

Spain's middle-class "left" parties and the French pension struggle

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Spain's middle-class "left" parties have supported France's New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and the French trade unions in their betrayals of the October-November strikes against social cuts by the Nicolas Sarkozy government.

France's unions worked to stop any independent action by workers against Sarkozy by negotiating with the government, limiting mass action to one-day strike protests, and finally by isolating the workers at oil terminals and refineries. The state forcibly broke these strikes. During the 30-day struggle, the NPA made no attempt to take the political leadership of the strikes from the unions, instead helping to channel workers' struggles into a dead end.

Spain's middle-class "left" parties—such as Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA—Anticapitalist Left) and En Lucha (In Struggle)—and its main trade unions, Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO—Workers Commissions) and Unión General de los Trabajadores (UGT—General Union of Workers), were silent regarding this attack on the French working class. They made no attempt to mobilize workers in Spain in solidarity with workers in France.

This is despite the fact that workers on both sides of the Pyrenees face similar austerity measures imposed by the same banks and investors. The failure to mobilize the Spanish working class in solidarity with the French demonstrates the hostility of the nominal "left" and the union bureaucracies to the struggle against social austerity.

Appeals for international solidarity and coordinated action against the social cuts would have been highly popular in Spain, given mass opposition to the measures this year of Prime Minister José Zapatero, of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). A new labour reform removes legal protections for workers,

makes it easier for employers to sack employees, and worsens labour conditions. Other measures planned by Zapatero include a 5 to 15 percent cut in civil servants' wages, a pension freeze, and later an outright cut in pensions.

The publications of Izquierda Anticapitalista, the Spanish section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, largely ignored the events in France. When the IA web site did publish news, it was to run a few articles from the NPA web site or from the bourgeois media.

This translated into support for France's Socialist Party (PS), whose sister party in Spain, the PSOE, is implementing the social cuts against the workers. On the October 25, the IA web site quoted an NPA declaration, "Socialist leaders are in all the demonstrations, and the more we are to hit on the same nail, the better."

The NPA was applauding the PS even though it noted that, as it was "located within the framework of the market economy, the economic and social programme of the PS is another way of making the majority of the population pay for the crisis."

The NPA is tacitly promoting the Socialist Party as an alternative to Sarkozy in the 2012 presidential elections. The bankruptcy of this policy is particularly evident, given the cuts pushed through by social-democratic governments in Spain, Greece and elsewhere.

The IA did not publish any article on the violence of police strikebreakers, the refusal of the unions to defend oil workers from police attack, or their refusal to extend the strike action to other sectors. They omitted the fact that the unions wanted to return to negotiations with Sarkozy during these decisive days in the struggle.

They even highlighted the NPA's scaling-back of its limited criticisms of the unions as the strike progressed

and the unions' determination to isolate the oil strike became clear. On October 28, the web site published an article from the NPA site that concluded: "Since the beginning of October, [NPA spokesman] Olivier Besancenot has dropped his criticism towards trade unions that are judged as being too soft, and has called for a 'new May 1968'."

En Lucha, the section of the state-capitalist International Socialist Tendency in Spain, maintained a similar politically significant silence. Albert Garcia, an En Lucha member and former member of the NPA, published an article titled "France: when unity and combativeness converge."

He wrote: "It is clear that repression and intimidation will not decrease the discontent and the anger. There are more every day that embrace Besancenot's words: 'What the parliament decides, the streets can undo'. It already happened in 1995 against Plan Juppé and in 2006 against the First Employment Contract."

He concluded by wishing that these struggles could "spread over the borders of France, and that the 'May 1968 spirit' [could] spread throughout Europe."

This analysis ignores the main problems that the workers and students faced in late October and still face—formulating a strategy and building a leadership for a political struggle against the government. It also is a complete distortion of the struggles against the Plan Juppé in 1995 and the First Employment Contract in 2006. These struggles did not demonstrate the viability of pressure politics, but confirmed that struggles aiming at pressurizing the state into backing down offered no hope of defending workers' long-term interests.

In 1995 the working class revolted against Prime Minister Alain Juppé's cuts to the social security system—a struggle led mainly by the transport workers. Ultimately, however, the unions organized a return to work, while much of Juppé's plan passed intact. The ruling class responded by organizing new elections in 1997. The PS-dominated Plural Left coalition of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin continued the attacks on the working class, opening the door once again for the right to return in 2002.

The lessons of the struggle against the First Employment Contract in 2006 are similar. While they won a partial and temporary withdrawal of the social cuts, the workers then faced in 2007 the election of Sarkozy, who has since moved to implement cuts far

more severe than those proposed in 2006.

In Spain, the trade unions declared a one-day general strike on September 29 after the government froze pensions, passed a labour reform and cut the civil servants' salaries. This strike was only called after the whole process of debating and voting had come to an end and Zapatero had made it clear that he was not going to reverse the labour reform.

In the five months before the reform passed, the unions had been involved in intense negotiations with the government and the employers' organization (CEOE). One day after the general strike, the trade union leaders of both CC.OO and UGT reassured the government that they wanted to come back to the "negotiation table" and that the "social dialogue" was not broken. IA, the Spanish Communist Party and other groups such as En Lucha avoided any defense of the workers when the vice-mayor of Madrid, Ignacio Gonzalez, warned that he was "not going to discard the option" of the military taking control of Madrid's Metro system, which had been paralysed by strikes at the end of June.

This silence was again repeated in August when the Minister of Public Works and Transport, Jose Blanco, threatened military intervention if the air traffic controllers went on strike. This silence is an extension of the role played by similar outfits such as the NPA in France and in Greece, where the fake left maintained unity with the trade union bureaucracy even when the unions backed the use of the army to break a truckers' strike this summer. These parties will not stop short of even supporting the use of violence against workers when they threaten to escape the control of the unions.



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