

The threat of dictatorship in Spain

Robert Stevens
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The decision by the Spanish government to use the army to seize airport control towers so as to defeat a wildcat strike by air traffic controllers is a warning to the entire working class.

The government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) has handed broad powers to the military by imposing a “state of alert,” nullifying basic democratic rights. The action exposes the thoroughly rightwing character of this “socialist” government. In its determination to impose the will of the financial aristocracy, it is taking measures that have not been seen since the end of the fascist regime of General Franco in 1975.

The stench of a police state once again hangs over Spain. The 2,200 air traffic controllers were forced back to work Friday and Saturday at gunpoint. Armed soldiers now stand guard in the airport towers as the workers direct air traffic under the threat of immediate arrest should they stop work.

In an attempt to justify these actions, Deputy Prime Minister Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba said the workers were “holding the country to ransom” by defending their “unacceptable privileges.” He added, “The immediate effect is that the controllers are now under orders to go back to work and can be charged with a crime under the military penal code if they refuse. The state of alert will initially last for 15 days.”

Rubalcaba’s comments stand reality on its head. It is not the air traffic controllers who are holding the country ransom to defend privileges, but the ruling class for whom Rubalcaba speaks. The same methods used against the controllers will be employed against any section of the working class that opposes wage cutting and austerity. On Wednesday, only a few days before the state of alert was imposed, Spain passed a new round of social cuts.

For the duration of the state of alert, the controllers

are categorised as military personnel. Under the orders given them, if they do not go to work they will be guilty of the crime of disobedience as laid down in Article 102 of the Military Penal Code, punishable by up to two years in prison.

The PSOE government ordered the state of alert at an emergency session following a mass sickout by the controllers that began Friday. The workers’ action, which immediately led to a massive disruption of air traffic throughout Europe, was provoked by a decree passed by the Council of Ministers earlier Friday. The decree drastically worsened the controllers’ labour conditions, significantly expanding their hours of work.

The same day the government approved plans to begin the privatisation of AENA, the state-controlled firm that runs the airports.

Some controllers who have been able to speak to the press have described the harrowing and brutalising conditions they face. The *Sunday Telegraph* reported that one of the workers spoke to the newspaper “in a half whisper, his voice quivering on his mobile.” The air traffic controller, based at Madrid’s Barajas Airport, said, “I cannot talk to you properly now. There are civil guards here, with pistols. If we don’t start work now, we will be arrested.”

The Public Prosecutors Office of Madrid has opened judicial procedures to investigate each controller for possible “crimes” against air traffic. The Prosecutors Office said that the workers could face up to eight years in prison. AENA has begun separate disciplinary proceedings against 442 controllers, nearly a quarter of the workforce.

These events have exposed the reactionary role of the trade unions, which have stabbed the air traffic controllers in the back. They first denounced the strike action, saying it was unofficial and spontaneous, and have now accepted the state of alert with barely a whimper of protest.

The Unión Sindical de Controladores Aéreos (USCA), which represents 97 percent of air traffic controllers, does not even have a statement on its web site regarding the mobilization of the army against its members. The two main trade union federations, the UGT (General Workers Union) and CCOO (Workers' Commissions), have likewise made no statement.

As controllers were being held at gunpoint, Camilo Cela, the president of USCA, called Saturday for the workers to “be calm,” declaring, “I appeal to the professionalism that we have demonstrated during all these months of attacks by the company.”

Supporting the trade unions in refusing to mount any struggle against this assault is the United Left (Izquierda Unida), the main pseudo-left formation in Spain, led by the Communist Party. A statement issued Saturday by José Antonio García Rubio on behalf of the United Left called for no action to be taken against the measures, declaring, “The United Left has never been in agreement with the demands of the controllers or their means of making them.”

The military action is the latest in a string of increasingly repressive measures by governments throughout Europe to quash popular opposition to sweeping cuts in pay, jobs and social programs. As they move to smash strikes and protests, political parties, whether nominally “left” or “right,” are overturning long-standing democratic norms.

In Greece earlier this year, a strike by truckers was broken up by the army, and riot police were later used against striking cultural ministry employees. Riot police have been used against oil refinery workers in France. In Britain, police squads have confronted protesting students nationwide and carried out mass arrests.

These governments are carrying out the dictates of the banks, which operate with ever-greater ruthlessness.

The events in Spain and other European nations reveal that the scale of social cuts being implemented—in order to make working people pay for a crisis not of their making—cannot be imposed on the basis of democratic rule.

Today the most urgent task in Spain, throughout Europe and internationally is the building of an independent political movement of the working class, in opposition to all the parties of the political establishment and the trade unions. It is only on this

basis that working people can wage a political struggle to repel and defeat the international offensive being waged by the financial aristocracy.

The struggle to oppose dictatorial measures and defend democratic rights is not a national question. It requires the unity of workers globally in a counteroffensive against the financial elite. Such a struggle must be aimed at the bringing down of the governments carrying out these attacks and their replacement with democratic workers' governments committed to socialist policies.

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