

Mass protests against government cuts in Spain

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Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated against austerity measures in 50 cities across Spain on Sunday. Noticeable by their absence were political parties and trade unions.

An estimated 200,000 protesters in Barcelona marched from the centre square Plaça Catalunya to the Cuitadella Park, next to the Catalan parliament. The demonstration began at 5:00 p.m., but at 6:30 p.m. protesters were still waiting to move from the square.

The main banner declared, “The streets are ours. We will not pay for their crisis”.

Many more homemade banners were to be seen, such as, “Greece you are not alone [in English]”, “Nationalisation of the Banks”, “Violence is to get paid 600 euros a month” and “Without police and without wealth, [regional Catalan president] Mas loses his head”.

In Madrid, six demonstrations converged at Plaza de Neptuno with around 90,000 protesters. The main shouted slogans were, “They don’t, they don’t, they don’t represent us!”, “They say this is democracy but it’s not” and “We will not pay for the crisis”.

In Seville, thousands of protesters joined under the slogan, “The only violence comes from the system”, with chants against bankers and in favour of the right to public health care and education.

In Valencia, 80,000 marched from the working class neighbourhoods into the main demonstrations. The marchers included pensioners, students, immigrants and whole families, according to the daily *Público*.

In Galicia, up to 10,000 demonstrated in the regional capital city, Santiago de Compostela. One group in the demonstration put on an amateur theatrical performance. They dressed as slaves with a banner saying, “These are not times for slavery”.

In Zaragoza, Aragon, 20,000 marched.

The fact that these demonstrations were so large and developed outside the control of the union bureaucracies and the ex-left parties is a growing sign that the working class will not accept austerity measures as “necessary”.

Many protesters targeted the Euro Pact, or “Pact for Competitiveness”, passed last March at the Euro summit and predicted to be endorsed by the European Parliament on June 27. The European governments are committed to use public money to prop up the banks, while implementing structural reforms in pensions, wages and taxes. They will increase the retirement age and tie wages to productivity rather than the cost of living.

The Spanish Socialist Party government led by Prime Minister Jose Zapatero is committed to a €15 billion austerity package of spending cuts, including 5 to 15 percent cuts in civil servants’ salaries, raising the retirement age from 65 to 67, and introducing a new labour law reform that eliminates whatever remained of workers’ protections. The cuts in health care and education by the regional governments come on top of this. In some cases, such as in Catalonia, the cuts represent 10 percent of last year’s budget.

The official unemployment rate is over 20 percent, while for workers under the age of 25 it is 45 percent.

The social composition of Sunday’s demonstrations differed from those organized by Real Democracy Now, a student-based organization, held on May 15, with more workers and unemployed present.

According to *Público*, “From the public sector, numerous workers joined the protest, some grateful of the past actions carried out by the indignados [the indignant ones] during the past month in favour of health care, education and public benefits. The same happened with the Yamaha, Derbi and Seat workers,

which have received support from the 15-M in their struggles against the ERE [Expediente de Regulación de empleo—a labour force adjustment plan] of their companies and yesterday they did not hesitate to go to the demonstration.

“Although no specific manifesto was read out, a Telefónica worker, Josep Bel, was invited to explain the situation that exists in the corporation. ‘Telefónica get more profits than ever, and they are now throwing 6,500 workers onto the streets,’ said Bel in front of a significant crowd. The employee then reported that, even under the precarious working conditions that many workers face, ‘every day there are more mileuristas [one-thousand euro salaries]’ while the chief executives earn ‘eight million euros a year’.” (See “Spain: Telefónica slashes jobs and offers multimillion bonuses to its chief executives”)

The press has tried to play down the numbers of protesters. *El Pais* said that there were around 37,000 to 42,000 in Madrid and 98,000 in Barcelona. None mention the significance of the absence of trade unions and political parties. This is an expression of the fear in ruling circles that the situation is getting out of the control of their industrial police force—the union bureaucracy.

José María Ridao, a member of the editorial board of *El Pais*, was moved to ask, “What does the State and the institutional system win by ignoring the calls [of the protesters] ... in democratic politics, it is necessary that, as soon as possible, the phenomenon [the protests] should be described in terms of the Rule of Law to decide a response within the institutional system.”

More than 20,000 marched through the streets of Grenada, Spain, mainly young people, but also older workers and pensioners. A team from the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed some of those participating.

Sofia, a second year philosophy student, said, “We are tired of the situation because the politicians don’t take us seriously. They think we are like puppets. But we are part of society and we need to be heard.

“We are not responsible for the crisis, but they are making us pay. My mum, for example, works in administration. Her salary was 1,000 euros a month, but now she gets 300 euros less. It is really difficult to live.

“When Zapatero retires he will have a big salary for the rest of his life. It’s not fair. The rich must pay.”

Her friend Sara said, “I don’t agree with the government. We are not educated to think, but just to do and do. The news on the television and radio doesn’t tell the truth. Two months ago, I didn’t really question anything. I just saw the news and accepted it.

“I changed because I saw this movement and I began to think and investigate. This is the best way to educate ourselves. We are learning about the law and about our rights.”

Marina, a biology student, said, “I think we need new politics but we must be part of it and not just be told what to do. Capitalism is all over the world. Everything is falling down because the system doesn’t work. There has to be change all over the world.”

Her friend Berta, studying environmental science, said, “I think the best way is for the working class to have control of politics and the political system.”

Juan Gomez, an older worker on the demonstration, said, “I am here because I agree with this movement. I am thinking especially of the problem of youth unemployment. My 24-year-old daughter has a psychology degree and my son, 21, is a gifted artist. Both are unemployed. I think any system has to answer the problems of its citizens.

“I would support a general strike to get rid of Zapatero and his government.”



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