

Barcelona's workers and youth speak during Spain's general strike

Alejandro López
31 March 2012

Thursday's general strike in Spain was supported by 77 percent of the workforce and paralyzed whole cities.

Hundreds of thousands demonstrated throughout Spain against the latest labour laws imposed by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government.

In the highly industrial northern region of the Basque Country, tens of thousands demonstrated in Bilbao and San Sebastián, where most of the industry was struck and the small shops closed.

In Galicia, tens of thousands demonstrated in each of the main cities, Coruña, Santiago and Pontevedra. In Vigo, where the largest fishing port in Europe is located and there is a SEAT plant, three demonstrations with around 200,000 were held in the narrow streets of the city of a population of 300,000.

In Valencia, hundreds of thousands protested.

In the capital, Madrid, 17 demonstrations where organized and estimates range upwards of 250,000 to 800,000 on the main march.

This reporter was in Barcelona with the students in the early morning, in the working class neighborhood of Sants at midday and the official and unofficial demonstrations in the afternoon and evening.

In the early morning, students locked down the universities with chains and then silenced the doors. At 4 a.m., they joined striking metro workers and university workers and lecturers picketed the main metro lines. At nine they marched into the city chanting against the cuts in universities, the high fees and unemployment. The road was blocked until the police arrived. Police charged against the protesters, who then fled to a university at Diagonal, where the police cannot legally enter without permission of the rector.

At midday, a group of 200 workers and unemployed

marched through Sants, picketing any shop that remained open. They then joined a massive demonstration near the center of Barcelona. At around 5 p.m., tens of thousands of people of all ages were concentrated in Plaza Catalonia, the center of Barcelona, and the surrounding streets.

In the adjacent street thousands marched with the smaller trade unions, the CGT and CNT. Most were not members, but wanted to protest the betrayals of the two main federations, the Stalinist CC.OO and the Socialist Party (PSOE)-affiliated UGT.

The official demonstration of CC.OO and UGT started at 6 p.m., with the participation of the PSOE, which only a year and a half ago imposed their own labour reform, and other forces such as the Catalan section of the United Left and the separatist Esquerra.

There were very few banners of the CC.OO and UGT, reflecting widespread rejection of the unions. Also absent in all the demonstrations were Catalan national and separatist flags.

The majority of demonstrators stayed in the center of Barcelona, instead of marching on with the official protest. The police, who had been charging against anarchist groups around the center of Barcelona, then charged against the protesters, some of whom responded by throwing bottles and cans.

Hundreds of police were deployed, hitting out with batons, shooting rubber bullets and throwing tear gas. (See YouTube video of the violence.)

Tear gas has not been deployed since 1994.

Firemen, facing huge cuts in their wages and working conditions, protected protesters from the police. They were also dispersed with tear gas. (YouTube video of the incident.)

More unrest is inevitable, with the PP today announcing the most savage cuts since Franco, €27.3 billion, and a freeze on public-sector pay, slashing government spending by 16.9 percent.

Pedro, aged 21, said of the labour reform, “This law means that the businessmen will have all the power. It’s the old game. I am studying Marx at university and he once said that the employers own all the means of production and workers can only sell their labour power. He was right!”

“Workers should strike, but not like this one,” he said. “Like 1936, when the workers paralyzed the whole of Spain and stopped fascism.”

Jesus Izquierdo, a primary school teacher, said that the labour reform “means that anyone can be booted out without any justification. We can’t even get sick leave without feeling that we might be booted out for it. We are losing all our rights in one go... This strike will be effective if we continue after today. If not, the same thing will happen as after the last general strike a couple of years ago.”

“I come here representing myself, not the unions. I don’t believe in the transparency of the unions. They should be financed by their members like they were before, without any public finance, and then they would struggle for us. It is disgusting what they have done. They have called a strike only once the law was fully in effect.

“Every year they cut resources and staff. In three years, our budget has decreased 25 percent. They have also sacked teachers. It is harder because every year there are fewer teachers per pupil.

“The cuts have meant that my wage has been cut by 200 euros in less than two years. At the same time gas, electricity, food, absolutely everything has gone up.”

A worker who did not want to give his name or the company that he worked for, fearing being sacked, said, “This labour reform is an attack against the workers, on the small-scale social rights we still have, or used to. They are destroying the power of the workers completely.”

About the strike, he said, “This has all been play acting. The government imposes a huge attack on the workers, then the trade unions go out and the government takes a minor part of the law back, like

instead of paying you 20 days per year [when sacking you] they say 25. In any case we lose out, but the unions say we have won something.”

Port worker José said, “This labour reform has changed my life. I don’t feel secure in my job anymore. Who says they won’t sack me tomorrow? What about my children’s future? What type of employment will they have? I think they’ll have more in common with my father’s generation who worked in a factory under Franco than me: No right to strike, no right to decent health care, no right to protest, no right to anything.

“We must stop this PP government. Why did my father fight against the fascists during the Transition? So that their sons could impose more attacks against our living standards? No, I don’t think so.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact