

Spanish government sends army to break air traffic controllers strike

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The Spanish military took control of 10 airports last night after Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero, of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers Party), signed a decree giving the Defence Ministry control of the Spanish airspace. Yesterday evening, a wildcat strike by Spain's air traffic controllers left 330,000 passengers stranded in airports throughout Spain and Europe.

The air traffic controllers struck after a decree on their labour conditions was passed by the Council of Ministers on Friday afternoon. This decree stated that the controllers have to work 1,670 hours per year, without counting parental/maternal permits or sick leave. It also included the possibility of militarising the airports immediately if air traffic controllers went on strike, and sending doctors to workers' homes to check whether workers who have called in sick are in fact ill.

This is only the latest attack on the workers, however. In February, the PSOE issued a decree cutting controllers' wages by 40 percent, increasing hours and reducing rest periods. The government apparently passed the latest decree in anticipation of renewed opposition by the air traffic controllers.

The new measure on labour conditions is a clear breach of the agreement between the state-run Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea (AENA), the Zapatero government and the air traffic controllers trade union (USCA) in late September—notably on provisions regarding how working time will be counted.

Air traffic controllers started a sick-out around 5 p.m. yesterday afternoon, with up to 70 percent of the workers calling in sick. This appears to have taken authorities by surprise; French news magazine *Le Point* commented: “The exact reasons for this sudden movement are not known,” adding that “a strike against

[AENA's] privatization was planned for the end of the year.”

Government officials then announced that they would hold a meeting to militarise Spanish airspace, though they had to wait until the decree was published in the Official Bulletin of the State, at 9:30 p.m. Before that time, the decree was not in force. Once the decree came into force, top government officials convened a crisis meeting, including Zapatero and Air Force Chief of Staff General José Jiménez Ruiz. Zapatero signed the order forcing workers back to work at 11 p.m.

Defence officials announced at 11:30 p.m. that the Defence Ministry “will demand the presence at their workplaces of civil air traffic controllers.” Military police marched on the Hotel Auditorium in Madrid, near Madrid's main Barajas airport, to break up a meeting of air traffic controllers and force them back to work.

Last night soldiers were reportedly taking over Spain's central air control facilities in Sevilla, Madrid, Barcelona and Canarias. They also planned to reinforce and take control of civilian employees at airports in Valladolid, Murcia, Salamanca, Toledo, Badajoz, León, Zaragoza, Albacete, and the smaller Cuatro Vientos and Torrejón de Ardoz airports in Madrid.

Army units are authorized to forcibly seize air traffic controllers from their homes, transport them to control towers, and force them to work “under military authority”. The government will treat disobeying orders given by the military as a crime, punishable by six months to six years in prison.

The Spanish daily *El País* noted that the “response of the government had never been of such dimensions under times of democratic rule.”

To speak more forthrightly, a government that militarises economic life and tramples on the right to

strike is in the final stages of a collapse into outright dictatorship. The wave of wage and social cuts carried out in Spain, as in countries throughout Europe in the aftermath of the economic crisis, is no longer compatible with democratic rule.

The air traffic controllers' strike comes amid overwhelming popular opposition to Zapatero's social cuts, and to similar austerity measures taken by governments throughout Europe. Recent weeks have seen large-scale student protests in Britain and Italy, a one-day national strike in Portugal, the defeat of a large-scale oil strike in France, and the breaking of a Greek seamen's strike by a government back-to-work order.

In Spain, 10 million workers, or 70 percent of the country's workforce, marched in a one-day general strike called by the unions in September. An October opinion poll in *El País* found 61 percent disapproval for Zapatero's handling of the economic crisis. He has forced a two-year increase in the retirement age, wage cuts for state workers, and labour reforms making it easier to hire and fire workers.

On Wednesday, Zapatero cited pressure from banks and financial markets, who were speculating against Spain's public debt, to justify new social cuts. These include not only the 49 percent privatization of AENA, but the 30 percent privatization of the state lottery, a cut in small business taxes, an increase in cigarette taxes, and the elimination of a program paying €425 per month to the long-term unemployed. That program will expire in February 2011.

Such moves will devastate working class families throughout Spain, particularly as the country faces unemployment of over 20 percent. According to press reports, 40 percent of the unemployed live in a household where no one can find a job.

Under conditions where the government is arrogantly ignoring public opinion in its drive to impoverish the masses, any struggle between the working class and Zapatero has a potentially revolutionary character. The unions, who have been negotiating social cuts with Zapatero, fear such a confrontation and have made clear they oppose the strikes.

The Unión Sindical de Controladores Aéreos (USCA) called off a strike scheduled for late August, after 98 percent of the workforce had voted to strike. USCA leader Cesar Cabo explained at the time: "The executive committee has decided not to exercise the

right to strike during this month of August, in order to demonstrate responsibility."

Now union officials, after initially telling the press that they had also been taken by surprise by the wildcat strike, have made clear that they oppose the strike. Cabo posted a note yesterday on his Facebook page, declaring: "We are struggling for normalcy to return to the airports and so that peace will reign. The union has called on its members to calm tensions."

El País commented that earlier the union "repeatedly warned that it was getting ever harder to control its members, having asked them for 'calm and serenity' today." Union officials, *El País* added, "denied there was a strike and insisted that the protest was 'spontaneous.'"



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