

Spanish government proceeds with the destruction of health care and education

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Not a day passes in Spain without further cuts at the local, regional or national level being announced, or measures imposed curtailing the right to assembly, to strike and to protest.

The Spanish government outlined spending cuts last week valued at €10 billion in health care and education. These come on top of the €27.3 billion in cuts outlined in the 2012 budget, equivalent to 2.5 percent of GDP, the €15 billion cuts announced in December and the €16.5 billion made by the previous Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) government.

In lower and middle education, classes will be increased by up to 20 percent. The maximum number of students per class will increase from 27 to 30 in primary schools and from 30 to 36 in high schools. According to Minister of Education José Ignacio Wert, one of the objectives of increasing class sizes is so that children will be able to "relate and socialise" better!

Teachers will also have to increase their teaching hours by cutting the time used to prepare classes. Absences of fewer than two weeks will not be covered.

The *Sindicato de Estudiantes* (Student Union) estimates that between 50,000 and 70,000 temporary teachers will be dismissed.

Added to this, 2,000 vocational training modules planned for 2013 will be eliminated in a country already suffering 50 percent youth unemployment. According to the Regional Catalan councilor of businesses and employment, "The youth better get a plane to London to serve coffees", while the leader of the Business Lobby, José Luis Feito, sarcastically said they had better go to "Lapland, which is a very nice place, with highly paid seasonal jobs."

University education is also under attack. The previous system meant that students had to pay some 15 percent of the €6,000 average annual cost (around

€900 to €1,000 a year). Under the new plan, fees may go up by 50 percent, to around €1,700 to €2,000 a year. In some regions such as Catalonia, this figure rises to 66 percent.

The new system also means that tuition fees will increase if the pupil repeats a subject. The first repetition will see fees increase by 30 to 40 percent. A third repetition will lead to an increase of 65 to 75 percent and a fourth 90 to 100 percent. The grants on which lower-income students depend have been cut by 11 percent.

The premier of Madrid, Esperanza Aguirre, born into an upper-class family of counts and lawyers, declared that "intellectual and professional egalitarianism" is an "attack on individual freedoms" and that "egalitarian" schools and universities prevent "student progress".

In health care, a new system based on co-payment of medicines will replace free prescription medicines. Pensioners, who already receive a meager pension, will be obliged to pay 10 percent of the price of medicines. Active workers will pay between 40 percent and 50 percent for prescriptions.

The effects will be disastrous. Luis Martín Pindado, president of the Democratic Union of Pensioners of Spain, told *El País*, "More than four million pensions are below the minimum wage and an extra expense for these people, however small it may seem, will prevent them from meeting other payments.... You have to bear in mind that people of this age take many medicines. It is not ridiculous to think that many pensioners will stop paying other costs, like electricity and water, if they have extra expenditures."

The government will also bar the use of health care for many immigrants by modifying the Immigration Law so that non-Spanish nationals are obliged to work and live in the country to be able to access the public

health system. It is estimated that this will affect half a million immigrants without papers.

Another measure makes it harder for foreigners and tourists to access Spanish health care.

Renfe, the state company that operates freight and passenger trains in Spain, announced an increase of 11 percent in transport. In Madrid, the metro and bus fees will increase 9 percent or 29 percent, depending on the ticket.

All these measures are deeply unpopular. But in addition to the denial of basic social rights, democratic rights are also being drastically curtailed.

The response to this threat by the Popular Party (PP) government is to criminalise all opposition to its agenda. Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz announced that anyone using the Internet to organise “protests that are violent” will face charges of “membership in a criminal organisation”.

Unions, political parties and other organisations will be held responsible if their members cause “violence or vandalise property during demonstrations and public protests”. Parents of minors caught committing violent acts or damaging property will be held responsible. The Penal Code will be reformed so that “peaceful resistance” is designated “assault on authority”.

The Catalan regional interior minister has set up a web site where “citizens” will be able to “identify violent protestors” in demonstrations.

Political responsibility for enabling the ruling elite to impose such attacks rests with the trade unions, which work to suppress any working class resistance.

In late March, masses of workers participated in the general strike against the latest labour reform of the PP government. The unions called it one and a half years after the general strike of September 2010 against the previous Socialist Party government. In both cases, the unions engaged in tripartite talks with the government and the employers, pleading for concessions. Only when it was clear that none would be forthcoming did they reluctantly agree to action. Afterwards, they dutifully resumed talks.

In this task, the unions are supported by the United Left and other pseudo-left parties, which collectively subordinate any opposition to the union bureaucracy and the PSOE—the same force that carried out €16.5 billion in cuts and opened the way to a PP government.

In Andalusia, the regional secretaries of the Socialist

Party and Spanish Communist Party, which heads the United Left, Susana Díaz and José Luis Centella, announced a manifesto agreement that would give rise to a “coherent and strong” government in the region. Such a government would have to impose huge cuts in the heavily indebted region.



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