Farmers protest Socialist Party-Podemos government in Madrid

Alejandro López
6 February 2020

Hundreds of farmers rallied outside the Agriculture Ministry in Madrid yesterday to protest social conditions and economic problems facing the agriculture sector. This follows last week's farmer protests in the regions of Galicia, Extremadura and Andalusia.

Farmers are protesting the fall in farm-gate prices and rising production costs. According to the Agriculture Ministry, farm income dropped 8.6 percent in 2019 alone. Large supermarkets and grocery chains are hiking their prices but slashing what they pay to farmers. According to Europa Press, in January, final sales prices of agricultural products were on average four times what supermarkets paid to farmers; for potatoes it was seven times more; and for meat, eggs and milk, three times.

Other problems facing farmers are linked to the crisis of European capitalism and global geopolitical tensions: trade restrictions and potential cuts in the European Union's (EU's) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies due to Brexit, US President Donald Trump's tariffs on European agriculture, especially Spain's olive sector, and EU sanctions against Russia.

Before last week's protests, the Socialist Party (PSOE) regional premier of Extremadura, Guillermo Fernández Vara, blamed farmers' low margins on small minimum wage increases agreed by the PSOE, the Stalinist United Left and Podemos in talks with the big-business Confederation of Spanish Enterprises (CEOE). Vara, who presides over one of Spain's poorest, most agriculture-dependent regions, said, "with the low prices in this sector, it costs a lot to cover high salary costs linked to the rise in the minimum wage."

The main organisers of the farmers protests—the Union of Small Farmers (UPA), the Coalition of Farmers and Herders (COAG), and the Association of Young Farmers (ASAJA)—have not made wage levels for agricultural workers their central issue, for now at least. These protests appear to have a socially heterogeneous character. They include layers of farm workers and impoverished small farmers living on tiny profit margins and incomes, as well as big and medium-sized landowners.

This is also reflected in their demands, which go from better insurance systems to wildlife management, transparent labelling, and higher subsidies. "Our main demand," COAG General Secretary Ivana Martinez told *El Pais*, "is a fair price for agri-food products. ... They have to be worth what they truly should be worth and not what the big supermarkets and food chains impose, which are prices that always take all the added value."

Many farmers are wearing yellow vests, echoing the hundreds of thousands of "yellow vest" protesters who have united on social media against French President Emmanuel Macron's anti-worker policies. These demonstrations have become France's most significant opposition movement since the May 1968 general strike. The French "yellow vests" include significant layers of workers and are not a primarily agricultural movement, and Madrid is clearly terrified of opposition spreading to Spanish workers as well.

In an *El País* column on the farmers protests, political analyst Fernando Vallespín wrote, "it's still not a revolt. Neither is it organised, like the yellow vests in France, through social media. But the latest protests of the countryside in some parts of Spain are likely to make their impact felt beyond the specific problems of agriculture and livestock. It's a wakeup call."

Last week, a general strike paralysed Spain's Basque country. Tens of thousands of factory workers, education, health, transport and small business workers struck against precarious jobs and low pensions.

January saw the destruction of 244,000 jobs, making it the worst month of January since 2014. With more than 3.25 million Spaniards registered as unemployed, an explosive social crisis is brewing.

© World Socialist Web Site

The Barcelona daily *La Vanguardia* published an article titled "Sánchez deploys the whole government to stop the social explosion in rural Spain," reporting: "The Prime Minister demands initiatives to stop a 'yellow vest' rebellion." It writes that Agriculture Minister Luís Planes returned to Madrid "in shock" at popular fury erupting in rural Spain. Regional PSOE premiers, it noted, are warning Sánchez that this could be the "embryo" of a "movement like the yellow vests."

La Vanguardia added that Deputy Prime Minister Teresa Ribera will visit the coal-mining region of León, "another centre of alarm as coal subsidies come to an end." The PSOE-linked General Union of Labour (UGT) union has warned of a "possible social outbreak" by the miners.

The online daily *eldiario.org* wrote, "The government's fears are that the anger will resemble the yellow vests of France and that it will also be capitalised upon by the far-right Vox party."

The far-right danger is real: Vox is attempting to capitalise on growing popular anger. While the UPA, COAG and ASAJA said they wanted no political parties present, Santiago Abascal, the leader of the far-right Vox party, attended the rally to give a press conference. In his speech, Abascal criticised Spain's other parties for "kneeling to the European Union" and called for the EU to grant preference on European markets to EU and Spanish products.

Abascal's speech reportedly received a decidedly mixed reaction, however, ranging from calls of support to jeers and boos. In one of the videos, a protester can be heard shouting, "You are couch farmers! Show your hands, Abascal," referring to Abascal's career made of high-paid sinecures in government agencies to which he was appointed by politically connected friends.

While the danger posed by Vox is real, its rise is driven overwhelmingly from the top. The ruling class has promoted nationalism and police-state repression, especially against Catalonia, to disorient growing social anger at the current government's austerity and military-police repression. The struggle against Vox is inseparable from a struggle to mobilise the working class, drawing behind it layers of farmers and small business, against the PSOE-Podemos government. The PSOE and Podemos are themselves deeply implicated in the crimes of Spanish fascism.

On Monday, Podemos and the PSOE joined the right-wing parties (Popular Party, Citizens, Vox) to block the publication of notorious fascist torturer Antonio González Pacheco's service record. Better known as "Billy El Niño" (Billy the Kid), he was one of the most feared torturers of General Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship. He was accused of brutally beating up political prisoners, including pregnant women, as a secret police agent. He still lives and has never answered for his crimes.

Podemos claimed that they voted this way due to "juridical doubts" about the initiative presented by the Basque-nationalist EH Bildu party. Amid a public uproar over this vote, Podemos issued a meaningless promise that they might change their vote later.

As the WSWS warned two years ago in its piece "The 'anti-fascism' of Podemos: A cover for Spain's anti-worker Socialist Party government," analyzing the PSOE's review of Pacheco's merit awards: "A PSOE government backed by Podemos will prove to be a bitter enemy of the working class, whatever symbolic 'anti-Franco' measures it adopts. … They will not oppose, but rather fall in line with the EU austerity, wars and far-right attacks on democratic rights. They are indissolubly linked to neo-fascistic tendencies by their historic ties with the European ruling elite and state apparatus."

Two years later, the ruling class is showering Podemos with praise for its right-wing record. The conservative daily *El Confidencial* carried an article titled "The unexpected maturity of Iglesias and his ministers," writing: "The five ministers of the orbit of Podemos have avoided major stumbling blocks. ... Podemos seem to have left the chrysalis behind to become adults."

One example, it noted, was the "institutional composure" shown by Podemos ministers after the King's intervention at the opening of Parliament: the ministers, it concluded, were seen "clapping impeccably."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site