Strikes and demonstrations rock Spain

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On Saturday, hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations in over 80 cities around Spain on the 32nd anniversary of the attempted coup led by Civil Guard Lt. Col. Antonio Tejero, who seized the Congress of Deputies in 1981 to reverse the transition to bourgeois democracy and go back to Francoism. The main demonstrations took place in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Vigo.

The main slogan in Madrid was “No to the financial coup. We don’t owe, we don’t pay.”

In other cities the marches went ahead under banners such as “Against the coup of the markets”, “No to the brutal adjustment policies” and “The government has to resign”.

The demonstrations, known as F23, were called by the platform Citizens’ Tide (Marea Cuidadana), an organisation which includes remnants of the 15-M indignados movement, the Communist Party-led United Left, the Mortgage Victims Platform (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, PAH), and anti-austerity organisations such as the Green Tide against education cuts, the White Tide against health care privatisation, and dozens of others.

In Madrid, marches began at different points in the capital and converged at Neptune square near Congress where they were met by 1,400 riot police who blocked off a wide area around the parliament building, the Ritz Hotel and the stock exchange.

Following the mass demonstration in Madrid, the police violently attacked the protesters who did not go home and arrested 45 people, including nine minors, charged with “vandalism”, “disturbing the peace” and “assault against authority”. About 40 people were injured.

Ironically, more were arrested during last Saturday’s protest than among the army officers involved in the coup 32 years ago.

F23 was the latest in a series of mass protests in recent weeks against cutbacks to social and health care services being imposed by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s Popular Party government, which has been rocked by corruption allegations of kickback payments to Rajoy and other top officials from real estate developers. (See “Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy implicated in corruption scandal”)

A week earlier, thousands marched in over 50 cities to protest harsh repossession laws that have led to 400,000 evictions. In Madrid, the Spanish-born secretary general of the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), Beatriz Talegón, was jeered by protesters and had to be escorted away by the police. She had been heavily promoted by the media as a radical for accusing the main delegates of the social democratic parties at the Socialist International conference held in Portugal of being out of touch with the problems facing young people while meeting in a luxury hotel. But workers and youth rightly saw her as a member of the Socialist Party, which was responsible for the first round of austerity measures whilst in government.

In early February, mass demonstrations were held in Madrid and another 15 cities, including Barcelona and Valencia, in defence of public health care and against the cuts. For the fourth time this year, thousands of doctors, public health care workers and users marched on the streets against austerity policies that have seen nearly €7 billion (US$9 billion) cut from central and regional health budgets in the last three years, representing over 10 percent of total funding.

During these weeks, major companies, public administrations and banks have announced mass redundancies, adding to the ranks of the already record 6 million unemployed.

The leading Spanish tour operator Orizonia Group announced an ERE, an administrative “workforce adjustment” process required of businesses, which will involve 4,000 workers. The company announced that the February payroll is in jeopardy. The ERE at Orizonia follows one agreed between management and unions at travel company Globalia affecting 2,500 workers, involving job losses, a 25 percent cut in shifts and wage reductions.

Spanish utilities company Gas Natural Fenosa, which has 10,000,000 customers worldwide and increased its profits to €1.44 billion in 2012, has announced a "non-painful adjustment" of employees as part of its strategic plan for 2013-2015. The last time a "non-painful adjustment" occurred was in 2008, when the two major trade unions, the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and the UGT (Workers General Union), agreed to 600 layoffs (16 percent of the workforce)

The Polytechnic University of Madrid has announced that 301 workers will be sacked, and the remainder will have their salaries cut due to the slashing of €39 million from the Madrid regional government for the 2013 budget.

Bankia, the bailed-out, state controlled bank, has agreed with the CCOO and UGT to the sacking of 4,500 workers, and CaixaBank has announced the slashing of 3,000 jobs. Banco de Valencia has announced that 890 of its 1,613 workers will lose their jobs, on top of the 360 sacked last November. All of these arrangements are currently being negotiated with the unions, which have colluded with layoffs, salary cuts and the increase in working hours.

The restructuring of the banking sector comes after the meeting held between the euro zone finance ministers on December 3 last year that approved a €37 billion rescue package for four banks that were already functioning with Spanish state support: Bankia, Catalunya Caixa, Novagalicia, and Banco de Valencia. The terms imposed by the ministers included cutting the size of their business by 60 percent and closing 50 percent of their branches.

But the onslaught on jobs in the banking sector is not finished. The Association of Spanish Banks has stated that 30,000 jobs and 10,000 offices are surplus to requirements. Last November, CCOO general secretary for the financial sector, Luis Jiménez, defended these arguments saying, "In Europe the average employees per office is 10 workers and are more efficient than the Spanish." In reference to redundancies, he said, "The banks enjoy a sufficient [financial] base to make comfortable adjustments for those who want to leave."

Strikes have been a daily occurrence in the private and public sector. According to the Ministry of Employment, at least 80 national strikes will take place this year, 23 percent more than in 2012. The unions are doing their utmost to control them.

The strike by Iberia ground staff and cabin crew that commenced a week ago and which forced the cancelation of some 1,200 flights has been suspended until next month in order to give the unions more time to prepare a sell-out. (See "Iberia airline strikers clash with Spanish police") Public Works Minister Ana Pastor announced on Thursday that Iberia and the unions had agreed to invite Gregorio Tudela, professor at Madrid's Autónoma University, to act as mediator in the dispute.

In Seville, garbage collectors went out on strike for 11 days against the municipal collection company Lipasam. A ballot to continue the strike was nullified by the CCOO on the grounds that it included temporary workers and a second one held excluding them. The strike was finally betrayed by the CCOO, which helped impose a 3.6 percent wage cut and an increase in working hours.

In Barcelona, bus drivers took strike action for the reinstatement of Andreu de Cabo, sacked after filing an official complaint accusing the bus company of embezzlement and other irregularities. In the same city, 15 Telefónica workers are on a hunger strike for the readmission of a co-worker sacked after applying for medical leave and for the improvement of working conditions in the company.

In Madrid and Seville, workers at the multinational producer of sanitary products Roca went on a three-day strike against plans to eliminate 486 jobs. They are on indefinite strike and forced the unions to call off negotiations with the company, during which leading UGT official Julio Mateo stated: "If the [factory] plants have to remain idle we offer to make the necessary economic sacrifices."

Last Wednesday, 2,000 judges, prosecutors and civil servants of the judiciary went on strike against new legal fees, the elimination of locum judges and the proposed reform of the CGPJ legal watchdog.