Spanish port workers prepare national strike against EU reforms

Alejandro López, Alex Lantier
27 February 2017

Spanish port workers unions have called nine days of strikes starting on March 6, as anger builds among workers against the conservative Popular Party (PP) government's port liberalization decree.

The decree, which still requires parliamentary ratification, would be a historic attack on the labour conditions of port workers in Spain, in line with similar attacks across southern Europe. It opens the door to mass redundancies, wage cuts of up to 60 percent, using temp agencies to provide low-paid contract workers, and slashing safety conditions.

By taking strike action, the port workers are entering into political struggle against the PP and the European Union (EU): the European Court of Justice has ruled that Spain must impose the reform or face sanctions. Their struggle can only be waged by mobilizing broader sections of the working class, in Spain and internationally, against EU austerity. The fight must be taken out of the hands of the unions, which have called the action only because, as wildcat actions spread, they feared totally losing control of the situation.

The State Coordination of Sea Workers (CETM), the main port workers union, has until now been doing everything it can to delay, break up, and call off struggles against the decree. Two weeks ago, it called a three-day strike to take place every other hour on February 20, 22, and 24—which it then called off in order to continue talks with the PP, which has pledged not to back down on the reform.

Finally, port workers took matters into their own hands, launching wildcat strikes in Valencia, Alicante, and Cádiz, where port companies' association Anesco (the National Association of Stevedoring and Ship Consignment Companies) reported a 23 percent fall in productivity. CETM officials initially downplayed these reports, claiming this was because workers lacked "motivation."

It is precisely such treacherous actions by the unions that have emboldened the PP to try to impose the liberalization decree, overturning an earlier agreement between Anesco and the CETM.

The strike can only proceed as a struggle against the port reform if workers reject the straitjacket that the union bureaucracy will seek to impose on it. The CETM has no intention of paralyzing Spain's 46 major ports. Rather, it is again proposing to strike on alternate days at each port, undermining the impact of the walkout.

The CETM is further trying to lull workers to sleep, by advancing the false perspective that they can rely on pro-capitalist opposition parties, like the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and Podemos, to block attacks on the port workers in parliament. In a statement published last week, the CETM appealed "to the common sense of the other parliamentary groups, so they do not support a modification of the port system which is, on the other hand, one of the most efficient in Europe."

It also quoted CETM spokesman Antolín Goya: "We will initiate union mobilizations and actions to re-establish communication, demand companies to make every effort to negotiate, and explain to parliamentary groups the error of an imposed norm that destabilizes a sector and destroys jobs."

The PSOE and Podemos are playing along, making empty criticisms of the decree. On Sunday, PSOE regional premiers Susana Díaz (Andalucía) and Ximo Puig (Valencia) complained that the decree "does not seek consensus and understanding between employers and workers."

Unidos Podemos spokesman Félix Alonso lamented that the PP "seems not to be aware of the economic and

© World Socialist Web Site

social repercussions of a solution that has not been agreed upon" by the unions and the port companies. He warned that if the PP imposes the decree outright, this will undermine the authority of the unions among the workers. In future, he said, "any agreement between the unions and companies will be a dead letter."

Claims that the PSOE and Podemos will help port workers defend themselves against PP attacks are a political fraud. These parties are servants of finance capital, whose international allies impose similar measures in other countries. In 2016, after two years of struggle, Portugal's Socialist Party government oversaw an agreement between the Portuguese Dockers Union and port employers' associations to liberalize the sector, imposing a wage scale going from €850 to €2,300 per month.

It was Podemos' ally in Greece, the Syriza-led government, that imposed the privatization of the port of Piraeus in the face of strike action by Greek dock workers. After striking for one month, the Federation of Greek Port Employees (OMYLE) called off the strike as it began to have a real financial impact on the ports. This was another testament to the role of middle-class, populist parties like Syriza and Podemos as enforcers of the diktat of the financial aristocracy.

At most, the PSOE and Podemos may try to delay and manoeuvre, in order to better impose attacks on the workers without provoking a major strike against Spain's minority PP government, which is very weak and unpopular. They fear that a major port strike could trigger far broader struggles in the working class—ending the "social peace" overseen by the unions, potentially bringing down the PP government and doing irreparable damage to their economic and political interests.

PSOE member César Ramos spoke for these concerns when he said, "we should be thinking more about social peace than the €21 million fine [from the EU for not imposing the liberalization decree]. That amount is insignificant compared to what we can lose if the conflict is maintained in ports."

Spanish business is now deeply dependent on exports and fears a port strike that would halt the flow of goods. Spanish exports have risen €65.3 billion since the 2008 economic crash, as successive PSOE and PP governments' austerity measures slashed wages and conditions. While Spain's economy collapsed, and mass unemployment spread, Spain also emerged as a profitable export platform for international capital.

William Chislett of the state-funded Elcano Royal Institute said, "Faced with plummeting demand from consumers, companies and the government, companies have had no alternative but to seek out markets abroad, or in some cases face going to the wall, particularly small and medium-sized ones. Exports thus became a matter of survival."

Port management and the PP are in a weak position, and they are acutely aware of explosive political discontent in the European and American working class after the election of Trump, which provoked mass protests internationally.

Precisely because of this, however, the ruling class will rely all the more on the treachery of the union bureaucracies and take ruthless measures against the workers. The media have already launched a hysterical and provocative propaganda campaign—coming from defenders of the Spanish government and the EU, which since 2008 have handed trillions of euros to the banks—accusing port workers of being "privileged" members of a "labour aristocracy."

This makes it all the more urgent for workers internationally to support Spanish port workers as strike action develops, and for the workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions, organizing it on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site