

Spanish “left” groups use one-day general strike to promote trade union bureaucracy

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The two main Spanish unions, the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (Union General de Trabajadores—UGT) and the Communist Party (PCE)-led Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras—CC.OO), have called a general strike for today against the latest labour reforms.

The new legislation makes it easier for employers to reduce salaries and dismiss workers, facilitates the expansion of low-wage jobs, and limits national and regional collective bargaining. Since the announcement of the general strike, the pseudo-left parties have seized on it as proof that workers can and should rely on the trade unions to oppose the social counterrevolution being carried out by the ruling elite in Spain and throughout Europe.

In reality, the CC.OO and UGT called the one-day protest strike only after months of tripartite talks between the unions, the Popular Party (PP) government and the employers. After the legislation was agreed by the Council of Ministers and sent for ratification to the parliament, the CC.OO and UGT continued to plead with the government to eliminate the harshest parts of the reform package, while holding token demonstrations.

The same charade took place a year and a half earlier, in September 2010, when the unions called a one-day general strike against the labour legislation of the previous government, headed by the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). Months later, the unions signed the “Grand Social Pact,” which included raising the retirement age from 65 to 67 by 2013.

Ever since, the labour bureaucracy has suppressed working class resistance to the attacks on living conditions. In December, 637,544 hours were lost due to strikes, a fall of 68 percent from the same month one year earlier. In January, 564,852 hours were lost, a fall

of 20.61 percent from January last year.

Throughout, the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE); the Anti-Capitalist Left (IA) of the Pabloite United Secretariat; En Lucha (In Struggle), the Spanish affiliate of the British Socialist Workers Party; El Militante, the former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency; and Class Against Class, the Morenoite section in Spain, have acted as unabashed promoters of the union bureaucracy.

The PCE has many high-ranking members in the leadership of the CC.OO, which it founded in 1976. A recent communiqué reveals just how the unions act as safety valves for pent-up anger in the working class. According to the PCE, the attempts by the unions to reach a negotiated settlement “struck a concrete wall” and then “the citizen pressure at the bases of the union increased and the result has been the calling of a general strike.”

It omits the fact that the labour reform was fully in effect before being passed by parliament, as the government approved it through an executive order. In the time between the executive order and approval by parliament, the unions have attempted to dissipate working class resistance with weekend demonstrations that brought tens of thousands of workers onto the streets demanding an end to the reforms and not merely a modification of the labour bill, as called for by the unions and the PCE.

The Anti-Capitalist Left (Izquierda Anticapitalista—IA) of the Pabloite United Secretariat said they greeted the calling of the general strike as a “first step” taken by the working class. It has called for the building of “committees and rank-and-file organs,” not as organisations genuinely independent of the trade union bureaucracy, but rather as pressure groups on the unions “to ensure that after [March 29th] the union

leadership does not spoil the results [of the general strike].”

IA urges the CC.OO and the UGT to “break with the union strategy of seeking a Social Pact and arrangements” with the government and employers, advising that this is necessary to “restore lost credibility amongst significant sections of workers and send a message that now ‘we’re serious’.”

Credibility can be restored by the CC.OO and UGT, these acolytes of the union bureaucracy declare, by building “bridges to alternative unionism, which has rightly criticized their strategy.”

This is a reference to smaller trade unions such as the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour—CGT). The CGT plays the specific political role of sucking in workers disenchanted with the bigger union federations by means of radical and militant phraseology. If these smaller unions retain any credibility, it is largely due to the pseudo-left’s role in covering up their own betrayals, such as the CGT’s last minute calling off of the four-day strike that was planned by metro and bus workers in Barcelona in February (see, “Unions call off strike by metro and bus workers in Barcelona”).

The small Morenoite party Clase contra Clase (Class Against Class) acts as an adviser to the CGT and other “left” unions, pleading with them to organize “the most combative sectors.” The Morenoite group declares that these unions must “play a big role in fighting for the general strike and take important steps to unite all workers who are against the ‘negotiation’ policy of Toxo and Mendez [respective leaders of the CC.OO and UGT].”

En Lucha, affiliated to Britain’s Socialist Workers Party, is still more explicit in its support for the union bureaucracy. Its statement says blandly that “it is quite possible that a one-day general strike will not be enough to stop the Labor reform,” as if this was not well understood by the trade unions. Instead, the statement continues, “the sustained struggle and in many cases success of the Greek working class should be used as an example.”

What success? Greece now has more than a third of its population living below the poverty line. Twenty-one percent of Greek workers are unemployed and up to half a million have emigrated. The country is ruled by a non-elected government that is a puppet of

European and international finance capital.

This is the balance sheet thanks to the refusal of the trade unions to bring down first the PASOK government and now the coalition made up of PASOK, the conservative New Democracy and the fascist LAOS that was installed at the behest of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

El Militante, the former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency, also portrays the long list of agreements and pacts between the government and the “class struggle unions” (CC.OO and UGT) as purely the result of a “wrong strategy.” It pledges that it will “demand that March 29 has continuity and is not derailed into a negotiation process with the PP government.”

Workers should not be fooled that one-day token strikes can stop the ruling elite from imposing its attacks, any more than they can rely on the unions to wage the class struggle. The ex-left fraternity’s sole concern is to prevent workers and youth from drawing the lessons of painful experiences in Spain and internationally and striking out on the only viable political road—that of a rebellion against these moribund organisations and the building of a mass political movement to fight for workers’ power and socialism.



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