

Protestors occupy city squares in Spain after mass demonstrations Sunday

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Tens of thousands of protestors are continuing to occupy Madrid's Puerta del Sol and other major public squares in cities across Spain after last Sunday's mass demonstrations against social cuts. In Madrid, these protests were held in defiance of a ban by local authorities.

Citizens' committees reportedly have been set up to look after food supplies, coordinate protest actions and handle communications and legal matters during the occupations. Comments on Twitter and Facebook are drawing parallels between ongoing protests in Spain and the mass protests in Egypt, and particularly Tahrir Square in Cairo, that ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Protestors are still occupying the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, as well as squares in other cities including Barcelona, Sevilla, and Bilbao.

On Sunday, more than 100,000 mostly young people joined demonstrations in various areas of the country last weekend under the slogan "Real Democracy Now! (*Democracia Real Ya*) – We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers". An estimated 50,000 protested in Madrid, 15,000 in Barcelona and 10,000 in Seville. Smaller demonstrations took place in another 57 cities and towns throughout Spain.

Protestors shouted slogans against politicians, official parties and bankers—also denouncing the cuts in education, health care and other public social services, and youth unemployment and precarious jobs. Banners were waved bearing slogans like "Make the guilty pay for the recession" and "The struggle is on the streets, not in parliament".

The Madrid Electoral Board banned the demonstration in the capital ahead of Sunday's municipal elections and elections in 13 of Spain's 17 semi-autonomous regions, claiming there were "no special or serious reasons" for it to take place. A ban on other protests is also being considered by the Central Electoral Board. Riot police have been drafted into sidestreets in Madrid and are demanding people show their identity cards.

Spain already has high levels of poverty and is among the most socially unequal countries in Europe. The government

introduced a €15 billion package of spending cuts, including 5 percent reductions in civil servants' pay and pensions and raising the retirement age from 65 to 67 years. Reforms of the pension system and labour protection laws are also underway.

Wages have remained virtually stagnant for a decade, while unemployment has soared to 21.3 percent, the highest in the industrialised world, with the jobless rate for youth under the age of 25 reaching 43.5 percent. Recent reports show an unprecedented growth in households headed by unemployed breadwinners to almost 1 million and a similar number of families that have no income whatsoever.

The financial crisis shaking Spain drives the ruling class to further social cuts, to resolve its crisis on the backs of working people. In particular, the Socialist Workers Party government of José Luis Zapatero may apply for a bailout like those imposed on Greece, Ireland and Portugal.

The latest protests show that workers and youth struggling against austerity measures imposed by the Zapatero government have no confidence in the official party and union bureaucracies.

Demonstrations were organised via the social networks Facebook and Twitter by "Real Democracy Now"—led by a "Coordinating platform of groups in favour of mobilising the citizens". It has a similar character to the Portuguese *Geração à Rasca* (The "Scraping-By Generation"), which mobilised hundreds of thousands of youth and families earlier this year.

The manifesto of Real Democracy Now declares: "We are ordinary people. We are like you: people, who get up every morning to study, work or find a job, people who have family and friends. People, who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us." The objectives of the movement are diffuse, talking of "inalienable truths", criticising an economic system that "does not take care of rights" and "a political class that does not listen to us". It calls for "an ethical revolution".

At its centre is the claim that mass pressure will force the state and its institutions to reform. This is not, however, the

lesson of recent experiences. When in March, the Portuguese Socialist government faced mass protests that it feared were escaping the control of the Socialist Party- and Communist Party-controlled unions, the bourgeoisie took pre-emptive action. It removed the minority Socialist government and applied for an international bailout.

The emergence of apparently spontaneous groups like Real Democracy Now, and the popular support they attract, testifies to the huge gulf between workers and the political establishment, including the social democratic, Stalinist and trade union organisations. At the same time, they are given great publicity in the media such as *El País*, *Público* and others, as the perspective of protest politics does not pose a genuine threat to the financial oligarchy.

The struggle now unfolding in Spain must learn the lessons of other struggles, in Greece, Portugal and Ireland and particularly in the Arab countries—where the working class still faces the task of overthrowing dictatorial capitalist regimes backed by Western imperialism.

What is now required is for workers and young people to form independent organs of struggle. Rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the union apparatus in every workplace and neighbourhood, can mobilise the support of public and private sector workers, youth, the unemployed, pensioners and all those opposed to the attacks on social and democratic rights.

The most important issue is the question of leadership and perspective in the working class. Only on the basis of a conscious struggle based on a revolutionary programme will the working class be able to fight back.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed demonstrators in Barcelona, where the regional government under the right-wing *Convergència I Unió* is imposing budget cuts of 10 percent, the worst being in education and health care. The last demonstrations against the cuts were held in April, when more than 20,000 workers marched through the central streets of Barcelona.

Ines and Isabel are two nurses working in Bellvitge Hospital, Barcelona. Ines said, “We are here because we are against the cuts, against an exploiting social system. The banks are robbing and destroying us”.

Isabel stated, “We want that the politicians listen to us and defend our interests, not the interests of the banks, and the only thing the trade unions do is do deals behind our backs with the government”.

Asked how this economic crisis affects them, Ines explained, “I have a son who has a university career, philosophy, but he works in precarious jobs, if he is lucky! I am also having difficulties with the cuts in salaries and now they are talking about privatising the health system.”

Luis and Diana, two high school students, said that they attended the demonstration to demand work. “I have family that has been over two years unemployed. My father is a self-employed worker, meaning he is working lots more hours, earning less than before,” said Diana.

Luis was in favour of the objectives of the demonstration, stating that we are here “to struggle against the job insecurity, precarious jobs, the cuts, and to point to those responsible for the crisis: the banks.”

Asked about the role of the unions in the crisis, Diana said that “before they use to be, to some extent, responsive to workers, but now they defend the state. How are they going to defend us if they receive such huge subsidies from the state?”

Marta, aged 31, currently unemployed, said, “I am sick of so many robbers; they are making us responsible for their crisis. Cuts in health care, education and social services, this is the capitalist crisis; they rob the poor to give to the rich.”

“I am here to make it clear that I am not going to stand still while they take our rights and impose cuts,” she continued.

Mali, currently unemployed, and Badara, who is also unemployed and studying Catalan and Spanish, are “illegal” workers, originally from Senegal. Badara explained, “We are here to struggle for our rights. We are the worst off. They search us out, carry out raids and accuse of us of being responsible for the crisis.”

Asked about the objectives of the demonstration, Badara replied, “Social injustices, cuts in salaries...there is a common root of the problem and that is the politicians and the banks. The people have the right to have a guaranteed future.”

Mali said, “We are an association of illegal immigrants who are trying to defend our rights. The people accuse us of being responsible for this crisis. I have been a year without a job.”



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