

Spanish youth protest education reforms

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Thousands of students in Spain staged a one-day strike last week taking to the streets of Spanish cities in protest against implementation of the current Popular Party (PP) government's education reforms—a series of pro-business, anti-student, anti-worker measures.

In Barcelona an estimated 3,000 university students marched through the city centre to the building housing the Catalan government. They called for the repeal of the reform, chanting “No to privatization!” and denouncing the placing of “education at the service of the market, not the public” and the imposition of the teaching of Spanish to the detriment of the Catalan language.

Several hundred gathered in Madrid, where authorities refused to allow the demonstration to be held in front of the Ministry of Education. In Valencia, several thousand students also demonstrated.

The protests targeted the “3+2 Decree,” which increases the amount of unpaid, in-company internship time required in university courses of study—providing companies even more cheap labour power.

The protests were also aimed at the continuing effects of the “Wert” reforms, named after José Ignacio Wert, who was appointed Education, Sports and Culture Minister in 2011 and sought to create a generation of youth with basic qualifications entirely geared to the needs of big business.

Since then billions have been cut from the country's education budgets, with the main assault occurring at the regional level where governments have the primary responsibility for education. Class sizes, university tuition fees and teachers' hours have increased, compulsory religious instruction was introduced and limits were imposed on the use of the Catalan, Basque and Galician languages in regional schools. Wert stated that he wanted to “Spanishize Catalan schoolchildren.”

The organisers of the actions are student associations linked to either pseudo-left or Stalinist political parties,

like the Sindicato de Estudiantes or the Frente de Estudiantes, that seek to channel the protests into the dead end of supporting one or another bourgeois party.

The response to the strike and protests nevertheless expresses to a certain degree the broad social frustration and anger felt by students and young people in Spain.

Some 45,000 students have been forced to give up their studies since the introduction of the reforms due to rising tuition and fees and an absence of financial assistance. One education “reform” after another has sought to reduce access to public universities and provide greater public funding for private educational institutions at all levels, from kindergarten all the way to masters' studies.

The outlook for young people who do finish university studies is bleak. Particularly since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, millions of people below the age of 30 have been forced to choose between either staying in Spain and having to work as a super-exploited segment of the workforce in poorly paid temporary and/or part-time jobs, “internships” that pay below the minimum wage, or working in areas that are unrelated to their studies—all while continuing to live at home with their parents—or migrating abroad.

Reports have emerged on the manifold ways that the law either allows or sets up legal loopholes that are used by companies to intensify exploitation of young people as a source of extra-cheap labour.

Companies have taken advantage of a provision in the law on paid internships to avoid having to sign an actual employment contract with a worker. They require that workers enroll in flimsy online courses on, say, cooking or playing the guitar, to maintain their status as a “student” and thus remain eligible for an internship contract, even though they have already graduated from university.

If they stay in Spain, few of the available opportunities allow young people to establish their own

household before the age of 30.

For some time now, politicians and the media have trumpeted the economic recovery in Spain and the supposedly fantastic upturn in the job market, but 77.4 percent of the jobs created in 2015 were temporary (up by 15.8 percent on 2014), and one third of the new jobs were part time. Unemployment in Spain is still 22.4 percent, and 55 percent of people below the age of 25 are jobless.

It is no surprise that a very large percentage of young people end up seeking a future in another European country, or even in Latin America. The latest official figures show that more than 750,000 Spaniards have emigrated since 2009, according to the official Spanish Statistical Office (INE). However, the true figure of young Spaniards leaving the country is likely to be significantly higher.

The INE deliberately undercounts the number of migrants, as this figure only includes those who actually go to the Spanish consulate and sign into the official registry of Spaniards living abroad. It does not count Spaniards who register with foreign social security or other authorities, but who fail to register with the Spanish authorities.

The migration of Spaniards abroad also constitutes a “brain drain” for the country, as highly educated young people, including those in the sciences, have seen funding for research grants virtually dry up, forcing them to leave the country if they wish to do research. Engineers can expect to earn perhaps double the going salary in Spain if they choose to work in Berlin, for example, while many nurses have left to help cover staffing shortfalls in the National Health Service in the UK.



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