

Millions join general strike in Spain

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Yesterday's general strike against new labour laws imposed by the right-wing Popular Party government was backed by millions.

The two main union federations, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-aligned General Workers Union (*Union General de Trabajadores*, UGT), and the Communist Party (PCE)-led Workers Commissions (*Comisiones Obreras*, CC.OO) estimated that the stoppages were supported by 77-80 percent of the workforce. Many more people, unemployed, school children, housewives and students used it as a vehicle to protest government cuts and austerity measures.

Mass stoppages took place in industry, transport and services. The walkout hit road, rail and air service with barely any domestic or European flights in operation.

Nissan, Seat, Ficosa and Valeo and the petrochemical factory in Tarragona were shut down as well as Yamaha, Derbi and Panrico. The PSA Peugeot Citroën plant was opened, but with about 10 percent attendance. In Navarre, factories such as Volkswagen, FCC Logística, Human Koxka, TRW, Kybse and Dana were paralysed. Factories near Madrid closed down. Industry, ports and shipyards in Galicia were idle.

Although the trade unions had agreed minimum transport services of 30 and 35 percent, huge queues formed in all cities. The unions report that 91 percent supported the strike on the railways.

Around 30 percent of bank workers struck. The big stores such as El Corte Ingles opened under heavy police protection, but there were few customers. Refuse collection stopped the night before and though a minimum service was agreed, most containers remained full.

Minimum services allowed hospitals to function, but in many hospitals there were incidents between strikers and those who scabbed. Public buildings were under heavy police guard.

The stoppage was massive at universities all over the

country. Libraries were closed. Calling for unity with workers, students marched with banners that read, "Education Rest In Peace". Masses of workers and young people filled the streets, halting traffic in main streets and roads.

In total, 111 demonstrations and rallies took place around the country.

The police were out in force. Police attacks on strikers led to dozens of arrests and injuries.

Trade union spokesmen referred to "situations of intimidation", "police provocation" and "unjustified aggression". The UGT's 64-year-old Secretary of Training and Employment, Juan Jose Couso Ferreira, had to receive medical attention for wounds to his eyebrow, nose and arm. A cameraman was arrested as early as 6 a.m. An attack on a man in an electric wheelchair was filmed.

The new changes in the labour law go much further and deeper than those agreed between the PSOE government and the trade unions in September 2010, opposition to which also forced the unions to call a general strike. Many of these changes are already in operation, as the government unilaterally implemented them in February by decree.

All workers will eventually have to sign a contract which will limit severance pay to just 33 days for each year worked, with a limit of 24 months for unfair dismissal, as opposed to the present 45 days of severance pay, with a limit of 42 months. If layoffs are "financially driven", companies only need to pay 20 days' wages.

Companies are given the freedom to reduce working hours without having to apply to the Employment Authority and to reduce the number of employees depending on profitability, as well as redeploy them to other towns. People who are registered in unemployment offices and receiving benefits will be forced to "carry out services of general interest in the

benefit of the community” through agreements with the Public Administrations.

Young people will be forced onto cheap labour “training” contracts. After they have finished one, they can be forced onto another, and so on, until the age of 30.

The law undermines collective national agreements and allows agreements by company. Congress has already approved the new labour law, and the Senate voted yesterday in the middle of the general strike.

Today’s budget announcement is expected to bring in further and much wider austerity measures.

Despite the massive response and militancy of Spanish workers, the unions are insistent that all they want are modifications and concessions from the government that would aid them in imposing the measures on the working class.

UGT’s leader Cándido Méndez said, “We are convening the strike because we have to connect it with the parliamentary debate which is now reaching the high point of amendments. The general strike is not an end in itself, it is a means to correct.”

CC.OO’s leader Ignacio Fernández Toxo defended the unions’ record of collaboration in the attacks on Spanish workers. “The country was in need of more compromises, but quite honestly I don’t think that anyone can accuse the UGT and CC.OO that we have not made considerable efforts”, he said.

Toxo elaborated on the unions’ record of betrayal: “In the midst of the longest and deepest crisis that Spanish society has known in decades, we have signed three agreements that I think have had an insufficient appreciation. We have repeated in January the salaries (agreement) of 2010, correcting its contents while it was still in force. And also we made an agreement on pensions the likes of which does not exist in Europe. We have put forward proposals in 2011 on the eve of the election such as progressive fiscal reform ...”

Méndez added, “If we haven’t reached more agreements it is because they haven’t let us. We have had three agreements during the crisis and two strikes; three to two.”

At a press conference yesterday, he stated, “We have to look for a compromise with the government so that we can row in the same direction.”

Toxo added, “They have forced a general strike. I hope that this will be sufficient.”

The PSOE Parliamentary Group issued a statement supposedly in support of the strike, but focusing on a denunciation of the PP for not negotiating with the unions.

Minister of Labour Fátima Báñez replied that the government was open to proposals as far as the improvement and amplifications of the legislation was concerned, but the reforms were not going to be changed, strike or no strike. Asked about the brutal actions of the police, she said the government was elected to guarantee the right of those who want to strike and those who want to work.

The Madrid government delegate, Cristina Cifuentes, declared that “there are three groups with about one thousand people who are intending to mount riots in the centre of the city. They are being controlled by the police.”

The PP has received a big setback in two regional elections this week, and Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has been accused by the European Union of going too softly on the cuts in response. Rajoy had hoped that a big majority, particularly in Andalucía (the biggest region in Spain), would have given him the clout to say that his next plan of drastic austerity measures had the backing of the country. But despite the setback, he is under orders to step up the attacks on workers. The EU will be sending officials in April to make sure he does not back pedal in the wake of the strike.

In industrial action in Athens the same day, thousands of protesters, including doctors, nurses and administrative staff marched on the Greek parliament.

The author also recommends:

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