

Spain's fake left groups apologise for union agreement to social pact

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Last month, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party—PSOE) government, the employers and trade unions signed a “grand social pact” which will raise the pension age from 65 to 67 by 2013.

As a result, the population in Spain will be forced to work longer than anyone else in Europe.

The pact also slashes employers' social security contributions for a year if they offer new contracts of a minimum six months. Small companies will be totally exempt and large companies will have their contributions cut by 75 percent. With talks continuing on how to make it easier to fire full-time workers, this means further moves to a part-time temporary contract economy for which Spain is already notorious. Spain has an unemployment rate of nearly 21 percent (4.7 million workers) and amongst youth it is a staggering 46 percent.

The pact follows austerity measures introduced by the PSOE government last year, with the connivance of the trade unions, involving cuts to welfare spending and public sector pay cuts and “reforms” of labour protection laws. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero claimed the pact would help restore investor confidence in Spain, which has been under huge pressure following the European Union and International Monetary Fund bailout of Greece last May and Ireland in December.

“We are winning the battle, but I still have my guard up because we have to implement all the reforms that have generated more confidence,” Zapatero declared.

He praised the trade unions for working as part of a “team” that gave a “message of confidence in Spain and the European Union” and told the European Parliament that there should be a European-wide “grand social pact”.

The PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT) General Secretary Cándido Méndez described the pact as the only “effective remedy.” Ignacio Fernández Toxo, general secretary of the Communist Party (PCE)-led Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and a PCE leader, tried to sell his betrayal by describing parts of the pact—such as the paltry €100 a week for the long-term unemployed—as “revolutionary”.

“We have the strength and the capacity to overcome the economic crisis and we must do it through consensus instead of confrontation,” Toxo added.

Last September, the same union leaders called a general strike

claiming that they opposed the PSOE's austerity measures and anti-labour reforms. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that they only called the strike to allow workers to let off steam: “The PSOE knows that their political allies in the unions called yesterday's general strike as a necessary display of opposition, before taking part in further talks with the employers and the government aimed at pushing through austerity measures.”

The signing of the social pact shows how correct that warning was. It was agreed in the immediate aftermath of the military intervention against air traffic controllers, who walked out last December because most controllers had exceeded the legal maximum number of working hours. Early in 2010, the government increased their hours by a quarter, cut overtime and slashed wages by half.

Spain's nominal “left” groups either directly supported the military occupation of the control towers—the greatest attack on democratic rights since the end of the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco—or refused to mobilise against it. These middle class organisations dominated by the PCE-led Izquierda Unida (United Left—IU), and the anarchist Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour—CGT) have attempted to channel popular opposition back under the control of the unions and the PSOE. They have been assisted by the Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left—IA), Spanish affiliate of the Pabloite United Secretariat and El Militante, former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency of the late Ted Grant and Alan Woods.

When the social pact was announced, these groups feigned indignation against the CC.OO and UGT. But this was a damage limitation exercise mounted on behalf of the unions. In a series of press statements the IU (whose members dominate the CC.OO) declared it was “against” the pact, but refused to criticise those who signed it—whom they described as “hostages” to the government. IU General Coordinator Cayo Lara declared his support for the CC.OO and UGT, saying, “We will not make the mistake of making the trade unions responsible [for the pact], but the government.”

IU parliamentary spokesman Gaspar Llamazares added, “We are not uncomfortable with the pension reform bill—but we also don't think that this is the only reform possible. ... We recognise that it is a more moderate reform following the

intervention of trade unions and through the general strike, but ultimately, it is a cut and in our opinion it is not the time for a cut.”

Llamazares made it clear, “We want to try and change the policy of the government in congress and with the help of social pressure, but we are not going to mess up.”

The CGT, in partnership with the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour—CNT) and other smaller political organisations and trade unions, organised a token “general strike” against the pension attacks on January 27, pleading for the CC.OO and UGT to join them just as the union leaders were about to sign the agreement.

Once the pact was officially launched, CGT General Secretary Irene de la Cuerda carried out an about face, declaring the CC.OO and UGT to be “trade unions of the regime” and “accomplices of all the anti-social policy which has been carried out by the Government”—just days after the CGT had offered to subordinate itself to a CC.OO and UGT-led strike.

In the same statement Cuerda accused the CC.OO and UGT of being “drowned by subsidies” and ruled by a substantial privileged “bureaucracy”. Everyone in Spain knows this, but the CGT itself received in 2010 over €200,000 in central state subsidies, in addition to considerable local government subsidies, at the same time building up its own substantial “bureaucracy”.

The essential function of the CGT is to absorb those workers disenchanted with the bigger unions by using militant rhetoric. But it is just as much a creature of the state as its social democratic and Stalinist competitors.

The IA’s role is to act as loyal advisor to the bureaucracy. It split from the IU in 2008 after the party’s electoral votes slumped as a result of its subordination to the PSOE, arguing for the rebuilding of an organisation playing the same role as the IU but on a more explicitly anti-Marxist basis. Like its Pabloite sister organisations, including Olivier Besancenot’s New Anticapitalist Party in France, the IA’s vague “anti-capitalism” is a shift to the right on a thoroughly opportunist and unprincipled basis—calling for all forces opposed to neo-liberalism to join its project regardless of their class orientation, programme or historical role.

In early January, the IA complained that union participation in the social pact talks was using up “precious time” and that “the ranks within the trade unions should pressure the CC.OO leadership to abandon the negotiating table immediately and ask them to summon all the alternative trade unions and social movements in order to prepare another general strike as soon as possible.”

As details of the pact were made public, the IA and other groups began scouring the CC.OO for some signs of opposition. Foremost amongst them has been the so-called CrítiCC.OO (CC.OO Critics)—a faction of hard line Stalinists whose main concern is to maintain the bureaucracy’s grip over

workers who have been abandoning the unions in droves.

Some flavour of the crisis threatening to split apart the unions is given by the Critics’ Madrid Metro supporters, who complained, “The worst thing about this situation is that it has also gotten us on the left into crisis. ... the institutional left-wing parties have lost all their legitimacy among the population because they have been managing this disaster for years.”

A resolution from the CC.OO’s Granada Provincial Council pleaded with the Toxo leadership, “in the assemblies, in the workplaces and in meetings with civil society, something which corroborates what we experience in our everyday life ... criticism of the class trade unions has penetrated into the citizenship, which considers we are acting too passively in front of the crisis.”

The resolution reassured the bureaucracy, “This is not about finding culprits.”

On January 27 the IA issued a statement that used the same argument as the IU for supporting union participation in the social pact talks, claiming that it “softens some edges.” A February 8 statement urged “disoriented and disappointed” workers not to abandon the CC.OO and work to put pressure on its leadership.

The IA warns the bureaucracy, “We must not rule out sudden and spontaneous social explosions beyond, not only the traditional parties, but even the radical left,” adding that such a movement “constitutes a serious danger.”

The danger they fear above all is that workers are breaking from the unions, threatening their own social position and privileges within the bureaucracy.

El Militante is just as craven in its support of the bureaucracy. When the CC.OO and UGT entered negotiations on the pact it warned, “With the general strike on September 29, CC.OO and UGT leaders had an excellent opportunity to regain their lost authority during years of pacts and consensus that has only gone from bad to worse. If they go back to this road they will only sink their prestige in front of the workers and will weaken the trade unions.”

In a series of statements El Militante made desperate appeals to the IU to use its influence to “correct the drift of the CC.OO and UGT leadership,” adding, “If union leaders do not rectify, the IU should convene statewide protests.” It also tells workers not to “abandon” the unions but “to remain within them.”



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