

The Spanish general strike and the political tasks before the working class

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Last Thursday's general strike in Spain against the Popular Party government, the European Union and their austerity policies once again demonstrated the power of the working class and its readiness to fight.

In an outpouring of anger and militancy, millions struck and joined protests against the PP's labour laws, which overturn collective bargaining and enable employers to cut pay and fire workers at will.

The general strike was powerful in its size, depth and composition. Factories, airports, ports and rail services were paralysed. Public services were reduced to a minimum, and shops and universities closed.

Demonstrations by workers and students in towns and cities across the country were joined by many thousands more people—including the unemployed and school children—who seized the opportunity to voice their hostility to the government's measures.

This display of combativeness has caused consternation in the bourgeoisie in Spain, across Europe and internationally.

No one will have been more disturbed by the scale of defiance than the trade union leaders. 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) have sought to avoid any action against the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy since he took office in November.

For months, the unions engaged in tripartite talks with the PP and the employers, pleading for concessions. Only when it was clear that none would be forthcoming did the unions reluctantly agree to action.

Even then, the strike was intended as a token gesture. UGT General Secretary Cándido Méndez declared, “We have to look for a compromise with the government so that we can row in the same direction.”

The mass response to the strike is a harbinger of bigger and more explosive struggles to come. This, however, only underscores the urgency of the fight for a new leadership and new perspective of struggle for the working class.

The union leaders and the middle class groups that support them—such as the Anti-Capitalist Left (IA) of the Pabloite United Secretariat and En Lucha (In Struggle), the Spanish affiliate of the British Socialist Workers Party—said that one-day actions and similar protests would be sufficient to shift the policy of the bourgeoisie. These claims were shattered the day after the general strike, when the PP announced it would slash public spending by €27 billion—the most draconian austerity measures since the fascist dictatorship of General Franco.

The response of the government underscores the fundamental political issues that are posed before the working class.

Rajoy speaks not only for Spain's ruling elite, but for international finance capital, which has no intention of ceding one inch in its attempt to impose devastating attacks on the European working class. The aim is to drive conditions down to levels comparable to China and Brazil.

Greece is the testing ground for this policy of social counterrevolution, but it is one being prepared and implemented everywhere—from Ireland and Italy to Britain, the United States and across the world.

The global character of this offensive testifies to the fact that working people confront the breakdown of international capitalism.

The pseudo-left organisations work consciously to disarm the working class as to the real implications of this systemic crisis.

The depths to which they will sink was made clear by En Lucha, which claimed that the model for Spanish workers must be the “sustained struggle... and... *success*

of the Greek working class.”

What is this “success”? Five years into a deep recession, working people in Greece have suffered one round of austerity after another—implemented first by the Social Democrat PASOK government and now by the coalition between PASOK and the Conservative New Democracy.

A number of one-day and two-day general strikes organised by the Greek trade unions have brought tens of thousands onto the streets in scenes no less defiant than those last Thursday in Spain. But this has not stopped a succession of austerity budgets. Just this weekend, Greek Prime Minister Lucas Papademos announced further cuts of €12 billion in another “new economic programme.”

The result is a social catastrophe. Official unemployment is already 23 percent, and it is over 50 percent for young workers. Aid agencies describe parts of Greece as suffering a “humanitarian crisis.”

In the port city of Perama, near Athens, the Doctors of the World charity reports that large numbers of residents live on less than €200 (\$270 a month). The organisation writes: “There are some families that have not had electricity for five, eight months, who spent the winter burning pieces of wood to keep warm and whose children eat from the garbage.”

If this is how En Lucha views “success,” then it can have no differences with the PP and the ruling elite who aim for a similar “success” in Spain. Its contemptible statement only makes clear that, for such organisations, the destitution of the working class is imminently preferable to its revolutionary mobilisation against capitalism.

In Spain, as throughout Europe, the working class faces a fight for political power against the bourgeoisie and its representatives—including the trade union bureaucracy and its apologists. This requires the building of a new political party, a Spanish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.

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