

Madrid garbage collectors strike against layoffs and wage cuts

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Thousands of garbage collectors and gardeners employed by cleaning companies FCC, OHL, Sacyr, and Ferrovial grouped in the Association of Public Cleaning Companies (ASELIP) have been on indefinite strike in Spain's capital Madrid since November 5.

The 6,000 workers are opposing mass redundancies and pay cuts. Last month, the companies announced there would be 1,400 workers laid off out of the total of 6,500 (28 percent), and wage cuts of up to 43 percent. The average monthly salary is between €1,000 and €1,300 (\$1,350-\$1,750), with younger workers earning €900.

On the same day the strike started, 8,000 people marched in Madrid under the banner "Cleaners and gardeners of Madrid in struggle. Against cuts and redundancies! For the defence of our working conditions!"

FCC, OHL, Sacyr and Ferrovial are giant corporations originating in the construction industry. After the collapse of the real estate bubble in 2008, they diversified their activities and entered the public cleaning and maintenance sector. However, revenues have suffered as a result of successive austerity policies imposed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government and the Popular Party (PP) led to the slashing of funding to local governments. In August 2012, Madrid town council decided to reduce cleaning and maintenance spending by 30 percent.

From the beginning the role of the trade unions has been to wear down workers' resistance and openly sabotage the struggle.

On October 4, after ASELIP's announcement, the PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT), with eight of the 15 representatives on the collective agreement committee, called an indefinite strike for the end of the month without naming a day. The two other

unions involved, the Communist Party-aligned Workers Commissions (CCOO) with four committee members and the anarcho-syndicalist General Workers Confederation (CGT) with three members, called the UGT strike decision "precipitate." CCOO spokesman Félix Carrión declared, "We have still not seen anything, no specific proposals [from ASELIP] and we think that there are alternatives to layoffs."

On October 16, two UGT mass meetings took place in which the 3,000 workers present unanimously voted for strike action to begin on October 26. The CCOO also held two assemblies, but the 1,300 workers voted to postpone the strike until November 15 after union officials insisted there was still room for negotiations with the employers.

A CCOO statement published November 8 stated that "the unions have formulated alternative and reasonable proposals to redundancies: freezing wages, not covering vacancies, an early retirement plan, a programme of incentivised redundancies and cuts in spending such as clothing. Not one of these have been accepted."

When the companies repeated their decision to lay off 1,134 workers, the unions declared they would postpone the strike from October 26 to November 4 and then took part in meetings with the companies four times in a desperate attempt to prevent that strike from taking place.

Since the strike began, the unions have refused to mobilise other workers facing similar attacks. Instead they have limited the campaign to attempts to pressure the Madrid city government ruled by the PP to force the companies to negotiate and impose sanctions for not adhering to their cleaning contracts.

The city government has been totally complicit in the attack.

Last August, Madrid agreed to change the control system overseeing the new privatized services contracts. The companies no longer have to provide minimum human or material resources to these activities. The unions did not oppose this, opening the way to layoffs.

In August, 350 workers did not have their contracts renewed. They were abandoned by the unions. Most did not have unemployment benefits because they had not been formally sacked.

The Madrid city council has also decreed that 40 percent of the cleaning services have to be maintained, which it is allowed to impose under Spain's draconian minimum services legislation. The unions have agreed to abide by the ruling and called on workers who are randomly selected to carry out these functions. Workers have attempted to prevent the minimum services being carried out by picketing workplace entrances and sabotaging tyres of some work vehicles. Madrid City Hall has sent 60 police vans and four anti-riot vehicles to escort minimum service workers.

The unions are continuing to negotiate to reach an agreement with the companies that will inevitably entail redundancies and wage cuts, as they have done in other sectors.

The pseudo-left groups are playing a pernicious role in supporting the union bureaucracy's role as labour police dedicated to containing the strike. They insist the strike is proof there is still life left in the rotten union apparatuses and condemn anyone who dares to question this.

En Lucha (In Struggle), the Spanish affiliate of the British Socialist Workers Party wrote, "as we see, CCOO and UGT ... have launched a call to an indefinite strike, which contrasts with the fact that it has been one year since the last general strike at national level; this shows that, despite their sometimes embarrassing performance in certain circumstances, they can call decisive actions. It is therefore important to avoid sectarianism against these organizations, even though we have to criticize them many times."

This statement ignores the strategic experiences made by the Spanish and international working class over the past decades with the trade unions. In every country, to preserve its privileged existence, the union bureaucracy has actively colluded in the systematic lowering of wages and the destruction of jobs and working

conditions.

En Lucha never states precisely who is supposedly advancing "sectarian" positions, although we can guess that they are workers themselves. Only 16 of every 100 workers are in unions and over half of respondents in the latest polls on union satisfaction rated them as either "bad" (19 percent) or "very bad" (34 percent).

El Militante (The Militant), the former Spanish section of the International Marxist Tendency, the Pabloite Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anti-capitalist Left) and the former Morenista tendency Clase contra Clase (Class against Class) all published for the record statements praising the "solidarity", "unity" and "coordination" between workers. Not once do they mention the role of the unions as the main instrument of the ruling class in dividing workers. By doing so they are giving a blank check to the unions to carry out their betrayal.



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