

# Miners strike escalates in Spain

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More than 8,000 miners in the Spanish region of Asturias have been on indefinite strike since June 1. They are protesting cuts to subsidies that threaten to destroy the industry with the loss of 40,000 jobs in mining and related occupations.

As part of the austerity measures it was demanding across the continent, the European Union declared that mining subsidies will be abolished by 2014. With the Spanish economy plunging into its second recession since 2009, a threat of a banking collapse and increasing demands from the European Union and International Monetary Fund to slash the budget deficit, the cut to mining industry subsidies was accelerated.

In April, the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy published its 2012 budget which included a 64 percent cut in mining industry subsidies from €703 million to €253 million.

The miners' strike began on May 31. Since then, some miners have been involved in a sit-in at the Candin mine in Langredo and the Santiago mine shaft in Aller, where their health is said to be deteriorating. A camp has been erected in front of the Congress building in the regional capital Oviedo.

The struggle has become intense as the miners have been met by riot police using teargas and baton-charges.

Earlier this month, miners protesting in Madrid were subject to brutal attacks by police who made scores of arrests. In response, miners have established barricades across main roads and railway lines, severely disrupting transport networks in the region. There are reports of police entering mining villages, using teargas and rubber bullets to disperse strikers and break up barricades. (See euronews report.)

The local and national press have had barely any coverage of the bitter confrontations. Their silence is deliberate.

The mining subsidies are just a small fraction of the €27 billion package of cuts in the April budget. Education spending is reduced by €2.2 billion, 22 percent less than in 2011. Some €1.2 billion will be cut from spending on programmes helping people find work and health care is to be slashed by €3.9 billion. Huge cuts are planned in culture, infrastructure and civil research and development.

Regional and local governments were told to make cuts of up to €17 billion, which will also have a major impact since they are responsible for the most health care and education services.

Rajoy claimed that cuts were necessary to prevent Spain having to seek an international bailout. But last weekend came the announcement that Spain will receive a €100 billion bailout from the European Financial Stability Facility. Full details of the conditions attached have yet to be announced, but it is clear that attacks will have to be made on the working class to pay for the loans that will dwarf those already implemented.

A major factor in the agreement to bailout Spain's banks is the elections on Sunday in Greece and France. Of equal import is the ruling elite's fear of a developing movement of the working class in Spain.

A massive general strike on March 29 against the reform of the labour laws was supported by nearly 80 percent of the workforce. On May 22, virtually all schools, colleges and universities were shut down with huge demonstrations of workers, students and schoolchildren in all the main cities.

The mood in mining areas borders on insurrection, as striking workers fashion lengths of pipe to fire golf balls, stones and any other objects that come to hand to beat back police.

Now the miners have been joined on indefinite strike by transport workers in Asturias and the neighbouring region of Leon protesting an increase in working time

by 300 hours a year, a four year wage freeze and the imposition of separate wage agreements. Several cities are without buses and there is no school transport. Only a few convoys of vehicles circulate under police protection.

Under these circumstances, the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) together with the trade unions and the United Left (IU) are doing everything to politically isolate the miners and prevent a generalised offensive by the working class. They are pleading with the government to enter negotiations on a new “Plan for Coal”, despite the PP insisting there will be no retreat.

Some 40,000 jobs have been negotiated away in the last 25 years—mainly through the Plan for Coal agreed with the coal companies and the PP government of José María Aznar in 1997 which agreed the progressive reduction of subsidies, a 30 percent reduction in production and huge cuts in jobs. A new plan was agreed in 2006 with the PSOE government of José Luis Zapatero, which led to further job losses.

On May 31, after hours of fruitless talks with employers and the government, the unions organised the protest in Madrid—strictly limited to the miners—under the slogan, “For the future of Spanish coal and the rebirth of mining towns.” This was one week after the education strikes and demonstrations. The unions have called a “general” strike on June 18, but it will in reality only involve those industries affected by mine closures.

PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (SOMA-UGT) General Secretary José Angel Fernandez Villa called for the government to set up “a monitoring committee” to hear proposals for the industry, complaining that government intransigence was “encouraging radicalization” of the conflict.

The only national action against the austerity measures being proposed is a “peoples’ referendum” on the budget cuts in the autumn.

Even more cynical has been the response of the PSOE, which only last year governed Spain and imposed its own €15 billion austerity package, labour reforms and cuts in civil servants’ pay. Secretary General Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba has asked the government to talk with the miners, saying “All governments have always sought dialogue and agreement on this issue.”

The new coalition government in Asturias formed on

May 23 between the PSOE, IU and the Union, Progress and Democracy party (UPyD) has called on Industry Minister José Manuel Soria to negotiate with the mining unions. It did so at the same time as it is starting talks with the PP government on budget cuts reported to be around €400 million.

Asturias will be the last of the regional governments to agree to reduce their deficit to 1.5 percent of GDP in 2012. Its attempt to put on a left face is a transparent fraud.

Asturias provincial President Javier Fernández declared in one breath that “A year ago we reluctantly admitted the closure of mines in 2018,” before adding, “but we cannot accept the closure in 2012.”

Based on its record, the truth is that it can accept closures and will do so.



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