

Spain: Regional governments step up attacks on living standards

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21 December 2011

Since the victory of Mariano Rajoy's right-wing Popular Party (PP) in the November 20 general election, regional governments have accelerated budget cuts, worsening the living standards of much of Spain's population, particularly the most vulnerable.

The first round of attacks has been directed against the right to free health care. Currently, around 200,000 people in Spain are denied access to public health care, mostly individuals who are no longer eligible for checks, have never contributed to Social Security, or are members of professional associations. On top of this are the tens of thousands of undocumented migrant workers.

In Galicia, the PP government has brought in new rules that automatically block the health care cards of workers who have been unemployed for a year or more. They will have to request a document that certifies them as people without income in order to request a new health care card, which can take eight to ten months to process. In the meantime, they will have to pay for each consultation with a doctor and medical treatment. The Galician Trade Union Confederation estimates that 65,000 people will be affected and that most have not even been notified of the change.

In Murcia, the regional government has carried out a similar measure deactivating the health care cards of all immigrants without income and the long-term unemployed. Since October, this has affected 400 people.

The debt of the Murcian health care Service surpasses €1 billion, more than 25 percent of the regional budget for 2012, and is currently being targeted for a severe austerity package.

There are countless stories in the press showing the tragic effect the cuts are having on individuals. In Ibiza, in the Balearic Islands, the health service informed a

local HIV-positive person, López, who has been unable to work for over a year that he was only entitled to emergency care. His pleas for a new health care card have been ignored by the regional authorities.

In Castilla-La-Mancha, the regional PP president, María Dolores de Cospedal, recently announced further cuts of €250 million on top of the €1.8 billion already earmarked. Wages of civil servants will be reduced by 3 percent, and the working week is to be increased from 35.0 to 37.5 hours. A number of hospitals in the region are to be privatised.

Castilla-La Mancha currently has a public deficit of 4.4 percent of GDP, but that is expected to swell to 9.7 percent by the end of this year—far above the 1.3 percent ceiling set for all regions this year.

In Catalonia, the nationalist Convergence and Union (CiU) minority government announced a new round of cuts worth €850 million just two days after the election. Cuts include the freezing of public examinations (the most commonly used form of hiring public servants), the laying off of internees, and the cutting of wage supplements for 230,000 civil servants. Further increases in student enrolment fees, petrol, transport and water prices were announced.

The most significant attack was on health care, with the introduction of charges for medical prescriptions and proposals for a new system of co-payments where patients would have to pay for some procedures.

The regional ministry of education also instructed schools to cut “excessive consumption” of toilet rolls among pupils and to set a limit of a maximum of 25 metres per child per month.

The national government has set the budget deficit at a limit of 1.3 percent of gross domestic product for each of the 17 regions. Catalonia's deficit is running more than double that level this year.

Regional president Artur Mas declared that the “Catalan people have given him the legitimacy” to impose new cuts, after his party gained six seats in the Spanish parliament due to the collapse of the Social Democrats. In reality he received the endorsement of just 18.8 percent of all Catalans entitled to vote.

Juan Rosell, the chairman of the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE), on Wednesday backed Mas’s measures, claiming, “It’s common sense...you have to do what you have to do...it’s pure mathematics”. Rosell has made a series of public proposals including the creation, first proposed by the European Central Bank of “mini-jobs” that would pay salaries below the minimum wage of €541 per month. Rosell said he was inspired by the German model where up to 6.8 million workers (25 percent) are on these type of contracts.

Rajoy broke the silence on spending cuts he maintained during the election campaign and announced ahead of his swearing-in ceremony today, “We have to control spending, not to live beyond our means and not spend what we don’t have”. He appealed once more, “To move forward is not just the task of the government, but of the whole nation”.

Immediately following the election, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, “Rajoy’s appeal for national unity is a fraud. Whatever time and leeway the PP is given will be used only in order to mobilise its supporters in big business and the upper layers of the petty-bourgeoisie, including the pro-Falangist elements on the party’s periphery, as an effective force against the working class.”

Reports in the media suggest the government is planning just that. *El País*, traditionally associated with the PSOE, opined that Rajoy’s “priority strategy will consist in proceeding to another reform of the labour market, whose main lines have been conveyed in a peremptory manner to unions and employers. It is not necessary to go too far out on any limb to conclude that what the new prime minister and his shadow cabinet are planning consists in forcing a quick defeat of these social agents, in order to then legislate with total freedom.”

The trade unions have quickly indicated they will cooperate with this class war government. Rajoy has already had two separate meetings with the leaders of the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT) and

Communist Party-aligned Workers Commissions (CC.OO) in an attempt to negotiate a new labour reform with the CEOE before January 7. According to CC.OO general secretary Ignacio Toxo, Rajoy said he wanted written proposals “on collective bargaining, hiring laws, absenteeism, employment dispute settlements, temporary work agencies and training.”

Toxo declared that employers and unions had to work together to get the agreements Rajoy wanted, doubting only that it would be before January 6 because “we need resources, time and effort.” UGT general secretary Cándido Méndez added that he will “in depth and with full conviction and commitment” reach an agreement with the employers. The PSOE prime ministerial candidate and president of the party’s parliamentary group, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, has also met with Méndez and Toxo to discuss the labour reforms.

Shortly after winning the election, Rajoy declared, “We stand before one of those crossroads that will determine the future of our country, not just in the next few years but for decades.”

The working class does indeed stand at the crossroads. It is clear that preserving living standards and essential social benefits is incompatible with the continued existence of the profit system. The fact that the trade unions have rushed to cooperate with the right wing must serve as a serious warning.



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