

Hundreds of thousands evicted in Spain since 2008 crash

Carlos Hernández, Alejandro López
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The brutal consequences of evictions being carried in Spain by the banks in collaboration with the courts and police was evidenced once again recently when Antonio Argobia, a chronically ill and disabled 54-year-old, was thrown out of his home in the working class neighbourhood of Lavapiés in Madrid.

Two weeks ago, in the early morning, police cordoned off the street where Argobia rented an apartment and refused entrance to anyone who could not prove they lived or worked there, attempting to preempt an anti-eviction demonstration of the type that has become so common in Spain.

Soon after, a group of riot police broke down the door of Argobia's apartment with a battering ram without any prior negotiation and with minimal warning. In the apartment were a mediator from a local Stop the Evictions (Stop Desahucios) campaign and two photographers from international news agencies, all of whom were arrested and charged with disobedience for refusing to leave the apartment. Argobia was carried out wearing just his pyjamas and put in a police van.

Throughout the morning, several hundred local people and protesters gathered outside the police cordon. When a group of them sat down on the street in an attempt to prevent the armoured police vans leaving, officers in riot gear dragged them away and began wielding their batons, causing several injuries.

Undeterred, the protesters chased the police, throwing everything from shoes to stones, trashcans and potted plants while shouting "Murderers!" and "Police out of the neighbourhoods of Madrid!"

Last Wednesday night, Francisco Valdés and Josefina Aranda, both in their 80s, and two sons who lived with them were evicted from the home in which they had lived since 1942. Josefina is disabled and unable to move from her bed.

Over 20 Civil Guards, officials from a judicial commission and two bulldozers were sent to evict and demolish their house. The elderly Valdés was involved in 11 years of litigation after paying a substantial sum in rent in good faith to someone who was not the real owner. Father and son explained that they did not have time to remove their belongings from the house before it was demolished and that the cost of renting somewhere else would leave them with no money for food, as their income is so low.

The terrible distress suffered by Argobia and the Valdés family is a daily occurrence in Spain. Typical are recent media reports highlighting a demonstration outside the BBVA bank in Zamora, protesting the eviction of a family with two young children and another family evicted from their small farm by the regional Castilla y León government after it slashed the subsidy on which they depended.

The outrage of the anti-eviction protesters is not hard to understand. They have become a major political issue in Spain, with widespread disgust at the police response and massive sympathy for those unable to pay their rents or caught in the mortgage trap at the same time as the banks have been bailed out with tens of billions of euros on low interest.

Since the financial crisis hit Spain in 2008, through the end of 2012, there have been hundreds of thousands of forced evictions. According to a document published last May by the country's top legal body, the General Council of Judicial Power (CGPJ), there were 252,621 foreclosures, with an additional 198,116 pending review. It is clear that most foreclosures result in evictions.

Stories of people taking their own lives on receiving eviction notices continue to shock the country, although they have now become commonplace in the Spanish

press. During the last two years, 16 such cases have been reported. Horrifying stories of people throwing themselves off balconies, or hanging or burning themselves alive in their homes, often as bailiffs approach seeking repossession, appear with shocking frequency.

The social catastrophe can be seen in a study by the National Statistics Institution in January this year, which show the number of suicides in Spain in 2012 grew 11.3 percent over the previous year, the largest recorded increase and now the leading cause of violent death ahead of traffic accidents.

The main organised opposition to the evictions is the Movement of Mortgage Victims (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, PAH), which was formed in 2009 on the basis that sufficient pressure would force the Popular Party (PP) government to change the eviction laws.

To this end, the PAH launched an anti-evictions petition with three main demands: a backdated halt to evictions, the creation of a pool of social housing, and a new law to allow those who have had their homes foreclosed to write off their debts by handing the property over to the bank.

The petition received 1.5 million signatures, but none of the demands were included in the PP's new Law to Protect Debtors, Debt Restructuring and Social Renting. The law was so narrow that only a very small proportion of those facing eviction were covered, and it did not apply to existing eviction orders. Regional and local authorities were given powers to provide low-rent housing to evicted families, but only a fraction of those affected were covered. Most regions were so highly indebted and subject to deficit targets that they were unable to provide the accommodation or, where they did, cut expenditure on other services.

After the petition failed, the PAH sowed illusions in a judgment by the European Court of Justice, whose only criticism was that the speed of evictions violated European Union consumer protection laws.

The support the petition received is proof of the huge resentment within the Spanish population to the endless austerity measures and social cuts, and the betrayals carried out by the unions and parties like United Left (Izquierda Unida, IU), which is imposing cuts in collaboration with the Socialist Party (PSOE) in the regional government of Andalusia. But workers must

break with the bankrupt perspective of pressure politics pursued by organisations like the PAH and their hangers-on in the pseudo-left. The struggle must be aimed at the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the financial elite and the nationalization of the banks and major corporations, under the democratic control of the working class.



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