

Unions end Madrid cleaners' strike

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After 13 days on indefinite strike, the trade unions representing Madrid's 6,000 garbage collectors and gardeners—the CCOO, UGT and CGT—have called it off.

Last month, the cleaning companies announced 1,134 workers would be laid off out of the total of 6,500 (28 percent) and wages cut by up to 43 percent.

The capitulation came rapidly after Madrid's Popular Party (PP) mayor, Ana Botella, gave the unions and the companies a 48-hour ultimatum last Wednesday to end the strike. She accused the strikers of "vandalism" and failing to provide 40 percent of services that the council had imposed under "minimum services" legislation. Botella threatened to use strikebreakers if a deal was not reached, a measure that is illegal in Spain.

The police have so far arrested 19 workers accused of "public disorder" and "threats against authority," identified and warned 249 who have been involved in protests and pickets, and started proceedings against a number of others for attempting to stop workers carrying out minimum services.

At first, the unions reacted by declaring they would appeal against strikebreaking if it was imposed. The Communist Party-aligned CCOO warned that such a measure would "risk radicalising the conflict," and its Madrid general secretary, Jaime Cedrún, hoped that "there would be no one injured." The CCOO insisted there was sufficient "margin" to reach an agreement with the companies.

The unions' supine response encouraged the Madrid council to contract TRAGSA, a company that provides emergency services, to send in 200 strikebreakers, escorted by 600 local police, to remove 460 tons of waste last Friday night. The company recruited 90 volunteers and hired the rest from the employment agency Randstat at €85 a day, a substantially higher wage than the striking workers were being paid.

By Sunday morning, the unions had signed an

agreement involving a wage freeze and forcing all workers to take six weeks' unpaid leave each year until 2017. The average monthly salary is between €1,000 and €1,300 (US\$1,350-US\$1,750), with younger workers earning €900—a 20 percent pay cut.

Vacancies caused by retirement, resignations or redundancies will not be filled, which dramatically affects the working conditions of employees already overloaded with work due to job losses imposed over the years. Redundancy payments have also been altered.

During negotiations, the 350 workers who did not have their contracts renewed in August were not even mentioned. They were abandoned by the unions. Most do not have unemployment benefits because they had not been formally sacked.

In exchange for these huge givebacks, the companies will not carry out the planned 1,134 redundancies and 43 percent wage cuts.

The speed with which the union capitulated was designed to bludgeon the Madrid workers into voting for the agreement. In *El País*, Matías, a cleaner for 11 years, said, "Seeing all the cuts, we have voted for the best option there is." Daniel, a gardener for 14 years, added, "We have lost some things, but at least they are not going to sack 1,200 people."

Another worker stated bluntly, "This is a sellout. The only thing they are doing is reducing the service because the ERTE [temporary redundancy scheme] will mean fewer workers cleaning the streets."

The unions' capitulation is even more treacherous given that they have members in the TRAGSA workforce who are also under attack. TRAGSA is imposing a redundancy scheme involving 836 workers. The same unions involved in the Madrid dispute issued the usual ritual solidarity resolutions expressing their "total support to the just demands of the cleaning workers of Madrid" and declaring their refusal to

participate in the “tricks of the mayor.”

What they did not do is oppose the assembling of a strikebreaking force by mobilising TRAGSA workers, most of who refused to scab. Instead, the unions stated that as employees of a public company they would have to obey orders if they were told to break the strike.

The agreement has been celebrated by the unions as a “great victory.”

The capitulation of the unions opens the way for the ruling class to step up demands for more-repressive measures, with Botella declaring that it is necessary to pass “a law on strikes to prevent these situations...the citizens cannot be hostages of a conflict.”



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