

# Spain's air traffic controllers union backs military policing of its members

Vicky Short, Paul Stuart  
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On December 4, Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero's Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party—PSOE) government passed a Royal Decree, imposing a “state of alarm” on 2,200 air traffic controllers. This subjected them to military discipline and forced them back to work. The decree was not revoked until 43 days later, on January 16.

The controllers stopped work on health and safety grounds, insisting they had completed the increased annual quota of hours imposed by the government in early 2010. They had also taken a 40 percent pay cut. After being marched back to work by armed officers, the controllers were closely monitored while they worked; one described the atmosphere as akin to living “under Franco, Pinochet, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot or any other dictator.”

Not a single trade union or “left” political group declared its solidarity with the controllers, or mounted a campaign to mobilise workers against a measure not used since the end of the fascist Franco regime in 1975. Instead, they went along with the vitriolic propaganda campaign, denouncing the controllers as a privileged elite “holding the country to ransom.”

Since the state of alarm was called off, the state, media and politicians from all the main parties have hailed the military's role in the suppression of the controllers. Minister of Defence Carme Chacón declared the military operation against the controllers a “success”. She added, “Today, the military is the institution most valued by the Spanish, and that's not a gift but an achievement.”

The Sindical de Controladores Aéreos Unión (Air Traffic Controllers Union-USCA)—which acted as an arm of the state throughout the controllers' struggle—did not want to be outdone. USCA spokesman Daniel Zamit gushed that the military was “very prof

essional” and “giving priority to security over all.”

Zamit said he was considering sending a letter of thanks to the commanders involved. Working under its command had been “a pleasure”, he added, even if this was “hard to admit.”

He continued his fulsome praise of the military saying, “During the 45 or 47 days of military control, we have felt much supported in our functions, something that hadn't happened in the last two years....

“I hope that those who are coming in will follow the example that the military has given of rationality and backing for the workers.” He also hoped that they would “continue to protect us and carry on the measures for the service to operate with total normality.”

Zamit is the public face of the USCA bureaucracy. He has worked at every stage in the controllers' struggle to demobilise and derail a united offensive against the government.

His praise for the military follows his public admission that when the state of alarm was declared, USCA officials were dispatched from secret talks with the government to tell controllers they had no option but to submit to military rule. Zamit described the rebellious mood USCA had to combat: “The workers were willing to go to jail, to lose their jobs—anything.”

The union's betrayal of the controllers' struggle has emboldened the government and the Spanish ruling class, which now publicly adopts the position that the army can be used to break any strike that is not controlled by the venal union bureaucracy.

Following the military intervention against the controllers, all those involved have been awarded the Order of Civil Merit. Both generals and ministers greeted its termination by stating that unofficial actions by workers will never be allowed to take place again,

and that the Armed Forces are “prepared for any contingency.”

More than 100 officers have been trained as controllers to act as a strike-breaking force in any future dispute, also making a mockery of the claims by Minister of Interior Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba that control towers had passed back under AENA’s stewardship.

The PSOE, media and the unions, including USCA, have used the attack on the controllers to legitimise the military—dressing it up as a “neutral defensive organisation for citizens” and a force for stability—that is, for suppressing the social opposition by the working class. They speak and act for a ruling elite whose own fabulously privileged existence cannot continue without the use of repressive anti-democratic measures against the popular masses. In fact, the army backed Franco’s coup against the republic in 1936 and kept him in power until his death in 1975. As an institution, it has remained virtually untouched since.

Leon Trotsky’s warning in his 1936 article “Lessons of Spain” retains all its validity today. He described the officer corps as “the guard of capital”, which was at the centre of “the centuries-old tradition of enslaving the people.... Without this guard the bourgeoisie could not maintain itself for a single day. The selection of the individuals, their education and training make the officers as a distinctive group uncompromising enemies of socialism.”

According to USCA, 85 percent of controllers have now agreed to arbitration on wages and working conditions. In a further act of sabotage, it has agreed to the appointment as arbiter Manuel Pimentel, a former labour minister of a right-wing Popular Party (PP) government, whose “honesty and efficiency” Zamit described as “incontestable.” His recommendations will be released on February 28.

USCA General Secretary Camilo Cela reassured the government that while the arbitration process continued, his union would in “good faith” ensure the “full normalcy in the provision of service for all air traffic controllers.”

It is not only the controllers whose right to strike is being attacked. The regional PP administration in Madrid, despite posturing as constitutional critics of the PSOE, has secured a court ruling illegalising the Metro strikes last June because workers refused to adhere to a

minimum service agreement. During the strike, the PP threatened to deploy the military to break it. Madrid PP president Esperanza Aguirre said the ruling was “the first time in history that a strike is declared illegal for not respecting the minimum services.”

The decision will ensure that “never in the Community of Madrid will there be a strike that does not comply with minimum services,” she said.

The right-wing Organisation of Consumers and Users (OCU) welcomed the ruling, saying the right to strike was not an absolute right and demanded a similar judgement in the pending court cases against the air traffic controllers.

Through its connivance with the draconian attacks on the air traffic controllers, the union bureaucracy has given notice that it will assist the suppression of any movement of the working class. It has confirmed its role as the chief obstacle to a counter-offensive by workers against the destruction of their livelihoods and democratic rights. The only way forward for workers is a political rebellion against this rotten bureaucratic apparatus, to build new organisations of struggle under the democratic control of the rank and file.



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