

Spanish teachers and students protest education cuts

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This week, teachers and students across Spain are protesting against education cuts. Some 21,000 teachers in Madrid are involved in strike action under the slogan, “Education is not an expense. It is an investment. No to the cuts.”

“We support the protests because we truly believe that public education will suffer if there are fewer teachers,” said the president of the main parents’ federation, CEAPA, Jesús María Sánchez. “We fear that the cuts will be spread like wildfire, and our fears grow with statements such as those by Esperanza Aguirre”.

Sánchez was referring to comments by Aguirre, the right-wing Popular Party (PP) president of the Madrid region, that free education should be limited. Schooling in Spain is free for three to 16-year-olds and for those studying for the Baccalaureate and on vocational training. Aguirre declared that “not all stages of education should be free” and that “we need to reflect” on where savings can be made, including provision for three to six-year-olds.

Aguirre’s comments were backed by PP leader Mariano Rajoy, who insisted “everything that is not compulsory education for six to 16 year-olds should be reconsidered.”

Rajoy is likely to be the next Prime Minister of Spain following elections to be held on November 20. Opinion polls suggest the ruling Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of José Luis Zapatero will be trounced.

Under the Spanish political system, the regions are largely responsible for the provision of education, health care, and other social measures. They control 88 percent of education spending while the state controls 12 percent. Since the start of the economic crisis in 2008, both the PSOE government and the regions—mostly under control of the right wing opposition Popular Party since last May’s regional and local elections—have imposed austerity measures.

Figures released by the Ministry of Education state that public spending on education has fallen for the first time in 30 years. Last year’s education budget of €52.74 billion has been cut by 1.5 percent this year at the same time as pupil numbers have increased by 165,000. Also slashed are grants, teacher training, out-of-school activities, and salaries for from 5 to 15 percent of all civil servants, teachers included.

The first regional governments to announce cutbacks are Madrid, Galicia, Castilla-La Mancha and Navarre. In some cases, including in Catalonia, the cuts are already equal to a 10 percent reduction over last year’s budget.

In Madrid, Aguirre has announced that teaching hours will be increased and that the contracts of up to 3,200 supply teachers will not be renewed, saving the regional government up to €112 million per year. The policies go together. The more hours teachers have to teach, the fewer supply teachers are needed. This will affect not only the working conditions of teachers, but also the quality of public education, as they will be required to cover for subjects that they do not master. It will be less feasible to divide classes into smaller groups. A typical school that previously had 70 teachers will now have to manage with 50 teachers.

In an attempt to isolate them from other workers, Aguirre accused the protesting teachers of “only working 20 hours.” Other PP officials accused teachers of having too many privileges, “harming thousands and thousands of families” and not understanding the need for a “common sacrifice” during the economic crisis.

This is a lie. Teachers are employed on 37.5 hours per week contracts, divided into 18 teaching hours, 10 hours for lunch duties, department meetings, and organising coursework, etc. and the rest to correct exams, prepare classes, meet with other teachers, tutor students, do research, and other tasks.

The accusation of “privileged workers” has been a slogan continuously repeated by the ruling parties and trade unions against any sector of the working class who resists the austerity measures. Last December, striking air traffic controllers were accused of having too many privileges and were duly abandoned by the unions. The PSOE government decreed a “state of alert” and sent in the army to break the strike and take control of the airports.

The attacks in Madrid have been emulated elsewhere. In Navarre, teachers will have to work an extra hour, saving €8 million. In Galicia in-class hours will rise from 21 to 25 and teachers will have to take on the responsibility of supervising students waiting for the school bus. There will be 800 fewer teachers in primary and nursery schools.

In Castilla-La Mancha, the region considered the test case for Rajoy’s future policies, the regional government is planning to save €139 million by increasing teaching hours from 18 to 20 in secondary schools and 23 to 25 in nursery and primary schools. Teaching training has been cut and new contracts frozen. The regional government has announced that they will not pay holidays to the supply teachers who work more than 5.5 months.

The cuts in these four regions will not only affect teachers’ working conditions by making them work more hours, but will lead to a deterioration of education standards in a country which already has poor levels of educational achievement. Spain currently ranks third worst in Europe in dropout rates, with 32 percent of students leaving school without graduating from secondary school or vocational centres. The European Union average is 14.4 percent. According to the annual report of the Programme for International Student Assessment, coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Spain occupies 30th place in educational achievement, at the level of Turkey.

The main trade unions, the Workers Commission (Comisiones Obreras, CC.OO) and General Workers Union (Unión General de los Trabajadores, UGT), and the smaller educational unions have responded to the attack on education by promoting a regionalist line, dividing teachers, students and parents and preventing a unified response. On Tuesday the unions called for “a day of struggle”, but left it up to assemblies in schools to decide what action to take.

In Madrid, stoppages were organised on September 8 and 15 and for three days this week. In Galicia, 30,000 public teachers were asked to walk out on Tuesday

between 10am and 10.30am, but no further action will be taken until September 27. In Castilla-La-Mancha and Navarre, no protests have been organised.

All the unions have attempted to put the blame solely on the PP for the cuts, giving a blank check to the PSOE which has carried out €15 billion in austerity measures, including cuts to child benefits, public sector salaries, and pensions, as well as raising the retirement age. In recent years investment in education in Spain has fallen from 5.2 percent of GDP to 4.6 percent. In Europe it has risen by 7 percent.

Augusto Serrano, head of the Trade Union of Workers in Education (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza) declared that “this is a message for the PP, as most of the cuts are being implemented by the right wing regional governments”.

No mention was made of the PSOE, whose re-election in November the unions are supporting.

Anger at the unions emerged at a major assembly of 2,000 teachers held recently in Madrid. The unions were there to present their official days of action, but according to *El País*, “Many teachers have refused to support the call by the unions [...] In their turns to speak they have stated that they [the trade unions] ‘do not represent us’ and called for the assembly [not the unions] to decide on further actions.”

The precondition for defending the rights and living standards of the youth and the working class demands not just an economic, but a political struggle. The trade union leadership plays a treacherous role in the struggles of the workers it purportedly represents, betraying strikes and indicating they will support the policies of whoever wins the elections in November.

The struggle against cuts can only be won on the basis of a break with the strategies, tactics, and policies of the trade union bureaucracy. This includes the creation of new organs of struggle directly and democratically controlled by the rank-and-file.



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