

Spanish air traffic controller: “The unions, the political parties. No one supported us.”

Paul Mitchell
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On December 4, 2010, Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero’s Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government passed a Royal Decree, imposing a “state of alarm” on 2,200 air traffic controllers, which lasted 43 days. They were subjected to military discipline and forced back to work.

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 their control towers by armed officers, the controllers have been closely monitored while they work.

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. Claims for damages have been pursued against the controllers and the government has appointed an arbitrator who is now dictating a new contract.

Marcelino Victoria contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* recently, thanking us for our support and agreed to talk to reporter Paul Mitchell.

PM: There was a lot in the press blaming the air traffic controllers for not agreeing to a new contract. Why was that?

MV: Our contract originated in 1999. It says that if there is no agreement between the employers and the union, the contract keeps going. That is the general rule in Spain since 1975 [after the fall of the fascist dictatorship]. It is a legal agreement ratified by the Spanish Constitution

and the Lisbon Treaty article 151 [covering working conditions and labour protection]. In 2006, talks about a new contract failed. Suddenly the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Popular Party (PP) began to attack the contract. They were acting outside the law.

PM: There was a lot of propaganda about the air traffic controllers’ high wages and privileged conditions. What do you say about that?

MV: To me the fact that they cut our salaries by nearly half is not so important. But what they have done by increasing our working hours is absolutely illegal and dangerous. We had an agreement to work 1,200 hours a year and then get paid at an enhanced rate for overtime. When I first joined, I was working half the overtime I was working last year. Why was that? Not because I wanted to; but because the minister José Blanco said he was not going to employ any more air traffic controllers. He said air traffic controllers had to work the same number of hours as everyone else. He ignored all the rules about shift working and the general worldwide agreement based on health and safety concerns, which limit the number of hours air traffic controllers should work.

PM: What happened when the government declared a state of alert last December and sent in the military?

MV: The same thing happened to us as the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in Madrid. The military police escorted us back to work. I had two armed national police in each door of my control tower. This has never been done before in the recent history of Spain to any other worker. In less than one year the Spanish government has passed 23 different laws, rules and regulations which repress the legitimate rights of the air traffic controllers. This is more than in the whole history of our profession. It is difficult to understand the harshness of the actions of an allegedly socialist government—which under the state of alarm used the armed forces against workers in an industrial dispute for the first time since the death of the

dictator Franco. They showed an absolute lack of respect for the most basic legal rights of workers and for the conventions in the Lisbon Treaty (regarding collective negotiations).

PM: The PSOE has appointed an arbiter who is supposed to resolve your dispute. What do you think of that?

MV: The arbiter is not impartial. He has decided 95 percent. Nothing has been resolved. What happens next depends on the people of Spain.

PM: What do you think of the trade unions' response to the attacks on you?

MV: It's incredible. Disgusting. The unions only have a small membership but they get huge subsidies from the government. They get together with the government as if they are part of the same party. At the same time there is 22 percent unemployment. The air traffic controllers union USCA is the same. When we made a formal complaint about the statements of Luis de Grande [a PP politician and Member of the European Parliament who sits on the Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism] after he said that that he was "pretty aware" that the methods used against the air traffic controllers were unconstitutional, but were still OK because we were making too much money and holding the country hostage, USCA rushed to his office for a secret meeting and "asked for forgiveness". We have the email from the union to prove this. Camilo Cela, the president of USCA, said he was "really disappointed" that people had complained to the European Parliament.

PM: What about the response of the political parties?

MV: The unions, the political parties. No one supported us. None of them did. In our fight the PSOE did not protect us. A recent report said only one percent of the population believes the justice system works properly. The PP and the PSOE are the same thing. They are not for the workers. They are fighting for themselves. The PSOE consists of 20,000 families who know when they get elected they will live extremely well. Felipe González, the former PSOE prime minister, is now head of a couple of companies and earns half a million euros for working a couple of days a week. The PP is the same.

The United Left [IU, dominated by the Spanish Communist Party] has only two deputies in Congress. Not so long ago they had 15. They are losing their power because they are not in touch with the people. The IU pretends to be different but they are together with the PSOE.

PM: I have read that the air traffic controllers have set

up an organization called ATC Petition. Please tell me more.

MV: ATC Petition is the largest non-profit organization of air traffic controllers in Spain. It is not a union, just an association of workers demanding their rights. I am a founding member of this association as well as a close friend of the general coordinator, Nacho Ruiperez.

We recently forced the European Parliament to continue the current investigation on Spanish air traffic controllers after it threatened to close it down. Five hundred controllers sent in emails on one day. PCE [Spanish Communist Party] leader Willy Meyer, an IU Member of the European Parliament, refused to support our association and petition.

PM: What do you think of the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East?

MV: In Egypt there was no democracy. Mubarak had millions, while the population starved. These things show that sooner or later there will be trouble in Spain and Europe. We are in extraordinary times in Spain. With rising unemployment, declining production and the huge debt soon we will be below the line when people will be able to survive. The riots will start.

We have to use our resources better so that workers will have a much better life. Now the resources are going to the wrong places. We have to change that.

PM: What do you think about the financial crisis in Europe?

MV: Something huge is happening in Europe with the eurobonds. The workers of Europe will pay for the frauds that have been going on in Greece, Ireland and Portugal. If Spain defaults it will have twice the effect of Greece, Ireland and Portugal combined. No one can imagine what will happen. When Lehman Brothers fell the whole stock market collapsed. Spain will be like two Lehman Brothers. That is why everyone in government and the media is saying, 'yes, Spain is doing very well.'

I agree a political movement is necessary. It was only the *World Socialist Web Site* that took up the attack on the controllers. It is very good to find people like you and we thank you very much.



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