

Spanish dockworkers threaten to strike

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Under mounting pressure from Spain's 6,150 dockworkers, the State Coordinator of Sea Workers union (Coordinadora Estatal de Trabajadores del Mar—CETM) has called for strike actions in March. Dockers are facing a savage attack on their working conditions by the Popular Party (PP)-led government, port companies and the European Union (EU).

The strike announcement follows the government's decision in early February to approve a unilateral legislative decree that would adhere to a 2014 ruling by the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The ruling says Spain was failing to meet the requirements of the EU Treaty's freedom of establishment principle.

Under the current system, Spanish ports require employers to give preference to members of stevedoring societies in each port, known as Public Limited Company of Dockworkers Management (Sociedad Anonima de Gestion de Estibadores Portuarios—SAGEP), which are funded by contributions from port companies. Dockworkers must be members of the SAGEPs, which recruit and train port workers before making them available to terminal and cargo operators.

The ECJ has found that the SAGEPs limited port companies' options for sourcing workers and last July levied a €15.6 million fine on the Madrid government.

To avoid the penalty, the CETM union has proposed substituting the SAGEP's closed system for one where the companies would not have to be legally bound to contract workers from the SAGEP's pool. This option was rejected by the country's minister of public works, Iñigo de la Serna, in collaboration with the National Association of Dockworkers Companies and Ship Consignees (Asociación Nacional de Empresas Estibadoras y Consignatarias de Buques—Anesco). The Spanish government wants to use temporary employment companies to recruit workers without training and dismiss those already working.

The port companies and the government see an opportunity to claw back concessions they were forced to give in a previous period. The Platform of Investors in Spanish ports (Plataforma de Inversores en Puertos Españoles—PIPE), a lobby consisting of major companies working in the ports (Noatum, OHL Concesiones, Algeposa, Boluda o Bergé), defends the complete liberalisation of the sector and a 60 percent slash in dockworkers' wages, claiming this would bring in €2.4 billion to the Spanish economy. These points are included in the report, "Advancing towards a more competitive port system", completed by the consultancy PwC.

The report says the average salary of €67,800 a year—a figure challenged by dockworkers—would be reduced to €26,934 after the wage cut. "The implementation of these reforms would have a very positive impact on port costs", the report states.

The draft law from the Ministry of Public Works would mean abolishing the SAGEP system in three years, with companies having to contract 75 percent of the workers in the first year, 50 percent in the second and 25 percent in the third. By the fourth year, there would be no one with the current contract. The state will pay for the redundancies imposed on the workforce.

The union says the new employment rules would cut 8,000 jobs.

The Spanish bourgeoisie unleashed a propaganda offensive accusing dockers of being "privileged", part of the "last labour aristocracy", of "nepotism" and of "barring women". Despite, or because of this, dockworkers have received enormous sympathy as evidenced in the Twitter hashtag #SOSestiba (SOS dockers), which became Trending Topic in the whole of Spain last week.

The PP's imposition of savage austerity measures and job and wage cuts demands the smashing of any

signs of independent working class action and a resort to ever-more dictatorial measures to achieve this. It is fully aware that this small section of the working class can paralyse the economy, with around 60 percent of Spain's exports and 85 percent of imports passing through ports. This is more than half of the country's foreign trade with the EU and 96 percent with third countries.

The main aim of the CETM, the General Union of Workers (Union General de Trabajadores), Workers' Commissions (Comisiones Obreras) and the General Confederation of Labour is to isolate and suppress dockworkers' actions and to close ranks with the PP government and the European financial elite. The unions have made it clear from the start they will do nothing that threatens the profits of big business or stops the capitalist offensive.

On February 14, after a meeting with the CETM, the government made it clear it would not retreat. The unions then called for limited and largely ineffectual strikes every other hour on February 20, 22 and 24. Three days before they were set to begin, however, the unions called them off to allow more time for talks.

On Monday, the government once again signaled it would not change any parts of the law. The following day, facing the growing anger of dockworkers, the CETM called for nine days of stoppages across dozens of Spanish ports. Instead of shutting all the ports at once, however, the strike will take place on alternate days at each port, undermining the impact of the walkout.

Antolín Goya, leader of the CETM, said the announcement was "only the presentation of a notice" and the union might "not execute our right to strike and not carry it forward". If the Council of Ministers does not present the decree today, "we will withdraw the notice and sit down to negotiate", Goya declared.

The pseudo-left Unidos Podemos is intervening to preserve the union bureaucracy's grip over the dockworkers. On February 15, representatives of the party met with the CETM and CCOO. In their press statement on the meeting, they accuse the government of "not showing any intention to negotiate and make agreements", before claiming that most of the port companies, except JP Morgan-owned Noatum Ports, were ready to make an agreement with the unions.

The statement urges "all parliamentary groups to

reject the decree law prepared by the Government to resolve this labour dispute without listening to the demands of those affected and following the guidelines of investors like JP Morgan".

The various groups orbiting in or around Podemos such as Revolutionary Left (Izquierda Revolucionaria), Class Struggle (Lucha de Clases) and Class against Class (Clase contra Clase), have all posted articles that have uncritically cited the unions' strike calls and glorified the workers' militancy, as if this were enough to stop the political gang-up of the companies, the government and the unions that workers confront. Their main role is to prevent workers from drawing political conclusions from the experiences the Spanish and international working class have had with the trade unions, which have, for decades, imposed the dictates of the corporations and their respective capitalist governments.

The dockworkers' struggle is part of an international battle against the privatisation of ports and the destruction of dockers' jobs and living standards. In the United States, the International Longshoremen's Association has threatened to shut down the ports on the Atlantic Coast and hold a demonstration in Washington, D.C., against outsourcing and the destruction of jobs. ILA officials were invited to speak at a February 21 rally of protesting Spanish workers at the port of Algeciras.

There is a powerful sense among workers that they need to unify their struggles across international borders against the global shipping and stevedore companies. This is only possible, however, if rank-and-file workers conduct the struggle over the heads of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions.



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