

Spanish telecom workers strike against “precariousness and slave labour”

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Telefónica-Movistar telecommunications technicians and installers in Spain are continuing their two-month strike.

Since May 23, workers have been occupying the Mobile World Centre, formerly the telephone exchange, in the centre of Barcelona, to demand the end of “precariousness and slave labour.”

The workers are striking for higher pay rates, 30 holidays per year, two days rest per week and a proper 40-hour week. In many cases, they are paid on the basis of two or four hours of work per job, when in reality it can take eight or 10 hours, the difference being paid as cash under the counter.

This is the second time workers have occupied the building. Earlier this month, the first occupation was ended after strikers agreed to meet with the company. Management reneged on the deal, saying they would only recognise a document agreed with the main trade unions, CC OO and UGT, in negotiations behind the backs of workers.

The telephone exchange was made famous by the “May Days” events in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War.

The technicians on strike are employed by contractors and subcontractors including Abentel, Cobra, Comfica, Cotronic, Dominion, Elecnor, Itete, Liteyca, Montelnor and Teleco. The unions claim that about 30,000 of the 40,000 workers in around 200 such companies have supported the strike.

The strike began on March 28 in Madrid and was organised by the Alternative Workers Union (Alternativa Sindical de Trabajadores, AST). It was later joined by other unions—the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo), the Basque separatist trade union LAB (Lanfile Abertzaleen Batzordeak) and Co.Bas (Comisiones de Base)—a split from the Communist

Party-aligned Comisiones Obreras (CC OO). By April 7, the strike had become national.

The outsourcing of work by Telefónica has helped the company make multi-billions in profits every year. While the number of customers has risen from 10 million in the 1980s to 300 million today, making the company one of the largest global telephone operators, the number of directly-employed permanent workers has fallen by 50,000.

The strikers explain how for years Telefónica and its contractors have been replacing their permanent workforces with “chains of subcontracting, in which the conditions of every new echelon gets more precarious than the previous one.”

There has also been a big increase in the number of “self-employed workers,” who have no entitlement to unemployment benefits, holidays or pensions. In many cases, they have to provide their own Telefónica uniforms, tools and vehicles, which they have to run and maintain themselves. They often end up earning as little as 600 to 800 euros a month.

The two main trade union federations, the CC OO and the Socialist Party (PSOE) aligned UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores, General Workers Union), eventually joined the strike, only to stab it in the back. After calling their members out on six separate one-day stoppages in late April, they unilaterally signed an agreement with Telefónica-Movistar and several of the contract companies, which ignored the main demands of the majority of workers called out by the smaller unions. Strikes planned for May 6 and 7 were called off.

The CC OO-UGT agreement included new collective bargaining procedures, guarantees of employment, productivity and the levels of subcontracting. Most important for the unions was the formation of a new

“joint committee for dialogue” (“comisión paritaria de interlocución”). This comprises representatives from the two unions, Telefónica and the contracting and subcontracting companies. The committee and its associated substructures will provide secure and well-paid employment for scores of trade union bureaucrats, whose role will be to police the agreement.

The CC OO and UGT justified their betrayal by claiming that the strike by the other unions was illegal (i.e., not called by themselves). As a result, they have abandoned the strikers and their supporters to their fate and succeeded in dividing Telefónica workers from those employed by the contractors. This is a tactic in which both the CC OO and UGT are past masters—having used it in disputes at Panrico, Delphi and the air traffic controllers, to name but a few.

The strikers remain defiant and buoyed up by the tremendous solidarity they are encountering, but the CC OO and UGT betrayal and the perspective of the Alternative Workers Union and other smaller unions are putting the strike in danger. They receive no strike pay and survive on contributions made by other workers. Their economic situation is becoming desperate, with some having to resort to food banks.

The strike has been met with virtual silence on Spanish radio and TV stations. It only received coverage on the occasion of the CC OO/UGT-Telefónica agreement. The strikers have set up a website and produced a video appealing for it to be shared widely.

The alternative unions are either split-offs from the main federations and aligned with different sections of the Stalinist-led United Left (Izquierda Unida), the Pabloite Anticapitalistas, the state capitalist Militante or dissidents from the PSOE. They tell striking workers that only if they are more “militant” and make more sacrifices, can they pressure Telefónica and the contractors to make concessions, while they are also calling for the Barcelona city council, controlled since elections on May 24 by a coalition of pseudo-left and pro-independence parties including Podemos, to cancel its contracts with Telefónica.

The reason for the transformation of the unions into tools of management and government is not simply due to the widespread corruption of their officials. The degeneration of the unions is an international phenomenon and has deep objective roots in the

changes in world economy.

The globalisation of production has undermined the framework of all nationally-based social and labour market policies. While the trade unions in the past could apply pressure on companies and achieve at least partial improvements for the workers, today it is the exact opposite. Now they blackmail the workers to accept cuts to wages, benefits and working conditions to secure a competitive advantage for the corporations.



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