

El País warns Spanish unions of their loss of control over the working class

Alejandro López and Paul Mitchell
5 May 2018

In an editorial published on May Day, Spain's *El País* newspaper warned the trade unions they are losing influence and must respond to the growing class struggle, expressed in escalating strikes and social protests, which have erupted outside their control.

That *El País*, closely allied with the PSOE and the largest newspaper in Spain, issues such a warning is a powerful indicator that a fundamental change is taking place in the political situation on Spain and globally with revolutionary consequences. The more thoughtful sections of the ruling elite are deeply concerned that a fundamental tool for the suppression of social discontent has lost its authority and that something must be done about it.

"The commemoration of today, May 1," *El País* opined, "is surrounded and conditioned by unique political and economic circumstances. There are facts that the unions have to accept: social protests are being channelled by activists or groups that have nothing to do with the union organisations."

"The repeated and angry demonstrations of the pensioners or the tidal demands of women have transcended the limits of the major unions (UGT and CCOO) or even of any type of trade union association to look for more forceful forms of public presence. The unions have lost, so to speak, their dominance of the protest movement and a benign reading of this fact leads to the conclusion that they are not capable of channelling social conflicts, which is the task of representation to which they are called. At the same time, they have also lost much of the capacity for institutional influence they had since the 1980s."

Since the global capitalist crisis erupted in 2008, the CCOO and UGT have lost around 600,000 of their members. They represent just 1.8 million mainly elderly public sector workers, just 10 percent of Spain's 18 million-strong workforce.

During this period, the working class has faced relentless attack on its living conditions through austerity measures in education, healthcare and pensions, unemployment, precarious jobs and wage cuts. Unemployment, which

peaked at 27 percent in 2013, still stands at 17 percent. Youth unemployment is at 36 percent. Nearly half the workforce, around 8 million workers, earn just €1,000 or less a month, and another third (6 million workers) do not even take home the minimum wage of €735 (\$880) per month.

The unions have been active participants in this onslaught, which has only been outstripped by Greece in its ruthlessness. They have betrayed one strike after another and participated in collective agreements and labour reforms resulting in deteriorating working conditions for workers and fat profits for the employers and shareholders.

"Wage adjustment has caused us and other Spanish companies to increase competitiveness and efficiency," Rafael Vázquez, vice-president of production at Conesa, an industrial tomato processing plant in Extremadura, told the *Financial Times* last month. The company has tripled sales to €200 million over the past three years and helped Spain's economic growth rise by over 3 percent over the same period, well above the Eurozone average.

For these services to big business, the unions have been showered with millions of euros in subsidies from the state budget, regional and local governments, universities and think tanks. They have profited directly from the misery imposed on the working class, netting millions from training programmes for workers and the unemployed, while promoting private pensions schemes, some of which they manage.

The unions have been mired in corruption scandals, including union-appointed bank executives siphoning off millions through "phantom" credit cards and the creaming off of subsidies for state-sponsored redundancy schemes making it easier for companies to cut working hours and sack workers.

In the face of this record, *El País* blames the "loss of influence" of the unions over the working class on their "inclination" to represent the interests "only of workers with employment and not of those who lack a job or seek it with despair."

Moreover, “The trade union intelligentsia has not been able to articulate a coherent discourse for those affected by the financial crisis and the recession. They are the ones that today form the spearhead of social protest and those who are most in need of an institutional negotiating force; precisely, what unions should be doing.”

El País makes a wistful call to the unions to restore their credibility by providing “an answer” to “the excessive extension of precariousness employment,” “wage depression” and “the stagnation of the youth unemployment rate and that of workers over 45 years of age.”

The editorial concludes by appealing to the unions to “ponder on their responses to the serious disorder that has taken place in the labour market” and warns, “It is not enough to appear on May 1; you have to participate in the economic changes every day and recover your lost influence.”

The *El País* editorial is a remarkable and devastating exposure of the right-wing, anti-working-class character of the trade unions ... and of the pseudo-left groups that tail after them.

While the unions, year in, year out, stand by or actively collaborate in the imposition of austerity, the pseudo-left insist these bankrupt organisations are the voice of the working class, save for the problem of a few bad leaders.

These privileged middle-class forces populate the union bureaucracy and the labour studies departments of universities and receive well-paid jobs and pensions in return. They too have published numerous articles bemoaning the loss of influence of the unions, urging, like *El País*, that they put up some sort of pretence of opposition.

The Pabloite Anticapitalistas propose that the current “exhausted” trade union model must be replaced by “an open, feminist, class, militant and assemblyist unionism.” Calling for “trade unions that mobilise on the streets,” they make clear that such posturing is meant only to reinforce collusion between the trade union bureaucracy, the employers and the state in a “new legal framework for labour relations.”

Revolutionary Left, the Spanish affiliate of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), forlornly complains that “the leaders of CCOO” lack “an atom of will to mobilise workers” and are missing “the opportunity offered by the historic mobilisations of the pensioners” to push for a general strike “instead of dividing them with the sole purpose of trying to preserve their prominence and preserve some authority.”

The Morenoite Workers’ Revolutionary Current (Corriente Revolucionaria de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras) looks for salvation in the syndicalist CGT and CNT unions.

According to them, the “left trade unions have the opportunity and the responsibility to move forward in a reorganization of the workers movement if it unifies its efforts, abandons all sectarianism, deploys a policy of exposures and demands towards CCOO and UGT and puts itself at the head of the organization of the most important precarious sectors.”

In all the column inches written about the declining hold of the unions over the working class, no one addresses the main reason—that the globalisation of production has undermined the framework of all nationally based programmes. While the trade union bureaucracy in the past could apply pressure on companies and achieve at least partial improvements for the workers while still carrying out a defence of capitalism, today the trade unions work with big business and the state to impose cuts to wages, benefits and working conditions to secure a competitive advantage for “their” company and state against others.

The *El País* editorial is a confirmation of the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

On the day that it appeared, the *World Socialist Web Site* published “May Day 2018,” pointing out that “the conflict between workers and the unions is a defining feature of the growth of the class struggle in 2018.”

“These developments represent only the initial stage of an international process of expanding and explosive class struggle. They refute the reactionary nostrums of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left, which wrote off the working class as a revolutionary social force and claimed that the struggles in modern society would be centered on race, gender and sexual orientation.

“Those who rejected the revolutionary role of the working class did so to justify their alliance with and allegiance to the reactionary bureaucracies of the trade unions. No position of the International Committee of the Fourth International has been more bitterly attacked by the pseudo-left than its exposure of the right-wing role and anti-working-class character of the trade unions.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact