

Barcelona taxi strike called off after six days, Madrid strike continues

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Striking taxi drivers in Barcelona last Thursday voted narrowly to accept the new decree proposed by the regional Catalan government to establish stricter regulations for VTC (vehicle for hire) licenses. These are used by ride-hailing companies Uber and Cabify to operate in Spain. Taxi drivers in the Spanish capital, Madrid, have continued striking.

Barcelona drivers voted to end their strike by 2,508 to 2,177. They lifted their blockade of the central Gran Via boulevard, after creating major disruptions in the city's traffic during the six-day strike.

The strike was joined by taxi drivers in Madrid last Monday and later spread to various Catalan municipalities, including Mataró, Sabadell and Terrassa. Riot police forcibly removed drivers blocking the Castellana Avenue, in Madrid's central north-south axis.

On Wednesday, at least 11 people were injured as striking drivers clashed with riot police on the M-40 motorway. Protesters burnt tires and garbage containers, as well as blocking access roads around the location where Spain's leading tourist fair, Fitur, was being held. One protester was arrested.

In total over 26,000 drivers, operating 15,723 taxis, had stopped working and blocked traffic in Spain's two largest cities. Many wore yellow vests to emulate those worn by protesters against the Macron government in France.

In Spain there are around 67,089 taxi licenses. The drivers are concerned about unfair competition from the ride-hailing companies benefiting from low taxes, cheap labour, unregulated fares and much cheaper operating licenses. Taxi drivers have demanded various forms of regulation in the sector for several years.

The transnational Uber reported \$2.45 billion profits in the first three months of 2018 on revenue of \$11.33 billion. Cabify has received large investments by BBVA, Spain's second largest bank.

After nationwide strikes and blockades last July, the Socialist Party (PSOE) central government approved a legal decree giving regional and local governments the power to decide the number of VTC licenses issued within regional and city boundaries, dissipating the struggle by taxi drivers. These new rules gave the ride-hailing companies four years to keep operating before their current licenses are subject to invalidation. Moreover, Cabify and Uber have promised to appeal any limitations on their operations to the Supreme Court.

Drivers saw through the bogus deal and continued their struggle. In Catalonia, the government responded by offering to restrict the booking of VTC services to at least 15 minutes prior to the desired collection time, with a clause leaving a further 45-minute extension up to the discretion of municipalities and the Barcelona mayor's office. Striking drivers demanded this period be extended to between 12 and 24 hours.

Uber and Cabify have threatened to leave the city, and destroy the jobs of close to 3,000 drivers, should the 45-minute extension be implemented. Their drivers staged a two-day strike against the proposal and blocked two lanes of Avenida Diagonal, slowing traffic on the main southwestern exit from the Catalan capital.

On January 21, as taxi drivers approached the Catalan Parliament to voice their demands they were blocked by the regional police, the Mossos d'Esquadra, resulting in a violent confrontation that left several of the protesters as well as police officers injured.

The following day, Barcelona taxi association Elite called for the vote the next day on whether to continue the strike or accept the 15-minute limitation offered by the government. The vote was set for noon on Wednesday at an assembly on Plaça Catalunya but was delayed until the late evening. As drivers waited to vote, some of them spoke to WSWs reporters.

Many were immigrant workers, mostly from Pakistan and Colombia, but also from other Latin-American countries and Morocco. Hussein and Afzal are from Pakistan. They have

one taxi and license between them and work in shifts. Hussein explained, “Most of us, I would say 90 percent, are individuals who bought a license that cost about €150,000 and now every month we are paying back the loans.”

“We’ve lost about half the work we used to have. At this point we barely have enough to pay our loans. If more VTCs come we won’t be able to make payments.”

Hussein took out a loan six months ago and said that he plans to pay it off in six years. He is worried about his falling income, because for him and his wife, it is a major investment. Many of his colleagues share his fears. “If we lose the battle ... we won’t be able to pay our loans and many will have our homes foreclosed. For others the debt will be transferred to their parents ... So that’s why we’re here—to save our future.”

Hussein opposed the offer made by the Catalan government. “We demanded 24 hours for booking-to-pickup time and they are giving us 15 minutes. That’s basically Uber and Cabify working as a taxi.”

Afjal added, “They say that they leave open the possibility of the city of Barcelona extending this time up to an hour. But we know this won’t happen because Uber and Cabify will take this to the courts. Every time we’ve made a deal it has been a trick.”

Asked about the role of the Socialist Party (PSOE)-led central government in Madrid and the separatist government in Barcelona regarding the VTC license issue, Hussein replied, “I don’t see any difference. The Catalan government is treating us the same, or worse! That’s why some people say that the politicians are bought and paid for by these multinational companies. Instead of acting in the interests of the workers here, they are depriving our children of food.”

Asked what they thought of workers joining across different industries, of immigrants joining native-born workers in Spain as part of a united struggle of the international working class, Hussein responded, “I believe that the time has come for all working people to be united and fight against this slavery because if we don’t try, if we don’t fight, in the end we will all be slaves of the multinational corporations that have all the money.

“The way things are going, I think that there will be two types of people, the five or six rich people in the world and the rest of us slaves working for them. We won’t be able to decide what we do in life. If we don’t struggle, we will lose our independence, to those few who want to make slaves of everyone.

“People may criticize us today, but tomorrow everyone will be out on the streets, because when these multinationals start causing them the same problems as they are causing us, they will understand why we are fighting here.”

Oriol, a taxi driver of many years, appealed to other sections of the working class and especially young people for support: “They want to eliminate the taxis because we are regulated and the VTCs are not. They want to replace us. Tomorrow this can happen to any sector, so we need their support.”

Juan and Ramon are veteran drivers. Juan expressed his frustration at the unfair competition between taxis and the VTCs. “We work with the meter, always charging the same for the same work. They [Uber and Cabify] are able to change their rates according to demand. When there’s low demand they lower their rates and take all our clients. When there’s high demand they hike it up.”

Asked about the Catalan government’s offer to enforce a 15-minute minimum pre-booking, Ramon said, “The one responsible is not the [VTC] customer, or the driver, but rather the company that supports the bad practice and the government that doesn’t hold the company responsible.”

Juan expressed his frustration with the explosion of VTC licenses. “They do the same job as us but without the same obligations, which are many,” he said. “Keep in mind that many young drivers have barely enough to pay their mortgage, and they have to pay the loan they took out to pay their taxi license.”

Ramon spoke about the different strata in the taxi industry: “One is the self-employed driver with no license who drives someone else’s taxi, another is the one who has his own taxi, still another is the license owner that hires out his taxi to be driven by others and then there is the owner of many taxis. There are entrepreneurs that own up to a hundred taxi licenses and cars. This kind of person doesn’t see things the way a driver with his own car does. We have different interests.”



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