Protests grow against evictions in Spain

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The austerity measures of the Spanish government have hit every area of ??life. In addition to poverty, unemployment and private indebtedness, evictions of residents from their flats and houses has become a mass phenomenon.

Three suicides within a month have highlighted the brutality of the government and banks. Spontaneous protests broke out in Barakaldo, a town in the Basque country, following the suicide of Amaya Egaña, age 53, two weeks ago. Amaya Egaña was a victim of the policy of evicting all those unable to keep up with their repayments in the wake of the Spanish financial crisis. Popular anger is directed primarily against the banks that cause the evictions. Currently, 200 to 300 evictions are taking place each day with people dumped on the streets by police and bailiffs. Almost 180,000 evictions are being prepared.

Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2008 the number of over-indebted homeowners has risen to around 400,000. At the same time, another 800,000 flats stand empty. According to the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, citing the Madrid business press, there are a total of 1.3 million empty apartments in the country.

In recent years many Spaniards had bought homes with cheap credit offered by the banks. As the value of property rose over the years even low-income earners were able to obtain loans. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reports, at one point 86 percent of Spanish families possessed residential property. After the bursting of the housing bubble property prices plummeted by between a third and half of their value, making it impossible to pay off debt through sales of the property.

According to a Spanish law passed in 1909, a debtor is liable to repay his mortgage even after the loss of his property. The debtor must pay back loans even if the apartment or house was lost a long time ago.

Many Spaniards can no longer pay their mortgages because the austerity measures of the government have led to rampant unemployment and poverty. The gap between low and high income has quadrupled in recent years. Today over 20 million Spaniards, representing 43 percent of the population, earn less than €12,000 (US$15,600) per year. Unemployment has risen to a record level of 26 percent. According to the Red Cross, one in four children lives in poverty.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (People's Party—PP) is well aware of the social tensions arising from the wave of evictions. One day after a general strike and nationwide protests on November 14 the government and banks announced a moratorium on some evictions in an effort to avoid a social explosion.

Legislation provides for a suspension of evictions for two years for those living in a particularly precarious situation. However the regulations determining who is exempted from immediate eviction are so narrow that a large proportion of those affected are not covered by the bill. The law does not apply retroactively and also makes no change to the requirement that those who lose their property must still repay their outstanding loans, including exorbitant rates of interest. Accordingly, the bill has been vehemently opposed by the population.

The Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) opposition is spouting radical phrases in order to head off widespread anger with the government. PSOE Chairman Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba has loudly proclaimed that no one should lose a home because the owner is no longer in a position to pay the mortgage. The stance of the PSOE is completely hypocritical. In their own seven-year period in office, prior to the taking of power this year by the conservatives, they never sought to change the law.

In fact, the PSOE bears the main responsibility for the current disaster due to the austerity measures they introduced, including cuts to public workers service salaries, pension reductions, and cuts to child benefits and many other welfare payments.

In order to prevent evictions taking place, local

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initiatives have sprung up in many places expressing their solidarity with those facing evictions. On a number of occasions bailiffs and police confronted militant pickets who barred officials from taking control of sequestered property.

One coalition of those affected is the Plataforma de afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH). On its web site the organization demands a right to housing and publishes details of impending evictions. Their perspective, however, is extremely limited. They focus on changes to the law to prevent a disproportionate increase in mortgage payments and demand the authorities act in a more equitable fashion.

The PAH also calls on political parties and the government to provide affordable social housing to solve the housing crisis. It hopes to draw attention to its activities with signature campaigns and street blockades. Fake left groups and sections of the *indignados* movement have expressed their support for the organization.

Despite the mass protests and 24-hour general strike on November 14, the Rajoy government has made clear it will continue its austerity course. The government can maintain its course in relative safety, because the PSOE, the unions and the pseudo-left groups do all they can to defuse genuine political opposition.

The Pabloite Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left) has actively endorsed the government announcement for a moratorium on certain evictions and declared that this shows what can be achieved by pressure from below. It declared the general strike to be a great success, although it has changed nothing. As the crisis deepens and workers increasingly turn away from the unions and the PSOE, Izquierda Anticapitalista and other pseudo-left organizations are intensifying their efforts to create illusions in these increasingly discredited organizations.

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