

Spanish unions abandon miners prosecuted during 2010 strikes

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An agreement has been reached between the defence and the prosecution in the case of seven Spanish miners facing charges, including public disorder and “attacks on authority” during a strike over non-payment of wages in 2010.

The miners’ sentences of between 6 and 18 months were suspended subject to them not engaging in any type of offence in the next two years. Three others were asked to pay fines. The agreement was announced after a trial at the Criminal Court Number One of León on October 24.

Outside the court, one of the accused, Lisardo Riesgo, complained that they were forced to agree to the compromise because they had been abandoned by the trade unions. Riesgo declared, “To get us there against the riot police, yes, but coming here to show their faces, absolutely nothing... Apart from paying for the lawyer they have not done much else and no one has come here.” He said the trial was based on false accusations and that it was “the word of the (police) agents against ours.”

So far no reports of the trial have appeared on the web sites of the main unions, the CC.OO (Comisiones Obreras) or the UGT (Workers General Union), supposed to be conducting the negotiations. No doubt the union bureaucracy will be pleased with the sentence. To have militant miners threatened with jail if they carry out acts of class struggle will, they hope, serve as a warning to all workers.

The charges originated in the bitter strike and protests by miners in northern Spain in 2010. The struggle began after 35 percent of the miners had not been paid for two months. Employers complained that they had not sold any coal for months because of cheaper imports and that matters would get worse as the European Union (EU) had called for an end to state

subsidies. EU Competition Commissioner Joaquín Almunia, a former Spanish employment minister and chief economist of the UGT trade union, declared, “Companies need to be viable without subsidies. This is a question of fairness vis à vis competitors that operate without state aid.”

On September 1, 500 coal miners began an occupation of the Cuevas de Velilla mine, Palencia, and ignored efforts by the trade unions to end it. Frustrated by the lack of support from the unions, they attempted to popularise their plight by blocking roads, motorways and train lines with burning tyres. The general secretary of the Leon Industrial Federation of the CC.OO, Alberto González, disassociated the union from the actions and the then Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government sent in riot police. They were used to viciously attack the miners.

In the face of a massive backlash, the unions were forced to call a nationwide strike, scheduled for September 28-29. This was the same day as the general strike call by the CC.OO and UGT against the PSOE government’s labour reforms, called as a means of getting workers to let off steam before the unions agreed to the employers and governments demands and signed a “grand social pact” in early 2011. In a deliberate effort to divert miners from uniting with workers throughout Europe facing similar attacks, Carlos Mesa, a UGT regional secretary, urged miners instead to “make a common front” with the employers and government to put pressure on the EU. Cayo Lara, the leader of the Communist Party-led United Left (IU), called the suggestion “the opening of a door to hope.” A “Black March” of miners was organised to arrive in the regional capital León on September 29—the day the EU was meeting to decide whether the Spanish government’s use of subsidies was legal.

Eventually, an agreement was made to keep the mines open until 2018 and continue the subsidies, which was supposed to help fund alternative forms of employment.

This “door to hope” was swiftly shut. As part of the austerity measures it was demanding across the continent, the EU declared that subsidies have to end by 2014—four years earlier than agreed. The new Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy published its 2012 budget, which included a 64 percent cut in the mining industry subsidies from €703 million to €253 million. Union leaders complained this would precipitate an imminent collapse of the mining industry with the loss of around 40,000 jobs in the mines and related industries.

Once again, the mining areas erupted in militant struggles. The response of the government to the unions’ calls for negotiations was to send in the riot police with tear gas and rubber bullets. Many miners were arrested and are still awaiting trial.

The protests, strikes and occupations of mines were mostly outside of the control of the unions, which did everything to prevent them spreading. Transport workers had called strikes at the same time that paralysed whole towns, and workers in other parts of Spain began calling for strikes in solidarity with the miners. After hours of fruitless talks with employers and the government, the unions cut across any possibility of a united struggle by organising yet another long and fruitless march as a diversion—from Asturias and Aragon to the capital Madrid, which was again attacked by the police. Union leaders insisted that the march was kept as a purely miners’ issue under the slogan, “For the future of Spanish coal and the rebirth of mining towns.”

The unions wanted to reduce the protests and actions down to putting pressure on Industry Minister José Manuel Scoria, who was refusing to negotiate—at the same time as they had started talks with the PP government on budget cuts reported to be around €400 million.

Conflicts between the miners and the CC.OO and UGT have been developing for some time. At the end of both the 2010 and 2012 marches, miners accused the unions of hijacking them for their own purposes. In Madrid, where the unions had organised a general strike and a march on the same day as the miners’

march arrived, the miners demanded that they head the march, but the CC.OO and UGT refused. The miners staged a sit-down protest and organised an alternative route to that of the big unions.

Comments from readers appeared in the newspapers such as “Good luck to all those miners from Madrid, do not be fooled by the unions because they will sell you out” and “Where are the trade unions that defend the workers? Sitting comfortably in their offices being paid by the government and their members and then they want general strikes for photo opportunities.”

The trade unions would not have been able to carry out such a betrayal of the miners without the support of the ex-left organisations such as En Lucha and Anticapitalista. At every step, these petty-bourgeois groups glorified the Black March and helped conceal its real aim of isolating the miners. Meanwhile the unions, who they so fervently defend as the only legitimate leadership for workers, did everything possible to keep the miners away from public service, education and health workers who were striking and demonstrating against the Rajoy government on the same day they arrived in Madrid.

Just 25 years ago, there were over 50,000 miners in Spain, and now there are around 9,000, mostly in the Asturias region. These jobs were negotiated away under the auspices of the Plan for Coal agreed between the unions, the coal companies and the PP government of José María Aznar in 1997.



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