

# General strike for jobs and pensions erupts in Spain's Basque Country

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Strikes and protests are erupting across Spain, rapidly exposing what little remains of the “left” pretensions of the new Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government.

In the Basque Country (Euskadi) and the Basque-speaking region of Navarre, tens of thousands of protesters and strikers joined a one-day general strike called by Basque-nationalist unions under the slogan “Jobs, pensions and decent lives.” Besides demands to link pensions to inflation and for a rise in state pensions, broader working-class demands were raised. These include “an end to precariousness,” a €1,200 minimum wage, a 35-hour work week and “a public, universal and free social services system.”

On Thursday morning streets, workplaces and schools in the Basque Country were deserted as hundreds of thousands joined the strike. Key regional factories—those of automaker Volkswagen, railway and bus manufacturer CAF, and steelmakers Sidenor and Arcelor Mittal—were closed, as well as bars, restaurants and small businesses. In the public sector, support was overwhelming, with local town councils, hospitals, schools and universities also closed.

Pickets blocked key roads, and the region's main cities saw mass protests: 50,000 marched in Bilbao (population 350,000), 35,000 in San Sebastian (population 185,000), 35,000 in Pamplona and 25,000 in Vitoria-Gasteiz.

Significantly, strikers linked up with workers across the border in France to block the main train station in Hendaye, France—served by French TGV high-speed trains and TER local services, as well as Arco services operated by Spanish railway companies RENFE and EuskoTren.

The PSOE-Podemos government's police arrested 10 protesters in the Basque Country on various charges, including drawing graffiti and harming security

cameras.

Spain's main unions, the social-democratic General Union of Labor (UGT) and the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO), opposed the strike. They declared it “not consistent” with support for the PSOE-Podemos government.

It is critical for workers to take the strike out of the hands of the unions, form their own independent committees of action, and appeal for working-class support across Spain against this reactionary government. Podemos started supporting the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) regional government after the PNV backed the installation of the PSOE-Podemos national government in Madrid. Before the strike, in an attempt to break it, Podemos supported the PNV's “minimum service” requirements that 30 percent of public services had to function.

This strike is part of a global upsurge of class struggle, as workers across the planet rebel against obscene levels of social inequality produced by capitalism. Strikes have erupted in the US and Mexican auto industries, Sri Lankan tea plantations, and against French President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts. In all these cases, workers have faced direct confrontations with the unions. The way forward is an international struggle to transfer state power to the working class.

Podemos has issued thinly veiled attacks on the strike for supposedly disrupting national unity. Its Basque Country Twitter account said: “We respect the call of January 30. But we find that the strike has lost its character of a labor demand and has acquired a social and political nature, hence social and trade union unity has not been achieved.” Lander Martínez, the party's leader in the region, bluntly stated: “The strike does not give confidence to a newly installed government,” that

is, the pro-austerity PSOE-Podemos government.

Fearful of growing working-class opposition, the Pabloite *Anticapitalistas* faction of Podemos, led by Teresa Rodríguez, declared: “We cannot say in Euskadi that we should not go on a general strike, because we are part of the Government.”

The Spanish, Basque, and French unions all play a reactionary role. They all seek to divide the working-class movement against unemployment, low pensions and falling living standards along national lines and subordinate it to anti-worker parties like Podemos.

The CCOO, UGT and Spain’s General Confederation of Labor (CGT) opposed the Basque strike, claiming it has a “nationalist” dimension. This is a cynical political fraud. The Basque unions’ support for the Basque regional bourgeoisie and its calls for a separate capitalist state is nationalist and reactionary but so are the calls of the CCOO, UGT and CGT to defend the Spanish government against the workers. Their criticisms of the Basque unions simply aim to give a “left” cover to their hostility to the strike.

In France, meanwhile, the French CGT is deep in talks with President Emanuel Macron to finance widely hated pension cuts, even as hundreds of thousands of workers and youth march in protest. The CGT aims to strangle explosive anger against Macron, even after rail and transit workers, starved of strike pay, were forced to return to work, ending a six-week strike, two weeks ago.

A far broader eruption of opposition to the European Union and the PSOE-Podemos government is being prepared. Amid the pension strikes last week, a three-day protest unfolded in the Spanish agriculture sector, named “In defence of their future.” Farmers are protesting over low profits, trade restrictions linked to Brexit, US President Donald Trump’s tariffs, EU sanctions against Russia, and expected cuts in the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies.

Police repression of farmers’ protests by the PSOE-Podemos government left dozens injured. A stench of hypocrisy surrounds the attempts of Podemos to cover up its role in state repression of mass protests against its right-wing policies.

Equality Minister Irene Montero (Podemos) shed tears over farmers’ “difficult situation” and praised the right to protest: “I have defended this before and will

do so more now.” At the same time, the leader of the government she sits in, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, was authorizing police to shoot protesting farmers with rubber bullets.

As the PSOE and Podemos crack down on workers and farmers fighting their austerity agenda, they are breaking out the old lie used against the French “yellow vest” protests: that all strikes or protests against a social-democratic government are fascist.

A leading defender of Podemos, journalist Antonio Maestre, wrote in an eldiario.org column titled “The rural base of fascism” that the “far-right’s strategy in the farmers’ protests cannot be ignored.” Recalling that 19th and 20th century landowners mobilised small-scale farmers against their own best interests, he writes: “We must finally break that reactionary unity of action” between the oligarchy and “day laborers’ and smallholders’ interests.” He called for “isolating ‘couch farmers’ who receive millions of euros in CAP grants and use the countryside and its pain to break social progress.”

This is a political lie. First of all, Maestre’s column gives no evidence that far-right parties lead the farmers protests; Podemos officials, on the other hand, are on video chatting and laughing with fascistic Vox party members in parliament. Secondly, if there is a danger of Vox building a base among rural workers, it is because Podemos and its allies have worked for many years to suppress left-wing opposition to the PSOE. They are again working to boost Vox, by carrying out anti-worker policies while denouncing all opposition as fascist.

Waging the class struggle demands an uncompromising break with Podemos. It is critical to bring broader layers of the working class into struggle against the PSOE-Podemos government in Spain, and to unify struggles in Spain, France and across Europe against the EU. Against the nationalist poison and militarism of the ruling class, the decisive question is forging the international unity of the working class in revolutionary struggle.



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