

Hundreds of thousands protest new Spanish labour legislation

Alejandro López
21 February 2012

Hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrated in 57 Spanish cities on Sunday against the latest labour reform passed by the right wing Popular Party (PP).

The demonstrations were called by the main trade unions, *Comisiones Obreras* (Workers Commissions—CC.OO) and *Unión General de Trabajadores* (General Union of Workers—UGT).

In Madrid an estimated 110,000 protestors took the streets according to *El País*, while the unions put the figure at 500,000. In Barcelona the same newspaper estimated 100,000 protestors and the unions 400,000. Demonstrations in Saragossa, Gijón, Seville, Gerona, Murcia, León, Toledo, Pamplona and Tarragona were sizable.

The unions made clear they were opposed to any genuine challenge to the PP. Cándido Méndez, general secretary of the UGT, stated minutes before the start of the protest, “We do not want to confront, but to correct, and today’s demonstrations are a channel to achieve this goal.”

Fernandez Toxo, general secretary of CC.OO, said, “The objective of the unions is to help resolve problems... Negotiations are much better.”

The labour reforms mean employers can reduce the salaries of workers unilaterally, simply by claiming this is necessary for reasons of competitiveness or productivity. The unemployed will lose their benefits if they reject an offer of a job three times. New work contracts, including training and apprenticeship contracts, will create poorly paying jobs, leading to redundancies among older workers. The reform will mean an end to collective wage bargaining.

The chasm that separates the main unions from the workers was palpable.

Ines García, a teacher, told *El País*, “This labour reform is a perfect excuse for the government, which is

a puppet of the banks and the big corporations, to attack our living standards... This system is defrauding us all.”

César, an unemployed sociologist, said that it is “pure demagoguery” to state that the new labour reform will create jobs. “When I have a job, I want to have it under a worthy contract. With the new norms this will not be offered... We have to change everything. This system is rotten from top to bottom, including the unions, who are nearer to the rulers than the ruled.”

Carmen Lucea stated, “The policies of the [European Union] are going to make us follow the Greek path. We have to organise ourselves to stop this. We have no alternative.”

Pedro Ramírez, a steelworker, said, “They want us to go to the American system, where the worker has no rights.”

Cries of “general strike” were heard among the protesters in Madrid, Barcelona and other cities.

In Madrid, someone from the crowd threw yellow paint-filled balloons against the stage where the trade unions leaders were standing. “Yellow” unions have historically been defined as those unions that are created and controlled by the employers. It is also the colour of the coward.

According to a report of the right-wing daily *El Mundo*, “After more than two hours of slow progress, many of the protesters chose to scatter and cram the bars in the center of Madrid without waiting for the final reading of the manifesto [by the unions]... Maybe it’s because people don’t need speeches. In fact, covering the protest from beginning to end and paying attention to conversations, they revealed a fairly accurate knowledge of the harshness of the reform and, furthermore, of the serious economic situation in Europe, the extreme problems of Greece, the intransigent attitude of [German Chancellor] Angela

Merkel...”

After the demonstration, the union leaders made no call for a widely expected general strike. According to Toxo, “The inevitability of the strike is going to be decided by the government.” He called for negotiations to begin.

The ruling elite would be pleased. At a meeting in Brussels, Popular Party Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was overheard telling another European leader that his reforms would cost him a general strike.

The Popular Party, along with the main right-wing media such as *El Mundo*, the monarchist *ABC* and the ultra-catholic *La Razón*, have initiated a campaign against the trade unions to whip the bureaucracy into line.

Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría said after the regular Friday cabinet meeting that labour leaders have to make public what they earn. She threatened to reduce public subsidies to the unions.

On the same day *El Mundo* published a report accusing a UGT union leader of receiving 180,000 euros a year.

The campaign against the unions is directed ultimately against the working class, aimed at suppressing any movement against the government and the employers. Duran I Lleida, spokesperson of the right wing Catalan nationalist *Convèrgencia I Unió*, stated that the government should regulate the right to strike, because “the right to strike and the right to protest must never be against the general interest.”

The ruling class, determined to make the mass of the population pay for the cost of the crisis, cannot do so democratically. Spain has a jobless rate of 22.85 percent and some 5.3 million people out of work. In addition, 60 percent of salaried workers earn less than €1,000 a month. Living standards are bound to drop further, as the labour reform is put into practice by the corporations and the cuts further dismantle already much eroded welfare state provisions.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact