

Mass demonstrations in Spain, Portugal, Italy against austerity and unemployment

Our reporters

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Hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets Wednesday in a number of European countries to demonstrate against rapidly rising unemployment and the austerity measures dictated by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

General strikes in Spain and Portugal brought transport to a halt and led to the closure of many businesses and schools. Airlines were hit by strike action, with hundreds of flights cancelled. Trade unions in both countries claimed that millions of workers took part in the strikes.

Strike action officially began in Spain at midnight, with demonstrators already taking to the streets on Tuesday evening. Angry demonstrators in Madrid clashed with police at a number of locations.

Police attacked pickets at a Madrid bus depot where workers were trying to stop buses from leaving. In the centre of the capital, riot police fired rubber bullets and lashed out with batons to clear demonstrators from the central Plaza de Cibeles square.

In an earlier confrontation, police used batons and pushed away hundreds of young protesters to prevent them blocking the nearby Gran Via avenue. Protesters responded by chanting “Abuse of power” and “More education, fewer police”. According to official spokesmen, police arrested 82 protesters across the country and 34 people were treated for injuries.

In Portugal, demonstrators took to the streets in the early morning hours, carrying banners denouncing the European Union, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB). According to figures released Wednesday, the country’s unemployment rate hit a record 15.8 percent and is expected to continue rising in the coming months.

Strikes brought Lisbon’s metro service to a virtual

standstill and many schools and public offices were closed throughout the day. Ferry and train travel across the country was sharply curtailed.

In Italy, the unions restricted strike action to a series of rolling four-hour strikes throughout the day, which nevertheless led to the closure of schools, ports and many factories.

Demonstrations involving tens of thousands of students and workers took place in Rome, Turin and Milan, where transport workers, train conductors and hospital employees joined students in the streets. In the centre of Rome, dozens of young protesters trying to break through a police cordon were attacked by police using tear gas and armored cars.

Violent clashes between demonstrators and police were also reported in Turin and Milan. The angry protests in Italy came just one day after two government ministers had to be evacuated by helicopter from a meeting in Sardinia when protesters blocked roads on the island with burning cars.

Also on Tuesday, a speech by Labour Minister Elsa Fornero in Naples was interrupted by a man who threatened to slash his wrists to protest his daughter’s inability to find work. Protesters had already clashed with police in Naples on Monday.

The European Trade Union Confederation called the strikes and protests in an attempt to let off steam and contain growing anger among workers, particularly in southern European countries that have been most devastated by the austerity policies of the banks and the European Union.

While the protests in Spain, Portugal and Italy were marked by large and angry demonstrations, it was clear that the European trade union bureaucracy deliberately sought to demobilize workers in the rest of Europe.

In Greece, relatively few people were involved in the

protests. The country's main union federations limited the actions to just three hours. Only about 3,000 people participated in a rally in Syntagma Square in Athens.

Last week, hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Greece against the fifth austerity package dictated by the EU. The country was paralyzed by a series of strikes. Since then, the unions have worked to wind down industrial action and demoralize workers. They have ended strikes by street cleaning and power stations workers who took action against wage cuts, while limiting strikes in other industrial spheres to just a few hours.

Workers are currently occupying town halls in a number of Greek cities to prevent local government officials from sending the central government in Athens lists of public-sector workers to be dismissed. Despite this defiance, the government has already begun to lay off 2,000 state employees.

The demonstration in Athens was dominated by supporters of various pseudo-left organisations such as SYRIZA and Antarsya. For the most part, workers refused to take part in the token action on Wednesday.

In France, there was also little support for 130 demonstrations announced by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). The rallies that did take place were mainly composed of union bureaucrats and their supporters among pseudo-left groups such as Lutte Ouvrière and the New Anti-capitalist Party.

None of France's five main union federations—CGT, CDFT, FSU, Solidaires, Unsa—called a strike. The rally in Paris attracted only a relatively small crowd of 5,000 public-sector workers. Industrial workers were largely absent. There were no anti-government slogans or banners to protest the closure of the PSA automobile plant at Aulnay, which will cost the Paris area 10,000 jobs.

Only 3,000 marched in Nantes, a traditionally left-oriented city in the west of France. In Rennes, only 800 turned out to protest, and in Marseille, France's second biggest city, only several thousand demonstrated. Some 1,800 marched in Lyon.

French President Francois Hollande declared at a press conference Tuesday that the demonstrations "were not questioning our politics, but rather supporting it."

In Germany, the trade unions did nothing to mobilize their members in solidarity with other European

workers. The central German Trade Union Federation (DGB) rally in Berlin was marked by the absence of union banners. Virtually all of the 200 people who assembled at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate were members of the Left Party, Attac or other middle-class "left" groups. Following a perfunctory speech from a member of the Verdi public service union, who demagogically called for an end to casino capitalism, the crowd quickly dispersed.

In London, officials from the British Trades Union Congress reaffirmed their defense of capitalism, handing over a letter to the European Commission complaining that the measures imposed by the EU, the IMF and the ECB were "dragging the whole of Europe into economic stagnation... far from re-establishing confidence in the financial markets."



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