

Strike wave paralyses transport system in Spain

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Workers from the state-owned Renfe corporation, which operates freight and passenger trains, along with pilots from Ryanair and ground staff of Iberia airlines paralyzed Spain's transport system over the weekend. There is deep, growing anger among workers over the massive growth of social inequality and worsening working conditions. An estimated 40,000 travellers were affected by strikes in the railways and airlines which began last Friday.

On Sunday, Renfe cancelled 170 trains on a new day of partial strikes called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), calling for an increase in Renfe's workforce and, in addition, that the company apply the reduction of the workweek to 37.5 hours.

This is just the latest of five railway work stoppages this summer, adding to those that already took place. On August 1, Renfe had to cancel a total of 1,152 trains, followed two weeks later with the cancellation of 950 trains on August 14. Last Friday, it cancelled 360 trains.

Under the control of the acting Socialist Party (PSOE) government, Spain's Public Works has imposed brutal minimum services to break the strike. The government demanded that workers must guarantee minimum services of 75 percent of commuter trains running during rush hours and 50 percent at other times. For long-distance high-speed trains, 78 percent of services had to be guaranteed and on mid-range, 65 percent of trains.

On the same day, Ryanair cancelled six flights in Spain due to a cabin crew strike protesting the Irish airline's plans to close its bases next January in Las Palmas, Tenerife South, Lanzarote and Girona, as well as the Portuguese base of Faro. This will affect hundreds of jobs. It is the first of 10 strikes called by the unions. Meanwhile, the Spanish Ryanair pilots'

union has also announced strike action against the closure of Ryanair's bases that could see 100 pilots lose their jobs.

The PSOE's Public Works Ministry has also acted ruthlessly, setting minimum service levels of 60 percent of the flights to international destinations with a flight time of five hours or more, and 35 percent of flights within the Iberian peninsula with a flight time of less than five hours.

This weekend, ground crew from Spanish flag carrier Iberia and Vueling, a part of British Airways-owned International Airlines Group, launched planned strikes at Barcelona's El Prat, Madrid's Adolfo Suarez Barajas Airport, Bilbao Airport and Mallorca's Palma Airport.

Workers are calling for an end to job precariousness and temporary work, which affects 50 percent of the workforce. They are also protesting staffing levels, which are not keeping pace with the growth of activity at the airport, a lack of permanent contracts, and work overload caused by the company's abuse of mandatory overtime and the reorganization of shifts and schedules to prevent some employees working up to nine consecutive days.

Vueling had to cancel 92 flights at the Barcelona airport this weekend, with 14,000 passengers affected. The Ministry demanded 80 percent of Iberia Airport Services employees meet minimum service requirements.

The strikes across Spain's transport system are part of a global upsurge of the working class. It includes mass strikes in Portugal and Poland, "yellow vest" protests in France, and mass movements calling to bring down military dictatorships in Algeria and Sudan, and a global wave of strikes and protests from Hong Kong to US teachers and autoworkers. In each case, the

ruling class, isolated and deeply unpopular, is reacting to this upsurge by moving rapidly to the right, towards openly fascist-authoritarian forms of rule.

The exorbitant minimum services imposed in Spain, amounting to a de facto ban on strikes, is an initial indication of the attacks the PSOE is preparing on workers and youth. The PSOE has already indicated that it is committed to strengthening the army and police-state machine and imposing further attacks on the working class.

The PSOE intends to abolish the annual automatic pension increase based on the consumer price index, setting the stage for the real value of pensions to be slashed by inflation over the years. In the next four years, the PSOE also intends to raise taxes disproportionately affecting the workers. It also wants to implement the “Austrian backpack,” forcing workers to pay into a “personal savings fund” instead of receiving severance pay from employers.

As it boosts the military, increasing the army—by 7,000 soldiers—for the first time since the end of the fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco, and buying 348 “Piranha 5” 8x8 wheeled armoured vehicles, the PSOE is preparing a police crackdown by the state against the workers. It has shelved prior promises to eliminate the PP’s law on public security, dubbed the “gag law.” The latter restricts freedom of speech, prohibits mass gatherings and imposes fines for protesting and making comments on social media.

If the PSOE can nakedly attack workers with savage minimum services it is due to the role of the union bureaucracy, which works to divide and dissipate the struggles. All the unions involved in these strikes make empty protests against what they describe as “excessive” minimum services and a fundamental “attack on the right to strike” by the acting PSOE government. However, all have made clear they would respect the PSOE’s anti-working-class measures.

A union official at Iberia airlines, Omar Minguillón, admitted to the media: “Excessive minimum services are being met. We do not want to harm customers, our complaints are with the company.” He added, “We thank the companies for cancelling in advance,” allowing the company to transfer passengers to other flights. For its part, Iberia praised the unions this Saturday in a statement for meeting the minimum services.

Rather than call workers to unite to confront the PSOE government and the transport companies, the unions have worked tiredly to isolate these strikes from each other.

In the Renfe struggles, the CGT has pathetically called for five stoppages spread throughout August in order to divide them up as much as possible. The strikes consist of two four-hour periods, from noon to 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. to midnight.

Even more bizarre is the strategy of unions representing Ryanair’s cabin crew and pilots. Both called for stoppages in the same month, but while the cabin crew have been called on strike for September 1, 2, 6, 8, 13, 15, 20, 22, 27 and 29; pilots will be walking out on September 19, 20, 22, 27 and 29. Thus, the unions are consciously avoiding any united action even with workers within the same company.

In the Iberia ground staff struggle, unions have also divided workers from different airports. While last Friday was the second strike in the past month by Iberia ground personnel in Madrid, it was their sixth strike in Barcelona.

The recent strikes are the latest of a growing insurgency. According to the big-business association CEOE, the number of hours of work lost has grown in the first six months of 2019 as compared to the same period the year before. From January to June there have been 303 strikes involving 845,018 workers causing over 16 million working hours lost. This includes mass strikes by taxi drivers, in education and metallurgy.

Fearing the explosive state of class relations, the pseudo-left Podemos party has remained completely silent on the strikes. Its statements over the past days have focused on the negotiations with the PSOE government. Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias’ latest tweet was directed to the PSOE: “We still have time to sit down to negotiate a progressive coalition government, which is what most people want.”



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