

Catalonia rocked by a week of strikes against austerity

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Hundreds of thousands of workers and students have participated in demonstrations and strikes in Catalonia demanding the budget cuts imposed by regional nationalist governments since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis are reversed.

The pseudo-left party Podemos has stepped in to suppress the resurgence of opposition after a decade of austerity to help get a regional budget passed. In return the Catalan nationalists will have to end their opposition to the draft 2019 budget of the Socialist Party (PSOE) government in Madrid.

This week, primary care physicians working for the Catalan Health Institute, which manages 80 percent of the health centres in the region, and doctors of the semi-private health providers went on strike for the fourth day in a row, called by Metges de Catalunya (Doctors of Catalonia) and the anarcho-sindicalist Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labour-CGT). They are protesting increased workloads with 1,000 doctors' jobs cut since 2008, lack of resources, pay cuts and demanding more time to attend patients. According to data provided by the regional government, the strike has received 70 percent support.

On Wednesday, hundreds of doctors protested in front of the regional parliament where firefighters were also protesting precarious jobs and intolerable working conditions. According to the Catalan ombudsman, firefighters worked 460,000 hours overtime last year and the region needs at least 600 more firefighters.

When both groups tried to enter the parliament, the riot police charged them. They responded with chants to the police of "You, you, it also affects you." Doctors shouted, "The firemen will always be on our side".

On the same day, university students went on strike to demand a 30 percent reduction in fees and equalization

of charges between ordinary and masters degrees. The strike was supported in all the major public universities including the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Pompeu Fabra, University and the University of Barcelona.

The CGT and Labour Union Coordination (Coordinadora Obrera Sindical-COS) called a strike of teaching and research staff at all Catalan public universities. They are demanding the improvement of working conditions, higher salaries and the elimination of wage differentials between teaching and research staff.

Non-teaching staff in schools also went on strike including classroom assistants, extracurricular staff, kitchen staff, and cleaners under the slogan "Without us, no school works, let us fight against outsourcing."

On Thursday university, primary and secondary school students and teachers joined doctors, nurses, students and firefighters in a one-day strike called by the CGT and two smaller unions, Ustec-Stes and Aspepc-Sps. Around 8,000 people demonstrated in the Catalan capital, where Ustec-Stes spokesperson Ramón Font criticized the Catalan government's €5 billion budget allocation for education, saying that €16 billion is needed to cover existing needs.

Civil servants joined the protest, holding a two-hour stoppage demanding the return of the wages that were slashed in 2013 and 2014 as part of the Catalan nationalist austerity drive.

For years the regional bourgeoisie has relentlessly promoted Catalan nationalism to bury the socio-economic concerns of workers and youth, both Spanish and Catalan. This had an impact. Support for an independent Catalonia was just 15 percent when the 2008 economic crisis began, rose to around 48 percent in 2013-14 and is now about 38 percent according to

polls.

This served as a cover for the massive austerity imposed by the Catalan nationalists, along with their counterparts in Madrid. In 2014 Santi Vila, then Catalan regional Enterprise Minister, openly declared, “If this country had not put forward a discourse based on nationalism, how would it have weathered adjustments of over 6 billion euros?”

It is estimated that between 2009 and 2015 healthcare spending was slashed by 31 percent, the highest of all 19 regions in Spain, social spending by 26 percent, and education spending by 12 percent. Catalonia was the region where university fees rose the most—by around 158 percent—so that the average cost of a university credit is €41.17 compared to the national average of €17.70.

Four years later, the growing levels of protests and strikes are clear indications that the working class is beginning to break out of the political shackles collectively imposed upon it by the nationalists, the trade unions and pseudo-left forces.

Regional president Quim Torra has said virtually nothing about this week’s strikes and protests, claiming that he would “continue working to reach the necessary agreements for the good of our citizens.” Eduard Pujol, spokesperson for Together for Catalonia, accused public workers of exaggerating their claims: “Sometimes we get distracted by issues that are not essential. 85 days waiting lists [in hospitals], should be 82... We are fighting for crumbs. We have to achieve a real resolution of the problem”. Pujol’s “solution” is to once again stoke up nationalism, declaring that Catalonia had to escape the “strangling” of Madrid.

The unions for their part are making every effort to contain the growing levels of militancy by limiting strikes to single days, partial stoppages or are postponing them altogether to avoid joint action with other sections of the working class.

On Wednesday, a planned strike by the Communist Party-led CCOO and Socialist Party (PSOE) aligned UGT of 250,000 regional public sector workers was reduced to a token two-hour stoppage and further action postponed to December 12.

The unions are also avoiding linking workers in the region with their brothers and sisters on strike in the rest of Spain in recent weeks, including Amazon workers in Madrid, postal workers, pilots from Iberia

and teachers in the Basque region. Even sections within the state apparatus such as state attorneys, prison guards and judges have been on strike.

Like other countries in Europe and throughout the world, Spain is entering a period of acute social and political crisis, characterised by the resurgence of the class struggle. In this context, pseudo-left forces such as Podemos are intervening to rescue capitalism and maintain the stranglehold of bourgeois parties over the working class.

In Madrid, Podemos is attempting to rally the separatist parties in the Spanish parliament to support the 2019 budget crafted by Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias and PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. The Catalan nationalists hold the casting votes to get the budget passed but have so far refused after state attorneys confirmed sedition charges against nine Catalan leaders for their role in declaring independence last year.

In Barcelona, Podemos-backed Catalunya en Comú Podem (CECP) is holding talks with Torra over the regional budget. According to most accounts, CECP is the only party that can allow the budget to pass after the small pseudo-left separatist CUP party, Torra’s erstwhile ally, withdrew its support.

To diffuse popular opposition CECP is proposing the regional budget includes a €1.7 billion increase in social expenditure. The only way the financially bankrupt Catalan government would be able to carry out such an expenditure, the CECP advise, is to vote in favour of the national budget, which allocates an increase in investment in Catalonia of €2.2 billion.

Meanwhile, the leader of the right-wing Popular Party, Pablo Casado, stating that “Catalan autonomy has got out of hand”, has demanded that Sánchez apply Article 155 of the Constitution to suspend the regional government again and impose control from Madrid “immediately, for an indefinite period.” Casado declared, “We have to put order back into Catalonia.”



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