

Spanish unions and middle class “left” back state repression of air traffic controllers

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On December 4, Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero’s Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party—PSOE) government imposed a “state of alarm” on 2,200 air traffic controllers, subjecting them to military discipline to force them back to work.

The controllers had stopped working on health and safety grounds, insisting they had completed the increased annual quota of hours imposed by the government in early 2010, when it also imposed a 40 percent pay cut. They were also protesting against plans for the partial privatisation of the Spanish airport authority, AENA.

What followed is a damning exposure of what passes for the workers’ movement in Spain. Not a single trade union or “left” political organisation declared its solidarity with the controllers. None mounted a campaign to mobilise workers against a policy that has not been implemented in Spain since the demise of the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco.

The PSOE invoked two laws carried over from the Franco regime against the controllers, who were demonised in the press as privileged and overpaid in order to legitimise dictatorial methods that could then be used against the entire working class. This was only made possible by the complicity of the trade unions and what passes for the “left” in Spain. They have helped legitimise the PSOE’s actions and abandoned the controllers, who now face the threat of imprisonment for sedition and the loss of their jobs through the privatisation of the service.

The second largest union, the PSOE-aligned Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers Union—UGT), described the controllers’ action as “not in any way justified.” The largest union, the Communist Party (PCE)-led Comisiones Obreras (Workers Commissions—CC.OO), demanded the government mete out severe punishment to the controllers, declaring, “These actions are intolerable and alien to the codes of trade unions.”

It condemned the stranding of citizens in Spanish airports as “a serious irresponsible act that deserves our strongest and most radical rejection.”

The unions’ refusal to defend the controllers reflects not only an ideological commitment to the PSOE, but the material interests of the trade union bureaucracy—the protection of huge subsidies they receive from the state.

In 2005, shortly after it came to power, the PSOE gave the unions millions in compensation for assets seized during the Civil War. Every year since then, it has handed out huge subsidies. In 2009 alone, the CC.OO and UGT received €96 million each. Although Spain’s total union membership is less than 2 million, or 15 percent of the workforce, the state allows the unions to negotiate on behalf of 90 percent of the workforce. According to the Ministry of Labour, both

the CC.OO and UGT lost 276,000 members between them since 2009.

The direct accomplice in the PSOE persecution of the controllers has been the Air Traffic Controllers Union (Unión Sindical de Controladores Aéreos—USCA), which has collaborated with the government at every stage of the conflict. USCA is now facilitating the prosecution and possible jailing of its own members. Its main concern has been to demobilise and derail a united struggle against Zapatero’s dictatorial measures.

The pseudo-left groups have published a series of for-the-record statements on the state of alarm, but despite mealy-mouthed criticisms, they opposed the controllers’ wildcat action and did not lift a finger in their defence.

Condemning the controllers for excessive “privileges” and for holding citizens to ransom, their role has been to throw sand in workers’ eyes about the fundamental implications for the entire class of a state attack on a section of workers.

Collectively, they insist that the moribund trade union apparatus—which have again demonstrated their craven support for the state—must be looked to as organisations of “class struggle”.

Both the Stalinist Partido Comunista de España (Communist Party—PCE) and the United Left (Izquierda Unida—IU) coalition that it leads attacked the controllers. On December 4, PCE General Secretary José Luis Centella said he regretted the “harm undergone by many citizens due to the attitude of two inexplicable positions—those of the government and the controllers’ union.”

IU economics spokesman José Antonio García Rubio referred to the militarisation of the airports as “a very troubling decision”, but reassured the government, “We are not in agreement with the claims and the methods used by the controllers.”

In a congressional debate on December 9, IU deputy Gaspar Llamazares declared that the IU “condemns without any ambiguity the attitude taken by the air traffic controllers, leading us to believe that this is an abuse of power. It has been an abuse of power towards the travellers by denying them their right to travel, it is an abuse of power towards the citizens and an abuse of power towards the workers, because after this walkout by the air traffic controllers—this is not a strike—we are weaker to defend our labour and social rights, to defend our right to strike.”

Llamazares, after making clear that he will not defend the right to strike, pleaded with Zapatero to remember, “Mr. President of the government it seems that you omit, by placing us all on the other side, that all of us agree on rejecting the unjustifiable actions of the controllers.”

Since its foundation by the PCE in 1986, through an alliance with various petty-bourgeois groups, the IU has sought to divert working

class opposition back behind social democracy. It has functioned as a junior partner of the PSOE and an integral part of the political establishment. Its close support for the PSOE has seen its parliamentary group shrink from 21 seats in 1996 to only 2 today. Now that the PSOE is moving to implement the diktat of the banks with the methods of dictatorship, the IU has signalled its agreement.

The Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Catalan Republican Left—ERC) operates as the IU’s main political partner at the local, regional and national level. It has three deputies in Congress and 21 seats in the Catalan parliament. The ERC denounced the controllers, demanding that such “a privileged labour caste” should “abandon this attitude.”

As for the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain, the small Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour—CNT) merely issued a perfunctory statement on December 5 to “show their concern” at the PSOE placing “civilians under bayonets and threatening them with imprisonment”.

The main anarcho-syndicalist group, however, is the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour—CGT), whose origins lay in a split from the CNT in 1979 on the basis of supporting standing in trade union elections.

This stance has facilitated access on the part of the CGT to lucrative state subsidies. Despite having a membership of just 60,000, this makes it the third largest trade union federation—nominally representing 1 million workers.

The CGT plays a particular political role of sucking in workers disenchanted with the bigger union federations by the liberal employment of radical and militant phraseology. But it is just as much a creature of the state as its social democratic and Stalinist competitors.

Today, it is housed in a palatial headquarters in Barcelona, in which each individual “union”—teachers, metal workers or communications workers—has its own office. According to one glowing report from a fellow “anarchist”: “There are several larger meeting rooms, offices of the Salvador Seguí Foundation (a CGT cultural grouping) and a bar-cafeteria with a tiled outdoor lounging area. This has a wonderful view of Barcelona as it is on the ninth floor.” Alongside this edifice, the CGT possesses numerous regional offices staffed collectively by 5,000 of its members.

To facilitate this charade, the CGT boasts of its ideological flexibility, admitting to upholding ideas “that could appear contradictory; radical pacifism, or the justification of violent acts as social protest, extreme individualism and membership in syndicalist unions, absolute rejection of institutions and limited participation in them.”

On January 2, the CGT criticised the “authoritarian methods” of the PSOE for refusing to find a “democratic solution to a labour conflict.” Aside from this, it has done nothing. The CGT has an AENA section and a presence at Spain’s two largest airports, Barajas (Madrid) and El Prat (Barcelona). But it has made no attempt to mobilise the workers it supposedly represents.

The CGT is nevertheless promoted as a radical alternative to the two big unions by the Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anti-Capitalist Left—IA), Spanish affiliate of the Pabloite United Secretariat, and En Lucha (In Struggle), the Spanish affiliate of the International Socialist Tendency led by the British Socialist Workers Party.

Anti-Capitalist Left was formed out of the Liga Comunista Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR). The LCR has collaborated with the Stalinists throughout the post-Franco era,

entering the United Left in 1991, and played a significant role in its leadership. It split from the United Left in 2008, due to the political impact on its support of the IU’s close relations with the PSOE. But its every effort since has been dedicated to re-establishing an alliance with the IU.

Throughout the state of alarm, it refused to comment on the IU’s criminal denunciations of the controllers. Following the declaration of the state of alarm, the IA published the toothless statements of the CGT. Its own first statement, published on December 7, insisted that opposition to the state of alarm could only come through the trade unions. “If someone has to give an authentic voice of alarm, these are the trade unions,” it said. The statement concluded by blaming controllers for their own isolation, because they forgot “two variables of the equation: consumers and the rest of workers of AENA. This has left them isolated and a perfect target for labour repression and the lynching media.”

En Lucha also published uncritically a number of statements of the CGT. Its own sole statement calls the “attitude” of CC.OO, the UGT and IU congress deputy Llamazares “shameful.” But this is accompanied by a call for workers to support a strike (that at this point had not been officially called by any union), controlled and led by the CGT, CC.OO and the UGT, against “cuts.”

The former Spanish section of the Corriente Marxista Internacional (International Marxist Tendency—IMT), El Militante, has split from it and now operates under the banner Corriente Marxista Revolucionaria.

On December 11, it described the state of alarm as a threat to the whole working class, but then rounded on the controllers for taking unofficial action. “Even the way they have raised the conflict, concealing the strike with sick leave, has reduced their credibility within sectors of the workers who do know how much and at what risks strikes are made,” it argued. El Militante advised the CC.OO and the UGT to come to the head of the struggle against government austerity.

The fake left outfits stand exposed as a crucial link facilitating the imposition of dictatorial measures by the PSOE. No party came forward to resolutely support the controllers, or explain the true significance of the PSOE’s attack, other than the International Committee of the Fourth International in the pages of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The formation of a Spanish section of the ICFI is an urgent task.



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