

Spanish Popular Party government launches assault on public education

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Last Friday, the Spanish Popular Party (PP) government approved a new draft law designed by Education, Sports and Culture Minister José Ignacio Wert. If passed by the congress, where the conservative PP has a majority, it will slash funding for and lead to the dismantling of public education.

It will be replaced by a system reminiscent of fascist times, involving compulsory religious instruction and limits on the use of the Catalan, Basque and Galician languages in regional schools. Wert called the new reform “eminently practical, sensible, gradual and, of course, not in any way, ideological”.

The authorities have already cut billions from the country’s education and health care budgets, with the main assault occurring at the regional level, where governments who have the main responsibility for education have cut around €4 billion (US\$5.3 billion) in two years. At the same time, the number of students in schools has increased by 320,000 and in universities by 200,000 over the past two years.

Wert has already introduced measures destroying the quality of public education. Class sizes have been increased by 20 percent, and teachers have been forced to increase the number of hours taught by cutting the time used to prepare classes. Some 2,000 vocational training programs planned for 2013 have been cut. Fees for university education have gone up by 50 percent, to around €1,700 to €2,000 a year, and grants on which lower-income students depend have been cut by 11 percent.

The draft legislation aims at creating a generation of youth with basic qualifications entirely geared to the needs of big business. Students at ESO level (beginning at 14 years old) will choose between paths towards *Bachillerato* (high/secondary school) and vocational *Formación Profesional* (FP-Professional Formation).

FP students will only study science subjects relative to their choice of trade, and it will be extremely difficult to change path after age 15.

The draft also eliminates the *Selectividad* exam, a non-compulsory exam taken by students after secondary school in order to go to university. Now each university will be allowed to set its own access tests.

The draft also aims to meet the demands of business and the “requirements of the labour market” for more a productive workforce by narrowing the curriculum. Time spent on music, art, sports, technology, classical culture, and others so-called “less important subjects” will be reduced. Basic subjects including languages, maths and sciences will be required at all stages of education and more time will be spent on them.

The draft law opens the door to more charter schools (private schools subsidised by the state), already attended by 25 percent of Spanish children, and in which the Catholic Church has a strong presence. This move has been dressed up in talk about freedom of choice for families to choose which type of school their children go to.

Public schools will have more autonomy to design and implement teaching methods. Head teachers will be chosen by local and regional education authorities instead of teachers and parents on school boards. External evaluations will be established at all stages and the results published in league tables to encourage school competition and selection of pupils.

The new law will create vast disparities between public schools in wealthy or middle-class areas and those in working class areas. It will create more technical schools for working class children focused on lower-paid jobs, while children of the more affluent will go to university.

The law introduces more “flexibility,” so that

teachers can be moved from one subject to another as well as being transferred from primary to secondary or FP education. Teachers will be compelled to teach subjects outside of the fields for which they are qualified.

The new law eliminates €60 million in social spending for programmes aimed at preventing students from dropping out of high school. The PROA programme, which provides after-school classes for students with learning difficulties, will be slashed.

While drafting this legislation, Wert worked closely with the Catholic Church hierarchy. When the daily *El País* asked how much the Church has influenced the law, he replied: “that belongs to State secrets”.

One of the most reactionary parts of the law is the imposition of “Confessional Religion” as an alternative subject to “Cultural and Social Values” in primary schooling, and “Ethical Values” in secondary.

“Ethical Values” itself replaces “Education for Citizenship and Human Rights”, passed by the previous Socialist Party government and heavily criticized by the PP and the Catholic Church, which labelled it “totalitarian”. The archbishop of Toledo, Antonio Cañizares, called its references to sex education, homosexuality and secular values “an attack on the family” and those teaching it as “collaborating with evil”.

Sex-segregated schools, mostly under the control of the Catholic Church, will continue to receive subsidies despite the Supreme Court recently ruling against them on grounds of discrimination. Most of these schools would not be able to survive without state grants.

In the new legislation, the PP government is encouraging the rewriting of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship that followed it. As minister in charge of culture, Wert has already approved a generous €100,000 government grant for the Spanish Biographical Dictionary published by the Royal History Academy (RAH) which includes many historians of the Francoist revisionist school.

In the volumes so far available, the atrocities committed in the Civil War by Franco’s forces are systematically omitted, while those committed in the Republican zone are given full attention. Franco is described as becoming “famous for the cold courage he showed in the field” and as creating “a regime that was authoritarian, but not totalitarian.”

The “ideological” assault by the PP government extends to limiting the use of the regional languages, with Wert publicly stating that he wanted to “Spanisize Catalan schoolchildren”. While Spanish remains a “core subject”, the current co-official languages (Catalan, Basque and Galician) are relegated to a “specialised subject” at schools, alongside a foreign language, which would be taught as a “specific subject.” Co-official languages will become a third-class subject without exams in secondary education.

The PP’s whipping up of Spanish chauvinism has played in the hands of Catalan and Basque nationalist parties. They are using this latest law not to criticise cuts to education—which they themselves have carried out in their respective regions—but to call for the formation of separate states in Catalonia and the Basque country, which they would control.



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