

Spain's ex-radical groups apologise for unions' acceptance of social pact

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Last month, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party—PSOE) government, the employers and the trade unions signed a “grand social pact” whose provisions include raising the official retirement age from 65 to 67 by 2013.

As a result, Spanish workers will be forced to work longer than workers anywhere else in Europe.

The pact also slashes employers' social security contributions for a year if they offer new contracts of at least six months' duration. Small companies will be totally exempt, and large companies will have their contributions cut by 75 percent.

Under conditions where talks are continuing on lifting impediments to the firing of full-time workers, the reduction in employers' social security contributions will speed up the development of an economy based on part-time and temporary contract labour.

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 in welfare spending, public sector pay cuts and “reforms” of labour protection laws. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero claims the pact will 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 that of 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.” Zapatero urged the European Parliament to push for a European-wide “grand social pact.”

Cándido Méndez, general secretary of the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT), 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 conceal his betrayal by describing parts of the pact—such as a paltry €100 a week subsidy 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 declared.

Last September, the same union leaders called a general strike, claiming they opposed the PSOE's austerity measures and anti-labour reforms. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that they called the strike only to allow workers to let off steam. The WSWS wrote: “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. The pact was agreed in the aftermath of the military intervention against the air traffic controllers, who walked out last December because most controllers had exceeded the legal maximum for work hours. Early in 2010, the government had 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 worked to channel popular opposition behind the unions and the PSOE.

They have been assisted by the Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left—IA), the Spanish affiliate of the Pabloite United Secretariat, and El Militante, the former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency of Alan Woods and the late Ted Grant.

When the social pact was announced, these groups feigned indignation against the CC.OO and UGT. In a series of press statements, the IU (whose members dominate the CC.OO) declared that it was against the pact, but it refused to criticise those who signed it. The IU characterised them instead as “hostages” of 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 the trade unions and the holding of the general strike, but ultimately it is a cut and in our opinion it is not the time for a cut.”

Leaving no doubt about his loyalty to the government, Llamazares said, “We want to try to change the policy of the government in Congress 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.

When the pact was signed, CGT General Secretary Irene de la Cuerda declared the CC.OO and UGT to be “trade unions of the regime” and “accomplices of the anti-social policy which has been carried out by the government.” In the same statement, Cuerda accused the CC.OO and UGT of “drowning in subsidies” and being run by a privileged bureaucracy.

Cuerda did not attempt to explain why her organisation had directed workers to focus their opposition on appealing to such corrupt and reactionary organisations. Nor did she mention that in 2010 the CGT itself received over €200,000 in state subsidies in addition to considerable local government subsidies.

The essential function of the CGT is to divert workers who are disenchanted with the bigger unions by using militant rhetoric. In reality, it is no less a creature of the state than its social democratic and Stalinist competitors.

The Pabloite IA’s role is to act as loyal advisor to the trade union bureaucracy. It split from the IU in 2008 after the IU’s vote totals slumped as a result of its subordination to the PSOE.

The IA argued 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 substance of the IA’s vague “anti-capitalism” is a further shift to the right on a thoroughly opportunist and unprincipled basis. It calls 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.” It declared that “the ranks within the trade unions should pressure the CC.OO leadership to abandon the negotiating table immediately and ask it 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 signs of opposition. They seized on the so-called CritiCC.OO—a faction of hard-line Stalinists whose central concern is to maintain the bureaucracy’s grip over the workers, who have been abandoning the unions in droves.

Some indication of the crisis threatening to split apart the unions is given by the Madrid supporters of the “Critics,” who complain: “The worst thing about this situation is that it has thrown us on the left into crisis.... [T]he 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 pleads with the Toxo leadership, warning that “in the assemblies, in the workplaces and in meetings of civil society...criticism of the trade unions has penetrated into the citizenship, which considers we are acting too passively in the face of the crisis.”

The resolution goes on to reassure the bureaucracy, stating, “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, but to work instead 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 the Pabloite anti-socialists fear is that workers will break 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 resulting from 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 before the workers and weaken the trade unions.”

In a series of statements, El Militante appealed 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 their course, the IU should convene state-wide protests.” At the same time, El Militante reiterated its demand that workers not abandon the unions.



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