

Spain's unions silent on general strike repression

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Three weeks after the mass arrests and violent repression unleashed against the March 29 general strike in Spain, the main trade unions have yet to issue a word of condemnation.

The general strike, which paralysed the country, displayed the readiness of the working class to resist the austerity measures being imposed by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government, the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund.

The ruling class responded with repression. Some 180 people were arrested, 79 in the northeastern region of Catalonia alone. More than 100 were injured by rubber bullets, smoke grenades and tear gas.

Four people—two workers and two students—continue to be held in “preventive detention” following disturbances in Barcelona on the day of the strike. The authorities have justified their detention on the grounds of preventing them from involvement in further “anti-system activities”, specifically protests planned around the European Central Bank summit in Barcelona in May.

Only the youth sections of the Communist Party-affiliated Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and the Spanish Socialist Workers Party's UGT trade unions have made any comment—both equally worthless.

In its statement, the CCOO youth section effectively solidarises with the state repression, denouncing “the wild actions perpetrated by organised groups outside the unions on the afternoon of March 29 in Barcelona.”

It pleads only that the two students arrested be released because they “are not criminals, nor do they have criminal records. Neither do they belong to any violent organisation, but to the Association of Progressive Students (AEP) and CCOO, the first union in Spain in terms of membership and democratic representation.”

No mention is made of the two workers also held in custody.

The statement by the UGT youth section is even worse. It does not even call for the release of the students. It simply says plaintively that their detention is “hopefully not the result of a political decision, in order for it to become an exemplary punishment for future social protests and general strikes. We demand for them the same legal guarantees as the rest of the detainees and any other citizen.”

In fact, the motivations for these pre-emptive detentions are wholly political, as the unions know full well.

They flow directly from the vicious state assault made against striking air traffic controllers in December 2010 by the then-Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government, with the support of the trade unions.

The controllers were fighting a 50 percent pay cut and attacks on their working conditions. In response, the PSOE invoked a state of emergency, using laws from the fascist era of General Franco. Under its provisions, the controllers were rounded up and forced to work under military discipline. Threatened with imprisonment for sedition, they were railroaded into signing new contracts or face the sack.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, the PSOE's actions were aimed at legitimising repression—including the use of the military—against all opposition to the austerity measures agreed by Spain's ruling elite and the EU.

The trade unions and the pseudo-left organisations lined up with the bourgeoisie against the controllers.

The UGT said the controllers' actions were “not in any way justified” whilst the CCOO demanded the government impose severe punishments against the

strikers, stating, “These actions are intolerable and alien to the codes of trade unions.”

While the pseudo-left organisations issued for the record criticisms of the state of emergency, they did not lift a finger in the controllers’ defence. Instead, they joined in the right-wing media campaign, condemning the workers for their supposedly “excessive privileges” and for holding the country to ransom by striking!

Under this reactionary banner of “citizen’s rights”, they sought to conceal the dangerous implications of the government’s measures for the working class as a whole.

The attack on the air traffic controllers established a precedent that has now been extended more broadly.

In May 2011, police fired rubber bullets and beat anti-austerity demonstrators peacefully occupying Barcelona’s Plaza Catalunya. Then, the sections of the UGT and CCOO, within the regional police that had carried out the assaults, published a statement pledging their “unconditional support to the police who intervened”.

The following month, police violently dispersed a demonstration outside the Catalan parliament as it approved cuts to education and health care.

Such actions have escalated under the heirs of Francoism, the PP. Prior to the general strike, students and schoolchildren demonstrating in February against education cuts in Valencia were subjected to violent police attacks after the regional head of police described them as “the enemy”.

The unions’ refusal to defend the working class against state repression is not simply the result of cowardice. It expresses the social interests of the trade union bureaucracy, which receives huge subsidies from the state.

Every year since the economic crisis erupted in 2008, the trade unions have received a total of approximately €20 million from the state, of which €16 million go to the UGT and CCOO.

These payments have continued despite savage cuts in public spending imposed under both the PSOE and the PP, which have seen wages and pensions slashed and unemployment skyrocket.

In return, the trade union bureaucracy has worked to suppress working class resistance to the attacks on living conditions.

The March 29 general strike was the first against the

PP government since it came to power in November. For months, the unions have worked to suppress working class resistance to the attacks on living conditions.

According to the Spanish Confederation of Employers’ Organisations, in December there were 637,544 hours lost due to strikes, 68 percent less than the same month one year earlier. In January, 564,852 hours were lost—a fall of 20.61 percent from January 2011.

Only when tripartite talks between the unions, government and employers broke down, did the unions reluctantly call a general strike, but only then as a token action, aimed at dissipating workers’ resistance.

Just two days before the March 29 strike, the UGT and CCOO received €1.3 million from the state for “social purposes.”

Subsequently, Catalan interior regional minister Felip Puig announced that the government is creating a web site where “citizens” will be able to identify “the violent ones” and will propose restrictions on the right to assembly.

With the announcement this week of a third austerity package of €10 billion in cuts, Interior Minister Jorge Fernandez said that the government will submit a law to amend the Criminal Code.

The amendment is intended to tighten all public order offences. Among the new features will be designating “peaceful resistance” as an “assault on authority”.

The calling of “violent” demonstrations through the Internet and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) will be considered a crime.

The minister also announced he would toughen penalties for street violence, comparing it with the anti-terrorism legislation on *kale borroka* (former urban street violence organised by the Basque separatist ETA). In the Basque country and Navarre, the penalties for *kale borroka* range as high as 18 years’ imprisonment.



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