A reply to a letter on the Spanish air traffic controllers' struggle

8 December 2010

The WSWS received this letter from Spain defending the Zapatero government's military suppression of the air traffic controllers and criticizing the December 6 WSWS Perspective, "The threat of dictatorship in Spain" by Robert Stevens. A reply by WSWS writer Jerry White follows.

Dear Sirs, Robert,

Your article has come as a shock to me, scaring the hell out people talking about dictatorial measures in Spain and evoking ancient fears. You should know you have it the other way around. The dictators in this case were the flight-controllers, who as a small privileged group abused their power to blackmail a whole country, taking the 300,000 people stuck in the airports as hostages.

They have threatened to do this for ages in order to force governments to give them privileges in wages and working conditions. This small group of people that earns 600,000/year in a country with 20 percent (4 million) unemployed and a mean salary of somewhat over 1,000 a year "protested" against the fact that the number of hours they spend with the syndicate are not counted towards the working hours they have to comply with in a year.

And they find that reason enough to screw up the lives of more than 300,000 people (holidays, old people, sick people, families....) and ruin the whole functioning of a society.

They are the ones acting as dictators, and for pure capitalist reasons. When they went on strike and caused Spain to collapse for this childish and irrelevant reason, what other option was there than to send others to do their work? And simply the only "others" are available from the army. But this has absolutely nothing to do with the old Franco stuff or some banana-republic coup. No force has been used.

I am from Holland myself and frankly there is a lot I still consider backward here in Spain and a lot I criticise. But this is the second time I really and profoundly approved of Zapatero's decisions.

RB
6 December 2010

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Dear RB,

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands by everything it has said about the state repression used against the Spanish air traffic controllers and urges workers throughout Europe and internationally to defend them against victimization by the military and Zapatero government.

Your letter is typical of the type of middle class attitudes promoted in Spain to justify the attack on the air traffic controllers. It is notable that the unions and the supposedly "left" organizations have all condemned the controllers' job action and refused to defend the stand they have taken. In one way or another they are aligned to the political establishment, including Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party, and agree that the working class must pay for the capitalist crisis.

In virtually identical language as that used by Deputy Prime Minister Rubalcaba you denounce the controllers for being overpaid and privileged, accuse them of blackmail and "ruining the whole functioning of a society."

Excuse me. The controllers—who already hold one of the most demanding and responsible jobs—are fighting the privatization of airports and the imposition of additional working hours that imperil the safety of air passengers. Moreover, like millions of other workers in Spain and throughout Europe, they are engaged in a struggle against the international banks and financial speculators whose demands for austerity and brutal budget cutting are genuinely ruining society.

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Presumably you believe the bankers are motivated by far loftier goals.

As our article pointed out, the assault on the controllers is not an isolated incident. It is only the latest in a series of cases where the army and riot police have been used against workers and young people in Europe, from striking truck drivers and cultural workers in Greece, to French oil refinery workers, to students in Britain. Increasingly, the ruling political parties in Europe, whether they call themselves conservative or "socialist," are resorting to police state measures to impose deeply unpopular policies at the behest of the financial markets.

You praise Zapatero for using the military to break the strike and chastise WSWS writer Robert Stevens for "evoking ancient fears" about dictatorship because he noted that this was the first time the Spanish government used its "state of alert" emergency powers since the end of the fascist regime of General Franco in 1975. "No force has been used," you insist, although armed civil guards and military troops were dispatched to the control towers, workers were put under military discipline and ordered back to work and stripped of the right to free speech and free association under the threat of immediate imprisonment. Some 442 controllers, nearly a quarter of the workforce, have been singled out for further persecution.

Your indifference to such a blatant violation of democratic rights and paeans to Zapatero for restoring order and ending strikes and disruptions reminds one of the retort of the supporters of Mussolini: "Say what you want, at least he makes the trains run on time."

Nearly 30 years ago the Reagan administration used the same arguments to smash the strike of 13,000 air traffic controllers in the United States and destroy their union, PATCO. Two days after the August 3, 1981 walkout began, the Republican president fired 11,359 controllers who defied his back-to-work order. Military controllers were dispatched to take the strikers' jobs while FBI agents and federal marshals were sent to the picket lines to drag PATCO leaders to jail shackled in chains. The union was bankrupted by fines and decertified, while the strikers were blacklisted with the vast majority never rehired to this day.

As in Spain, politicians from both parties and the news media howled about high paid strikers holding the country hostage. In an editorial, the *New York Times* praised Reagan for defeating the effort of air traffic controllers to "extort a favorable wage settlement by stopping the planes." It continued, "By refusing to cave in to this illegal strike, the President has set a commendable precedent that is already paying dividends in relations with other unions."

Air traffic controllers in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, France and elsewhere in western Europe engaged in slowdowns or outright bans on US-bound air traffic in a show of international solidarity. Despite widespread support among workers for the calling of a general strike the US unions capitulated to Reagan, isolating and betraying the PATCO strike. The defeat was a signal to US corporations that the government would support—and the unions would do nothing to oppose—a wave of violent union-busting in the 1980s that would permanently alter class relations in the US and lead to a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling elite.

In a similar fashion the state repression of the Spanish air traffic controllers, along with the Greek, French and British workers and youth—is being used as a precedent for an escalation of violent attacks on the European working class. In opposition to the Spanish unions, which are isolating the air traffic controllers, workers throughout Spain, Europe and the world should rally to the defense of these embattled workers.

Jerry White for the *World Socialist Web Site*

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