Barcelona workers and youth discuss austerity

A WSWS reporting team
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Spain is undergoing an unprecedented double-dip recession. The right-wing Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has secured a €100 billion bailout of the banks and is likely to ask for more money soon.

Spain has pledged to lower the public deficit from 8.5 percent of GDP last year to 6.3 percent this year and 4.5 percent in 2013. Last week, Rajoy presented another set of austerity measures that will slash overall spending by €40 billion, freeze public employees' salaries and cut unemployment benefits. At the same time, the government is reforming the labour laws, with the collaboration of the unions, making it easier and cheaper for companies to sack workers, lower wages and end collective bargaining.

The country's public debt has surpassed €800 billion for the first time ever—equivalent to 75.9 percent of GDP. Three quarters of the debt belongs to the national government and one quarter to the regions. The most indebted region is Catalonia (€5.8 billion).

Despite its bitter conflict with the PP government in Madrid, the Catalan government aims to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. The region has been used as a laboratory for cuts. Over the last two years, it has imposed huge reductions in education, health care and public sector wages, in addition to other social cuts.

The austerity measures imposed by the regions are intensifying poverty in a country that is already suffering 25 percent unemployment and more than 50 percent among young people. Social inequality is rising to record levels.

The social crisis is provoking almost daily protests by workers throughout Spain, to which the police respond with increasing violence.

The Catalan government is pressing for independence, not to roll back social cuts but to unload its fiscal crisis on the poorer regions of Spain. A demonstration held last week to lobby political parties to move towards independence attracted the support of one and a half million Catalans—a quarter of the population.

A *World Socialist Web Site* team reporting in Barcelona spoke to workers and young people about these issues. Particularly interesting, given polls suggesting more than half the population would vote for independence in a referendum, is an understanding amongst those we interviewed (and they were not specially selected) that the calls for independence are a "diversion from the real problems".

At the University of Barcelona, philosophy student Tonj said that the answer to the attacks of the troika (the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank) was "to break with capitalism."

"We cannot ask the same politicians who are destroying the whole welfare system to come to our aid. It is up to us to fix things. I am in favour of any movement basing itself on assemblies, locally and horizontally organised, attempting to break the dynamics of representation and parliamentarism.

"We cannot reform something which has an innate contradiction based on continuous growth and exploitation, and putting capital and money over people's lives".

When it was pointed out that history has shown that the only way workers and young people have broken with capitalism is through a revolutionary socialist party, Tonj said he did not agree and expressed anarchist illusions. "Entering the logic of parliamentarism and majorities is being trapped in the same problem," he said.

When asked whether the Bolsheviks defended capital, Tonj smiled and replied, "I don't know much about the Russian Revolution. I think we have to in any case go back to organising locally and defending self-

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management within our own neighbourhoods."

WSWS reporters pointed to the failure of the Indignados or 15-M movement. Begun on May 15, 2011, their demand for a radical change in Spain had attracted popular support. But the movement had no means of effecting such a change, since its proscription on "politics" actually meant excluding socialist politics and disarmed the working class in the face of the bourgeois offensive.

The result was that the troika has been able to impose more austerity measures. Workers without their own independent class perspective are powerless, stated one reporter.

In reply, Tonj said, "The indignados attracted all sorts of people, from the most anti-capitalist to the most reformist, from the students who can't pay their fees to the businessman fed up with paying taxes. What united us all was anger. The good thing about the indignados was it did bring solidarity between us."

On Catalan independence, Tonj said that the nationalists "have exploited the feelings of people who think that they will live better off [in an independent state]. They brush aside all the austerity measures which they themselves have imposed by talking of the enemy without.

"The argument of independence is the same story as always. Some say first independence, then fight for a better society. It was the same story in 1936—fight the fascists and then revolution. Now we need a global view."

Ricard, also studying philosophy, said, "I am a nurse and I work half what I worked last year. They have taken away our Christmas bonus, which represented nearly a tenth of my wage. Plus they have cut another 5 percent."

On the effects of cuts, he explained, "They don't cover for sick leave, meaning you have more workload. Patients have longer waiting lists. The unions are trying to make agreements with the hospital, but they are useless and the cuts are being imposed anyway."

Cristian, asked about Catalan independence, said, "It is a political manoeuvre by the Catalan right that has nothing to do with common people." Ricard agreed with him.

Jordan, an ambulance worker at the Barcelona Hospital Clinic, said, "They are increasing taxes and destroying our living standards, taking all our rights gained up to now in just one go. All the politicians are robbers. They are cutting health care workers, privatising hospitals.

"The workload has been reduced, and they have done us an ERE [Expediente de Regulación de Empleo—redundancies agreed with the unions] to kick most of us out. They have sacked 40 of us this month. Next month they are saying more will go.

"Trade unions do absolutely nothing. Can't you see that now they are silent? The government has come in, given them some money, and now they are silent. This is the same old story."

Sergio, his colleague, said, "We are scared. We have to pay the mortgages, maintain our children. Independence is to divert from real problems."

Jordan added, "It is the answer of the CiU [the ruling party in the regional Catalan government] to the crisis. It is precisely here in Catalonia where most robber politicians are and most cuts have been imposed. Just because [Regional President] Mas wants independence does not mean that we are all behind him. It is a big diversion from the economic crisis."

Outside the Hospital Clinic, pensioner Maria told us, "We pensioners think that the cuts will not come to us, but I don't think so. The youth are the worst off. Until now, I have lived through this crisis thanks to my savings and cutting my spending. Others are not so fortunate. They will probably cut or eliminate the work pensions or the individual pension schemes. One of the two will be eliminated. By then I hope to be in the afterworld."

Taxi driver Pilar explained, "The crisis has meant I earn half what I earned five years ago. The health cuts are especially affecting those like me who are older because we have more needs to go to the doctor…and now we have to pay for medicine. They should give less money to the banks and more to us."

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