

# Reply to a reader on the Spanish air traffic controllers

5 February 2011

*The following is letter from a reader on “Spanish air traffic controllers’ union facilitates government persecution of its members” followed by a reply by the WSW.*

As a veteran reader and supporter of the WSW, I need to underline my disappointment regarding the article you published yesterday (7th January) supporting the bunch of class vultures who are—and have always been—the Spanish airport controllers. Your obfuscated journalists in Madrid should have reported the opinion of people in the streets and the working class in general. Our controllers have been earning, over years, almost three times as much money as their average European colleagues: \$300,000 per year (up to \$600,000 in no few cases).

Things with the Spanish socialist government broke definitely in February 2010, when those vultures pretended to be able to retire at the age of 52, BUT keeping full payment for life. Another class condition was the “right” to decide exclusively by themselves who could join them as “controller” in the airport premises, a privilege that would leave in their hands the aerial movements of the whole country.

So, their claims were not due to salaries or working-time schedules as mentioned in your article. On the contrary, our rich controllers received, on top, triple pay each “extra hour” worked and they refused as “abusive” any reduction of their extra hours at reasonable price. Such has been and still is the heart of this affair. Why did your correspondents not even mention any of these circumstances in their report? Such treatment of information does not fit into the WSW’s usual line.

Best greetings,  
Amando, Madrid  
\* \* \*

Dear Amando,

We stand by our coverage of Spain’s air traffic controllers. It is you who must re-evaluate your false and politically dangerous response to the unprecedented state attack imposed by the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government.

Contrary to your assertion, the handful of air traffic controllers receiving a high salary is not at the “heart of this affair”. This is being utilised as propaganda to justify a fundamental attack on the democratic rights of controllers, with repercussions for the entire Spanish working class. The PSOE’s aim, like ruling elites throughout the world, is to foist the systemic crisis of capitalism onto the backs of working people, through the imposition of savage austerity measures, job and wage cuts. This requires above all the smashing of any signs of independent working class action and a resort to ever more

dictatorial measures to achieve this.

Your letter does not even mention the invoking of a “State of Alarm”, using laws from the fascist era. Under its provisions, the controllers were rounded up and forced to work under military discipline. They were threatened with imprisonment for sedition and prosecution for damages that could bankrupt them. Now they are being railroaded into signing new contracts by being threatened with the sack.

It is not just the controllers that have been treated this way. Similar sedition laws from the Franco era were used last year against workers who occupied Barcelona airport in 2006, in protest at their transfer to other companies with the loss of jobs and lower wages. Striking Madrid Metro workers were also warned the military would be sent in if they didn’t provide minimum services. Are these workers also over-paid “class vultures”? Were they worthy of being defended by the “the people in the streets and the working class in general”? If so, why, like the controllers, were they attacked by the PSOE and the courts, and abandoned by the unions?

What we have seen during the course of last year is the legitimisation of the use of the military in industrial disputes. Its use is now deemed to be an acceptable response to any section of workers who dare to defy the dictates of the financial aristocracy—the real “vultures” of society.

You have nothing to say about these developments, or the price the working class will pay for failing to articulate a response to them. This is all the more alarming given the bloody history of intervention by the military in Spain. Instead you regurgitate the filthy prejudices, lies and distortions of capitalist politicians and the media about “privileged” workers—a tactic that has been used to isolate refinery workers in France, truck drivers in Greece and British Airways (BA) cabin crew in the UK.

What are the real facts behind the repeated invocations by the government and the media of the air traffic controllers’ “privileges”?

The implementation of the “open skies” policy in the 1990s has provoked strikes and strike threats across Europe. The airlines and airport operators, aided and abetted by the unions, have rammed through a policy of jobs losses and wages cuts. In Spain, the merger of Iberia with BA and the partial privatisation of the Spanish Airports and Air Navigation authority (Aeropuertos Españoles y Navegación Aérea, AENA), the largest remaining state-run operator in Europe, are the most recent manifestations of this policy. The defeat of the air traffic controllers has been a major objective in this process.

In 1999, controllers agreed a five-year legal contract based on 1,200 hours work per year, overtime at 2.65 the normal rate and work patterns, on a par with international air safety regulations. The agreement suited AENA as it was cheaper to pay overtime during peak summer periods, rather than hire full-time controllers.

Since 2005, controllers have sought to thwart attempts by AENA and the Air Traffic Controllers Union (USCA) to negotiate a new contract that would drastically cut their wages and conditions. In early 2010, the PSOE government intervened, declaring a Royal Decree that increased hours to 1,750 per year, limited overtime to a maximum of 80 hours per year, gave AENA almost total control over work patterns and compelled controllers to retire at 57 years.

The press regurgitated government claims that the average wage of a controller was €305,000. Research by USCA showing take-home pay was between €42,000 for a controller at a small airfield to €90,000 for a senior controller at an international airport, about the same as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, was ignored. The doubling of pay in some cases only occurred because of staff shortages that forced controllers to work excessive overtime (in many cases, up to 550 hours per year)—without which the number of flights would have been cut by between 40 and 50 percent.

A controller has pointed out to us that your statement that they “retire at the age of 52, but keep full payment for life” is not true. All European collective labour agreements include early retirement provisions and in some countries it is compulsory for controllers to retire at 55. On reaching the age of 65 they receive a state pension based on their contributions, like every other worker. Also false is your statement that the controllers had the right to decide who could become a controller. Our contact states, “We have never ever controlled access to the profession. The notification of exams for places has always been the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of AENA. And the interviews for selection are theirs.”

The controllers did not refuse as “abusive” any reduction in their extra hours. The controller told us this was accepted “without a murmur the day of the decree in February ... that is why they have reduced everyone’s salary by about 40 percent.”

In August 2010, hostility to the effects of the changes and others being negotiated by USCA produced a near unanimous vote for strike action. USCA ignored the result and instead called for the government to mediate. The government reacted by reducing the hours worked per year slightly to 1,670 and making the 80 hours overtime mandatory at the discretion of AENA. The controllers were promised a final collective agreement to be reached by the end of 2010.

By the beginning of December, many controllers had worked more than the 1,670 hours maximum and, legally, could not work more hours. AENA and the government responded by publishing a “clarification” of the Royal Decree unilaterally raising working hours to 1,844 and excluding sick days, training courses, etc. Angered by the increased workload and the threat to health and safety this posed, controllers began handing in a “declaration of unfitness” to their supervisors. AENA systematically started closing airports affected by staff shortages.

The government’s response was to declare the State of Alarm, placing the controllers under military supervision and subject to punishment under the military penal code if they refused to work. Since then, a contingency plan has been developed to prevent such strike action happening “ever again” including training 100 military officers to run the control towers.

Privatisation of the control towers at 13 airports has been announced, with more to follow.

The unions, which pledged in early 2010 to fight to the bitter end to resist privatisation of AENA, have capitulated, pleading only that workers should be given the chance to work in the new companies that

take over.

The action against the controllers is a clear demonstration that the Spanish state and constitution that was set up in the 1970s following the “transition” from fascism to democracy—a compromise between the fascists, the Communist Party and the PSOE—not only provided a political amnesty to the criminals of the Franco regime. It allowed the continued existence of many of its repressive laws and judiciary in the event they would be needed again. That time has come.

You throw at us what you claim to be opinion “on the street” in order to portray our stand as the product of “obfuscated journalists in Madrid”. Yet you never ask yourself what factors have helped shape public opinion and led to the present dangerous quiescence in the face of the PSOE’s resort to fascist methods against the working class.

In a previous period, this would have provoked outrage. The unions would have been forced to call mass protests against such an attack on the democratic right to strike. In 1972, in the UK, the Trades Union Congress, faced with massive and rising anger, called a national strike to demand the release from prison of five shop stewards known as the Pentonville Five who were arrested whilst picketing. The UK was brought to a standstill and thousands marched on the prison. The government was forced to back down and order the stewards’ release.

The failure of the working class to forcefully respond to the attack on the controllers is the product of the stultifying and disorienting impact on its consciousness of its old and now degenerate parties and trade unions—not to mention the plethora of petty bourgeois fake left groups that orbit around these bureaucratic, pro-big business machines.

This is a temporary state of affairs. Their own bitter and often painful experiences will rapidly lead workers to break with these corrupt leaderships. The opposition that is developing in Spain and internationally to the efforts of the ruling elite to unload the burden of capitalism’s crisis on their backs will drive millions into struggle. The task of the *World Socialist Web Site* is to politically arm the working class for these decisive battles, to inform, educate and mobilise on a revolutionary perspective those looking to fight back—and who will have been outraged at the treatment meted out to the controllers, as you should have been.

Paul Mitchell



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wws.org/contact](http://wws.org/contact)**