Spanish government rejects unions' pleas for anti-crisis pact

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Last year, Spain's trade unions threatened the government with a general strike if a red line of six million unemployed was crossed.

Instead, with 6.2 million out of work (27 percent of the population) and 1.8 million households with everyone unemployed, they have offered a State Pact (Pacto de Estado) for "economic policy change" between the "social partners"—the right wing Popular Party (PP) government, opposition parties, big business and the unions.

A meeting with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy for talks on May 16 was the first time union general secretaries Ignacio Fernández Toxo (Comisiones Obreras, CC OO) and Cándido Méndez (Unión General de Trabajadores, UGT) had been invited to discussions with business leaders since the PP came to power 17 months ago.

Toxo complained afterwards that their offer had been rejected. "We have worked with the idea of a great national consensus for a situation that, without exaggeration, can only be described as a national emergency", he said. "Rajoy thought a grand bargain was an unlikely scenario."

Rajoy did not simply ignore the trade unions' appeals for collusion with the ruling class, however. He merely dictated terms.

"We talked about the major reforms still to be done, including reforms of the public sector, pensions and vocational training", he revealed.

"We agreed on the need to open a framework for dialogue", he added, before announcing the creation of working groups involving the different social partners to stimulate discussion on social protection, employment and social security. Rajoy concluded by praising the "wage moderation and business benefits employers and unions agreed in 2012."

For months, the CC OO and UGT have been campaigning for a renegotiation of the infamous Moncloa Pacts, which helped prevent a revolutionary reckoning with the crimes of fascism after the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco and the transition. They utilised the big turn-out for the traditional May Day demonstrations this year to call for a new pact entailing economic policies that would stop looking towards Europe and concentrate on Spain, defend the right to take to the streets (after recent police repression of demonstrations, etc.), reinforce collective bargaining, defend the public sector against privatisations, and enhance democracy. Their proposals are mere tinkering with the economy, and in some cases echo the concerns of sections of the bourgeoisie within Spain and the European Union.

The huge opposition expressed by the hundreds of thousands of people on May 1 is now being portrayed by the unions as "a clamour for pacts" and the "vehicle" that expresses the peoples' "discontent". They made clear that the "vehicle" they are in charge of is a safety valve that they will drive into a blind alley. CC OO Communications Secretary Fernando Lezcano reassured the government that the unions posed no threat declaring, "Nor is this the time to create a crisis leading to early elections."

In other words, the PP government, which the unions blame for Spain's social misery, should be allowed to remain in power for another two years and carry on its work. This is at a time when support for the government is at its lowest ever. The approval rating for Rajoy is just 18.2 percent and members of his cabinet are trying to distance themselves from him as are the so called "barons" (leaders of the autonomous regions).

The aim of a grand pact, the unions say, would be to

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“work out a common exit strategy” from the “social emergency” Spain finds itself in. The call for such a pact is a bid to gather together all the political and social forces of the bourgeois state to impose further cuts and determine the best means by which opposition within the working class can be crushed.

Lezcano adds that “(T)he situation requires a convincing citizens’ response in face of a Government incapable of confronting the severity of the crisis … the recession demands solutions … hence the urgent need for a national agreement.”

Recognising the danger of the emergence of a revolutionary situation he warned that if an agreement was not reached, “(A)nything can happen, an explosion, a retreat or outbreaks of individual desperation, as in Italy.”

UGT head Cándido Méndez said on Sunday, “When bad times come, you unite or you fall and we are the union.”

The Socialist Party (PSOE) issued its own call for national pacts between the parties. Organisation Secretary Óscar López has demanded that the government “listens to the street” and looks for pacts with the trade unions and the political forces in order to “get Spain out of a dramatic situation.”

For their part, the Spanish Confederation of Employers (CEOE) and the Institute of Family Businesses (IEF) urged the government to listen to the calls for talks issued by the PSOE and the unions in order to “tackle the necessary reforms”. A spokesman for the CEOE insisted, “We must continue with reforms, reforms and reforms, without fear; and if this is done by consensus, wonderful.”

The “reforms” the employers have in mind include a drastic cut in the three million public sector employees, the “restructuring” of state services for the benefit of private enterprises and an intensification of attacks on employment rights. Even the king in his regular meetings with the prime minister and the leader of the opposition has raised “the importance of finding consensus to fight against unemployment.”

National pacts such as the one now being proposed by the unions are doubly cynical, considering that they have directly collaborated with the passing and implementing of reforms and, where they have not, they have demobilised the working class and allowed the government to impose them by decree (Decretazo).

In the last three years, the unions have signed agreements with both the PP and previous PSOE governments and the employers that have seen the pension age rise from 65 to 67; increases in the number of years required to obtain a full pension; and labour reforms that ended collective bargaining, cheapened redundancy payments and made it easier to hire and fire workers. Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría boasted recently that 300,000 public sector jobs have been destroyed in the last year.

The list of betrayals of workers’ struggles stretch from the air traffic controllers—whose cut in wages by 40 percent set the benchmark for every airline—to pilots, car workers, teachers, health workers and public service workers. At the same time, union leaders have enriched themselves by using union insurance agencies and legal firms to negotiate layoffs and keep a percentage of redundancy payments.

Little wonder that Rajoy understood he held the high ground. Even as he agreed to take part in the May 16 talks, he declared that he was not prepared to “talk about or negotiate anything that might imply a return to the policies that have brought us here”. To make sure everyone got the message, the government announced a new round of cuts and tax increases.

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