Spanish parliament votes to extend dictatorial powers

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Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government has extended to January 15 the "state of alert" imposed upon 2,200 air traffic controllers on December 4—placing them under military control. The move confirms that the attack on the controllers is an attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class.

The controllers stopped working on health and safety grounds, insisting they had completed their annual quota of hours. They were also protesting against the proposed partial privatisation of the Spanish airport authority, AENA.

The state of alert is the first time it has been used since the death of the fascist dictator General Francisco Franco in 1975. It was first declared on December 4, following Zapatero's calling of an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers. Royal Decree 1673/2010 placed controllers under military discipline, forcing them to work at gunpoint and under threat of imprisonment. Since then 400 have faced disciplinary procedures or prosecution, which could result in sentences of up to eight years in jail.

The government secured congressional approval for the extension on December 16, with the support of the Catalan nationalist Convergence and Union Coalition (CiU), the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and the Canaries Coalition (CC). The right wing opposition Popular Party (PP) declared that the PSOE was acting outside the constitution, but then simply abstained, ensuring the passage of the legislation.

CiU spokesman Pere Macías said they were "totally convinced" of the necessity for an extension to the state of alert, but warned they "will not support any other extension or exceptional measure". PNV spokesman José Ramón Beloki denounced controllers for carrying out a "serious rupture of the rules of the game". PSOE ministers demanded the extension because they feared they would immediately re-enter struggle—an argument for permanent de facto military rule.

During the congressional debate, Minister to the Presidency Ramon Jauregui declared that "the same reasons persist" that led to the declaration of the state of alarm. He remarked later, "The normalization of air-traffic is neither total, nor is it totally guaranteed .... There is no perception of normality in Spanish society after the enormous dimension of the sabotage."

The Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and the Communist Party-led United Left (IU) voted against the renewal of the state of alert. But in his remarks to Congress, IU parliamentary spokesman Gaspar Llamazares stressed that the IU had opposed the controllers' actions and backed the initial state of alert. However, like the PP, he simply questioned the constitutionality of the extension—stating that two of four criteria to decree a state of alarm were absent.

The State of Alarm is based on a Franco law dating back to 1969 and retained during the "transition to democracy" in 1975-78, which provides the state with the legal right to militarise labour and suspend democratic rights in the "national" interest. Once workers are militarised by government, they are subject to the code of military justice under which withdrawing labour can be classified as an act of treason. The PSOE are letting it be known that any resistance to its austerity measures will be met with the dictatorial methods that formed the foundations of fascist rule.

El Mundo reported that further extensions of the "state alert" can be expected, the purpose of which is to create "the period considered necessary to prepare the first group of military controllers to stand in for the civilian professionals who have been fired, severely sanctioned or facing criminal prosecution."

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Prior to the vote on December 16, the Union of Air Traffic Controllers Association (USCA) president, Camilo Cela, issued a letter to parliament declaring that it was the "irrefutable will" of his union to continue mediation "to resolve the labour conflict as soon as possible." Cela added that USCA wanted to restore "social dialogue and collective bargaining" and "the normal constitutional order."

Cela is offering the government a joint pact to prevent any future action by controllers, in what amounts to a no-strike deal backed up by a union commitment to police its own members. Development Minister José Blanco gave short shrift to USCA's crawling, saying, "We can't believe them, and that is why the government must not drop its guard".

UCSA has played a despicable role throughout the controllers' struggle. It openly collaborated with the government in imposing a 40 percent pay cut earlier in the year, extending working hours and cutting overtime. The union leadership did not hesitate to publicly attack the work stoppage as it spread across the country. After USCA officials were summoned by Zapatero to an emergency cabinet at the Ministry of Public Works, they headed to where the controllers were meeting at the Hotel Auditórium in Madrid. Amidst emotive speeches and floods of crocodile tears, they reiterated the government's threat to start arresting workers one by one. They said controllers had no option but to return to work on terms determined by the ministry of defence and accept being placed under military law.

In an interview with the BBC, USCA spokesman Daniel Zamit revealed how the union had to bend over backwards in order to persuade controllers to return to work. He indicated the mood amongst workers was to confront these draconian attacks—describing how, "The workers were willing to go to jail, to lose their jobs—anything."

The Communist Party-aligned Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT) condemned the controllers in the most aggressive language. The CC.OO attacked them for actions "alien" to normal union "codes" and said they were deserving of "our most powerful and radical rejection."

Spanish controllers won widespread support from controllers throughout the world. However, the Air Traffic Controllers European Union's Coordination (ATCEUC), to which UCSA is affiliated and which represents 13,000 workers in 28 European countries, issued a toothless press release on December 4. Whilst condemning the action of the government, it organised no action in support of its members in Spain. The same response came from the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations (IFATCA), which represents 50,000 air traffic controllers in 134 countries. Both organisations have helped isolate the controllers in Spain, assisted in the suppression of their struggle and opened the door for similar repressive measures to be used against other groups of workers.

Sandalio Gómez, professor of labour relations at the IESE business school in Madrid, urged Zapatero to seize the opportunity to roll these measures out throughout the economy. The attack on controllers "should be an opportunity for a major overhaul [of labour practices] that goes well beyond the dispute with controllers."

Deputy Prime Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba has reiterated that the government was discussing a secret contingency plan to ensure that such actions "would never be allowed to happen in Spain again."

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