

Spanish government attacks democratic rights

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The Spanish Popular Party (PP) government has accelerated its attacks on democratic rights in response to widespread opposition to the social catastrophe brought about by its austerity measures and those of its Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) predecessor.

According to the International Monetary Fund, which is complicit in imposing the austerity measures, the gap between rich and poor has grown faster in Spain since the global economic crisis erupted in 2008 than in any other country in Europe. A report by the Caritas charity shows that the top 20 percent of Spanish society is now seven and a half times richer than the bottom fifth—the largest divide in Europe. A Credit Suisse study revealed that the number of millionaires in Spain rose to 402,000 in 2012, an increase of 13 percent in just one year. At the same time, unemployment stands at 25.6 percent, and 56 percent amongst young people.

Working class resistance to impoverishment has increased. According to the employers' organisation, CEOE, during the first two months of 2014 there were 184 strikes supported by 56,693 workers, leading to 2,668,556 hours of work lost, a 5 percent increase on the year before. Overall in 2013, more than 15 million hours of work were lost, as a consequence of 1,259 strikes, in which over half a million workers participated.

The number of demonstrations has increased substantially. According to the Ministry of Interior, there were 36,000 demonstrations in 2012—double the number of 18,442 in 2011.

Under these conditions, the ruling class is resorting to openly authoritarian measures. Striking workers and protesters are being hauled before the courts, with prosecutors demanding savage sentences.

Eight Airbus workers are currently being prosecuted for clashes with the police outside the factory during the September 2010 general strike against the PSOE's labour reform. Prosecutors are demanding eight years'

imprisonment for each of those involved, the highest sentence ever demanded for similar cases since the end of Spain's fascist regime in 1978.

In Madrid, 113 air traffic controllers (ATCs) and eight officials of the USCA union are facing sedition charges, punishable by up to six years in prison, for participating in a wildcat strike in December 2010. The ATCs were striking against a PSOE government decree cutting their wages by 40 percent, increasing hours and reducing rest periods. The PSOE government responded by declaring a 15-day state of alert and sending in the military.

The ATCs' strike showed that when the trade unions fail to contain, isolate and demoralise the working class with useless one-day token protests, the state intervenes with naked repression. Bolstered by the unions' betrayal of that strike and others since, and by their collaboration in implementing cuts and labour reforms, the government now wants to lay the framework to legalise strikes altogether.

Labour and Employment Minister Fátima Bañez is calling for the "need for a law of minimum services" for all strikes, which will neuter industrial action as it does already in "essential services" such as public transport, where 50 percent of normal services have to be maintained. Bañez stated that such a law should "be spoken of naturally and responsibly with the representatives of the workers, the employers and the government". The unions will doubtless comply with her demands, as in the past.

The Spanish government has also been strengthening the forces of repression, including the anti-riot police involved in the control and monitoring of demonstrations. In 2013, the budget for anti-riot material and equipment was increased from €173,670 in 2012 to €3.26 million, and further funding promised.

A legal framework to criminalise protests is being created. On March 31, an unprecedented judicial case

was started against 20 youths accused of “crimes against the institutions of the state” for surrounding the Catalan parliament in June 2011 in an attempt to prevent deputies entering and voting on huge budget cuts.

The case has been brought by the Generalitat (the Catalan regional government), the Catalan regional parliament and the fascist union *Manos Limpias* (Clean Hands), which are demanding up to eight and a half years’ prison sentences for the accused.

The fact that the ruling Catalan party *Convergència i Unió*, currently leading separatist agitation in favour of an independent Catalonia, is pursuing the prosecutions and allying itself with fascists, shows the type of mini-state they are aiming to create in Catalonia: a pro-business, anti-working class setup where protests will be crushed and those arrested sentenced to years of prison.

Recent protests in the past three weeks have also witnessed a crackdown.

Following the huge March 22 demonstration against austerity in Spain’s capital, the Government Delegate of Madrid has announced that charges will be pressed against the main organisers for damages caused during disturbances at the end. Madrid mayor Ana Botella called for a ban on demonstrations in “historical-artistic settings, areas with significant tourism presence and strategic transportation routes” in the city, effectively restricting them to the outskirts—a request backed by Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz, who declared that “no right is absolute.”

During the March 26-28 strike against education cuts, the elimination of student grants and increase in tuition fees, which was supported by more than 2 million students, the police marched onto university campuses, reminiscent of their actions during the Franco era—under Spanish law police can only enter universities with permission of the rector. In Madrid alone, 80 students were arrested whilst occupying their faculties.

On March 29, a small protest in Madrid calling for the abolition of the monarchy was dispersed by anti-riot police who declared it “illegal” for not having notified the authorities. Journalists known for their criticism of the government and police conduct in demonstrations were attacked by the police and one arrested.

On the same day, in Barcelona, 1,400 anti-riot police

were mobilised against a demonstration of 8,000 protesting the draft Citizens Law, which curtails the right to protest and imposes heavy fines and imprisonment for “disobedience”.

The Spanish authorities show contempt for any criticism of their methods, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which declared that “any attempt to intimidate or attack journalists is a clear violation of the right of free media and cannot be tolerated” after four journalists were arrested in Madrid.

The PP regional president, Esperanza Aguirre, attacked the OSCE, stating, “Who are these people who come to Spain to watch our police as if this was a banana republic or a communist satrapy...it is intolerable, the presence of these people.”

A pattern of deliberate police provocations is emerging, with the police charging demonstrations at 20:30, half an hour before the main news programmes are broadcast.



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