and small business people attended. The main slogan of the march was “Així no” (“Not this way”) and the protesters chanted, “Zapatero must hear the voice of the workers”. Some political parties such as the EA-ICV (Esquerra Unida- Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds)—the United Left (IU) section in Catalonia—and the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), which have participated directly in implementing the austerity measures, were in the demonstration. On June 10, the Catalan Parliament passed the deficit reduction plan with the ERC, EA-ICV and PSC (Catalan section of the governing Socialist Workers’ Party) all voting in favour.

The demonstration ended with the singer, Gerard Quintana, reading a manifesto agreed by the different parties and trade unions calling on the government to withdraw the Labour Reform and to implement measures such as increasing the tax on the rich.

Nicolas, aged 41, told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, “These are measures dictated by the international organisations like the International Monetary Fund, and the PSOE is doing “seguidismo” (following up). It is a disgrace.

“We are struggling. I have two children and my wife, and I are now trying to get my 400 euros (\$550) benefit extended, but it seems they won’t give it to us. I am unemployed and my wife earns 800 euros (\$1,100) a month. So these measures are affecting me a lot. All these are supposedly ‘left’ measures, but now no one believes this.

“I came with the hope that this will become chaotic like in Greece but it doesn’t seem to go that way.” Asked about the role of the trade unions in breaking up the resistance of Greek workers to the social democratic

PASOK government’s austerity measures, Nicolas said, “I did not know about this, but I would not be surprised. The trade unions here are disgraceful. They are just acting. They have been two years at the table negotiating! At my last job, when I was going to get fired, I went to the CGT and they just said to me, like the PSOE is doing now, that this is a global crisis and that there is less work. The CGT also disappointed me.”

Julia from Romania, aged 33 and unemployed, said, “This crisis is affecting me a lot. I can’t find any jobs and I keep trying. I want to regularise my situation, but I don’t know how and where to do this. I do not have any information. I came here three years ago to work and up to a few months ago I had a job as a house cleaner. But now there is nothing.

“In Spain like in the rest of Europe, governments are expelling immigrants. The [French] Sarkozy government is expelling Roma just because they are Roma. We are all humans. Why are they doing this?”

A student who was passing by said, “Immigrants are being used as scapegoats in this crisis. That’s why Sarkozy is expelling gypsies. They want to blame the immigrants for their crisis.”

Julia said she agreed with the student.

Arnau, aged 18 and currently studying fine arts, said, “I came here to the demonstration to show my concern for what is going on. I am unemployed and trying to find a job. If I don’t, I will not be able to continue studying.

“The PSOE implements the policies that the banks want. I never thought that they would go this far—austerity measures, labour reform and now they want to reform the pension system! I always thought there was very little difference between the PSOE and the Popular Party, but now it is very clear there is none.”



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