

Spain's air traffic controllers targeted for escalating state repression

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The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) governments' top law official, Attorney General Cándido Conde-Pumpido, is demanding prison sentences of up to eight years for hundreds of air traffic controllers who organised a strike last weekend. The controllers face charges of sedition under the Criminal Law Procedure of Air Navigation.

The controllers are being denounced as insurgents who must face the full force of the state. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero described the strike as an "open rebellion against the rule of law" and "an affront to the constitutional order."

"The government will not hesitate to use, without ignoring the requirements of proportionality, all the instruments of the law to end situations such the one we experienced at the weekend," Zapatero declared.

The controllers' "crime" was to call in sick en masse in defence of health and safety conditions and in opposition to government plans to privatise 49 percent of the state-run airport authority, Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea (AENA). Almost 90 percent of the controllers have exceeded the legal maximum of 1,670 hours of work a year. Early this year, the government increased the controllers' hours from 1,200, cut overtime to a maximum of 80 hours a year, and slashed wages by half.

The PSOE government responded to the work action by declaring a 15-day state of alert—the first since the fall of the Franco fascist dictatorship in 1975. The controllers were marched at gunpoint from the hotel where they were meeting and forced to sign a document placing them under military control and discipline. They have since been working under police guard. Over 190 Air Force officials have been deployed to Spain's air traffic control towers and more than 2,000

police dispatched to the airports.

Zapatero is now threatening to extend the emergency powers on the pretext of preventing industrial action over the Christmas holiday period. This will also allow time for military personnel to be trained to take over the jobs of sacked controllers.

Deputy Prime Minister Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba said that the government was discussing a top secret contingency plan to prevent such strike action happening "ever again," warning that the controllers would "face a string of court cases and administrative sanctions."

The first group of 100 controllers facing prosecution were summoned to appear before the public prosecutor in Madrid on Thursday. A dozen refused to testify, saying they should be tried in a military court because the military was in charge of them.

AENA has also opened disciplinary proceedings against 442 controllers. According to *El Mundo*, thousands of affected travellers, consumers' associations and state prosecutors are also preparing lawsuits that could bankrupt the controllers.

The PSOE government has acted in this vicious manner in order to show international investors that it will do anything that is required to implement the austerity measures now being demanded of Spain. Zapatero was rewarded with a laudatory report in the *Wall Street Journal*, which noted that "the government's severe response has shored up the position of Spain's embattled prime minister and could give him more support in passing reforms."

The main organ of US big business stated that Zapatero's actions were popular with "conservatives, who want to see tough reforms in areas such as labor, pension costs and the banking sector." Zapatero was throughout in contact with the leader of the rightist

opposition Popular Party, Mariano Rajoy, “to keep him in the loop.”

The WSJ is candid as to the use to which the support won by the PSOE for its stand against the controllers will be used—pushing through “the consolidation of Spain's troubled banking sector” and confronting “a rigid labor market that zealously protects the salary and benefits of full-time workers.”

If the PSOE can exploit confused sentiment amongst some workers—whipped up against the relatively highly-paid controllers—this is thanks to the active support of the trade union bureaucracy and the fake-left groups for its propaganda offensive and the repressive measures being justified on this basis.

The two main trade union federations, the PSOE-aligned UGT (General Workers Union) and the Communist Party controlled CC.OO (Workers' Commissions) have attacked the controllers. The UGT said the action by the controllers was “not in any way justified.” The CC.OO was more vitriolic still, describing the strike as “intolerable” and “alien” to normal union “codes” and deserving of “our most powerful and radical rejection.” The CC.OO attacked the controllers as “a corporate group pampered by the company and the government” and demanded they “respect the labour law.”

For its part, the Unión Sindical de Controladores Aéreos (USCA), which represents controllers, was quick to apologise for the strike and insist that it was not authorised by the union.

The United Left (Izquierda Unida-IU), led by the Stalinists in alliance with various petty-bourgeois groups, issued a statement on the day the state of alert was declared reassuring big business and the government that it “has never been in agreement with the demands of the controllers or their means of making them.”

Gaspar Llamazares, the United Left's parliamentary speaker, told the Congress of Deputies that the IU “condemns without any ambiguity the attitude of the air traffic controllers... because after this stoppage, not strike, of the air traffic controllers, we are weaker to defend labour and social rights, to defend the right to strike.”

This turns reality on its head. It is the IU's refusal to defend the air traffic controllers and its lining up behind the state repression that has strengthened the

government. The precedent set by this despicable betrayal, sanctioning the imposition of military rule in the face of industrial action, can and will be employed again and again. And it will be accompanied on subsequent occasions by similar claims that workers in an “essential service” are “holding the country to ransom.”

The same role is played by the trade union apparatus and the pseudo-left groups that gravitate around it in every country. Throughout Europe, the trade unions betray any and all struggles that develop against austerity measures that threaten tens of millions with unemployment and tens of millions more with poverty.

Emboldened by this treachery, governments of every nominal colouration—social democratic in Spain and Greece, conservative in France and Britain—employ police brutality to break strikes and intimidate protests by students and others.

The time has come to call this to a halt. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers in Spain and throughout Europe to denounce the legal offensive against the controllers, demand the immediate suspension of the state of alert and the withdrawal of all criminal and disciplinary measures. This must be the starting point for a political rebellion against the rotten bureaucratic apparatus of the trade unions, which function as a fifth column on behalf of big business and the state.

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