

Massive support for June 18 general strike in Spain's mining regions

Paul Mitchell
20 June 2012

Union leaders from the Communist Party (PCE)-led Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE)-aligned General Workers Union (UGT) say support for the June 18 general strike in 50 municipalities in Spain's mining regions was "total".

Some 8,000 miners have been on strike for nearly four weeks in protest against a 64 percent cut to subsidies proposed by the Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The cuts would decimate what remains of Spain's mining industry and could lead to the loss of 40,000 jobs. Union leaders called the one-day strike, claiming it would put pressure on Spain's Congress before a scheduled Tuesday vote on the subsidies.

The PP brought the cuts forward, ahead of a 2014 European Union deadline, because the Spanish economy has plunged into its second recession since 2009 and the banking sector is facing collapse. Attempts to slash the budget deficit have proved futile, from the September 2010 "Grand Social Pact" agreed between the unions, the employers and the social democratic PSOE government in power at the time, to the €27 billion package of cuts in the PP's April budget, of which the cuts to mining subsidies were a small part.

The miners' action has become increasingly militant. Following brutal police attacks on a May 31 demonstration in Madrid, where scores of arrests were made, a mood bordering on insurrection has developed in the mining areas. Striking workers have fashioned weapons for use in running battles with the police and set up burning barricades to stop road and rail travel. Mines have been occupied and a camp set up near Oviedo, the regional capital of Asturias.

During Monday's strike many municipalities resembled ghost towns, with virtually all factories, offices, shops, bars and restaurants closed down. Many posted signs on their front doors saying, "In solidarity with coal workers and for survival."

In the Asturias region, where the majority of miners are employed, several roads and railway lines were closed due to barricades made of coal trucks and burning timber and tyres. Unions said 50,000 people joined a march in Langreo, a mining town near Oviedo.

"The crisis is a useful excuse for taking money from workers and giving it to the banks," said retired miner Vicente Turrado. A woman supporting the action explained that the area is already struggling and said, "Half the mothers have unemployed children at home."

Another miner employed by the state-run company Hunosa told reporters that he had worked night shifts for the last 15 years in the Santiago mine in the Aller district, one of the mines that has been occupied. "In the 1980s, the area I live in used to have 15 working mines that fed entire families," he said. "Now there are only two. Here in Hunosa, we have been on strike since May 29 and will remain so indefinitely. Police quickly began using force against us."

He continued: "We are marching to defend our rights. We aren't delinquents, but they have been treating us as such. Take for example the peaceful march that was organized in Madrid, in which security forces encircled and blocked us in a particularly provocative way, making the situation even tenser.

"We march peacefully and never mean for things to get out of hand or to injure anyone. But we do have to defend ourselves when we are attacked by police. The government leaves us no other choice. It's destroying everything we had set up under the 2006-2012 mining plan.

“There have been injuries on our side too, but we’re not afraid. We miners risk our lives every day at work. We’re used to danger.

“At first we marched openly, but since things have gotten uglier, protesters have started to cover their faces with masks and scarves. However, we’re all aware that by now police are keeping a file on all of us and watching us—notably by tracking our licence plates and listening in on our phone calls.

“Some workers have opted for an underground strike, which is another way of putting pressure on the government because it’s very dangerous. They are 600 metres underground, where temperatures reach 25° C with an 85 percent humidity rate. It must be very hard for them.”

Most of the 31 mining towns in the region of Castile and Leon were also at a standstill. Some 15,000 people took part in a demonstration in the regional capital of Leon.

In the Aragon region, riot police evicted protesters who sat down on the road to the Endesa power station. There were protests in several towns in Aragon.

PP General Secretary Antolín Sanz warned that any of the party’s Congress deputies from the mining regions who were considering voting against the cuts would be disciplined. The government has deployed an extra 250 Civil Guard officers in Asturias, as well as 90 officers from the GRS riot police and 40 elite troops from the Public Safety Command Units (USECIC), which were formed in 2002 primarily as an anti-terrorist force.

The Civil Guard Association (APROGC) has condemned the miners’ demands, saying they “do not differ in way from terrorists” and drawing a parallel with the Basque separatist group ETA. The association expressed “surprise” at “the passivity of all when it comes to prosecuting these attacks” and demanded the “the political and judicial authorities... apply the law with firmness and determination.”

The government delegate in Asturias, Gabino de Lorenzo, who represents the national government, has warned that security forces will intervene if the mine occupations continue.

The PP’s intransigence is reinforced by the demands of the European Union, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) that the austerity measures be imposed come what may. On

Monday, the interest rate on Spanish debt exceeded the unsustainable level of 7 percent, similar to that which pushed Greece, Ireland and Portugal to seek a bailout.

Spain could be forced to apply for another international loan that would dwarf the €100 million it received just days ago to bail out its banks. The Bank of Spain has reported that the risk of default of the country’s financial institutions reached 8.7 percent in April, the worst figure in 18 years. Finance Minister Cristóbal Montoro called the situation “critical” and urged the ECB to step in and buy Spanish government bonds.

The trade unions together with the PSOE and the United Left (IU) are working to politically isolate the miners and prevent a generalised offensive by the working class. They are pleading with the government to enter into negotiations on a new “Plan for Coal”, despite the PP’s insistence that there will be no retreat from the cuts. UGT mining spokesman Victor Fernández warned the government, “If you do not want to have the mining regions at war, you will have to sit down and negotiate.”

CC.OO General Secretary and PCE leader Ignacio Fernández Toxo declared, “It would be desirable for the PP to seek social support beyond the perimeter of its party.”

“The government has chosen the path of confrontation” Toxo added, “We can only face the future with a strong political, social and institutional consensus.” Toxo explained that both the CC.OO and the UGT were participating in the G20 forum in Mexico, holding meetings with world leaders to pressure the ECB “to buy debt to solve the escalating cost of financing.”



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