

# Spanish government clamps down on public protests

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The Spanish Popular Party (PP) government is preparing legislation to drastically curtail the right to protest and freedom of speech by imposing huge fines and jails sentences.

Last week Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz presented a draft law to replace the 1992 Protection of Public Safety law, which provides sanctions for a range of “public order” offences.

Huge sanctions of between €30,001 and €600,000 (\$820,000) could be imposed for offences including recording and broadcasting images of members of the security forces in the course of their work; disturbances in public, religious, sport and other protests; demonstrating outside parliament, regional parliaments, the Senate and high courts without official authorisation; non authorised protests in front of important building such as nuclear power plants or airport landing strips; and “escraches”—protests in front of politicians’ houses.

Escraches were first carried out earlier this year, mainly by anti-eviction organisations, in protests outside politicians’ homes against the huge increase in home repossessions. The new law will also allow police to establish a “security perimeter” around any area, which protestors cannot cross. The inclusion of recording images of the security forces as an offense comes after repeated instances of police violence against protesters being captured on mobile phone cameras.

The new proposals also include fines of up to €30,000 (\$41,000) for disturbing public order; anything that hinders law enforcement identification including the wearing of hoods; threatening, harassing and insulting the security forces; burning rubbish containers; blocking roads with tyres or other items that may impede the normal movement of vehicles and people;

and climbing public buildings as a protest action.

The anti-protest law is a naked attempt to criminalise political dissent.

It is being drafted at the same time as the reform of the penal code which will include a minimum jail term of two years on those found guilty of instigating and carrying out violent acts during demonstrations.

The director general of the police, Ignacio Cosiό, applauded the draft bill, stating, “From the point of view of the police it is a necessary law and the ministry has displayed great awareness in heeding the day-to-day needs of the police.”

The state is being prepared for major conflicts with the working class.

Unemployment now affects 27 percent of the working population. A report by the Catholic Church charity Caritas said that there are now 3 million people living in severe poverty (defined as having less than €300 a month to live on) in Spain, double the 2008 figure. The report also found that the top 20 percent of Spanish society is now seven and a half times richer than the bottom fifth—the biggest divide in Europe. A separate study by Credit Suisse finds that the number of millionaires in Spain rose to 402,000 last year, an increase of 13 percent on 2011.

Workers and youth have repeatedly responded with mass protests and strikes. In 2011 there were 18,000 protests, most of which have been against austerity measures, tax hikes and the unemployment situation. Last year this doubled to 36,000 including two general strikes in March and November. Nearly 4 million workers went on strike, a 540 percent increase compared to the year before causing the loss of over 40 million work-hours. In the first nine months of this year (without two general strikes as in 2012), the hours lost due to strikes was nearly 11 million and 415,000

workers were involved.

In Spain, as throughout the world, the ruling class has responded to growing opposition by increasing police-state measures.

Spain now has now one policeman/woman per 190 people, making it the second country in the European Union after Cyprus with the largest police-citizen ratio—even though its rate of misdemeanours and crimes is one of the lowest in Europe. The Unified Police Union boasted in one of its reports, “Spain has one of the highest figures of police civil servants in Europe and, with exceptions difficult to compare, worldwide.”

Last year, the PP government announced increased expenditure on riot personnel and equipment including 20,000 bulletproof vests, rubber bullets, shields, tear gas and batons. It created a new Protection and Reaction Unit to take over some of the responsibilities of the riot police, including the surveillance and patrolling of demonstrations and other “black spots” identified by local police departments.

During these events, the anti-riot units have worn balaclavas and taken off their badges and other forms of identification, making it difficult to report violent attacks on demonstrators. Videos on YouTube show the use of police provocateurs inciting disorder.

Mass arrests and the brutal use of rubber bullets and baton-charges have become routine.

Rubber bullets can leave permanent disabilities, and can even kill. Last year a 28-year old youth was killed when he was shot by the Basque regional police during disturbances linked with football match celebrations.

Hundreds of injuries have been caused, including during the break-up of peaceful “indignados” camps in 2011, the strike by 16-to-18-year-old students in Valencia as well as the Madrid protest by striking Asturian miners and their supporters in 2012. This year, the pattern has continued with more arrests and injuries during the F23 anti-austerity demonstrations in February involving hundreds of thousands of people and in July during protests against the Bárcenas corruption scandal involving illegal funding of the PP dating back more than two decades and implicating the current Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

The use of rubber bullets to deal with protests has received the whole-hearted support of the unions. The largest trade union federation, Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO—Workers Commissions) with links to the

Communist Party of Spain, published a report during a debate in the Catalan parliament on a proposition to ban the use of these weapons which defended the use of rubber bullets in demonstrations so as not to reach what they described as the “Greek scenario.”



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