

Spanish air traffic controller: “We are living now like under Franco”

Chris Marsden
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A number of Spanish air traffic controllers contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to describe the state terror employed against them under the emergency measures imposed by the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government.

The controllers paralysed Spain’s airports Friday by calling in sick en masse. Earlier that day, the government approved legislation opening the way to the partial privatisation of the aviation authority, AENA, along with the management of individual airports by private operators. The law included a further lengthening of the working hours of air traffic controllers.

In taking action, the controllers were also taking a stand against the wider austerity measures of the government. The scenes resulting from the government’s military strikebreaking operation were chilling.

One air traffic controller told the WSWs by email Saturday that the workers felt they had to act since they had already exceeded the 1,670 hours they are now legally obliged to work and were being told to do still more.

He continued, “The Control Centres are now under military orders. For the moment there is civilian staff working, just for minimum services, but we don’t know until when. We are living now like under Franco, Pinochet, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot or any other dictator.”

Describing his immediate circumstances, he wrote, “We are all now in a hotel under police protection for our safety, waiting for AENA to come here with the military police to take us back to our work centres or to jail.”

Later, he sent another email, after being forced back to work under armed police guard. Stating, “We don’t have the same rights as any other free country, because

we are not free,” he continued, “The Stasi is back in Spain. They have threatened to take a few of us and go one by one to be interrogated by military police. They would threaten them with 10 years in prison and the loss of all their possessions and, if that wasn’t enough, the loss of their families, by showing them pictures of their children.”

A colleague added in a further email, “I’m sad to tell you that we have been feeling sick since last February. We can’t sleep properly. We can’t rest properly. Our holidays and free days are being changed and we are being requested to work any day on any shift—forced, not voluntarily.”

“We are tired, exhausted, broken,” he continued. “We want to leave this situation, but we don’t know how... New decrees are invented day after day.

“The wildcat strike was due to a restless and desperate feeling that started in Madrid and was supported throughout the rest of the control centres and towers.”

He concluded with an appeal: “Please help. We are working without rest, we are controlling in a very bad mental situation. I was working as a supervisor when 12 guardia civil [military police] and a captain came to the tower to intimidate us... Please help us.”

The government’s declaration of a state of alert is the first since the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Laws enabling the imposition of such emergency powers were kept on the statute books after the supposedly democratic constitution was drafted in 1978 by the government of Adolfo Suarez, a former Francoite. This was made possible by the determined efforts of the Communist Party and the PSOE to stabilise capitalist rule and demobilise the working class.

The state of alert allows the government to arrest

those in “strategic industries” who refuse to work. Far from opposing this assault on the working class, Spain’s trade unions and the Communist Party-led United Left (IU) supported the government by isolating the controllers and repeating the slander that they were a privileged elite holding Spain to ransom when other workers were taking cuts.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has threatened to extend the emergency legislation that placed the airports under military rule and forced the controllers back to work at gunpoint. Zapatero declared that the state of alert would be in place for 15 days, but then added, “Depending on how the situation develops, the government will take the decision to extend the measure, and will of course do so taking public opinion into consideration and in conjunction with the political parties.”

The treatment meted out to the air traffic controllers establishes a precedent for similar attacks on any other group of workers that takes industrial action in opposition to the government’s austerity measures.

Spain’s public works and transport minister, Jose Blanco, has instigated a campaign of mass victimisation, targeting 442 of the 2,300 air traffic controllers employed by Spain’s airport authority. Blanco called for “appropriate” punishment to be meted out for their “irresponsible behaviour,” including fines and dismissals.

The PSOE, like its social democratic counterparts internationally, has again revealed itself to be a political tool of the financial oligarchy. The trade unions have, for their part, confirmed their role as the chief obstacle to a counteroffensive by workers against the destruction of their livelihoods and democratic rights. The readiness of the trade union tops to accept the use of police-state measures against the air traffic controllers shows that there is no line they will not cross in defending big business against the threat from below—up to and including embracing a police-military dictatorship.



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