Spain declares state of emergency as unions agree to mass layoffs

Alejandro López
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Yesterday, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government announced that it was implementing a state of emergency for 15 days to control the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. The decision comes as there are 4,209 confirmed cases, 1,000 more than the day before, and 120 deaths.

At a press conference yesterday afternoon, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said the state of emergency would come into effect today, allowing the government to temporarily restrict the movement of citizens and mobilise the police and the army. He claimed the measure "would allow for the maximum mobilisation of resources against the virus."

Sánchez added that "We are only in the first phase of combatting the virus," and "We have some very tough weeks ahead of us. We cannot rule out reaching 10,000 [infections] by next week."

The state of emergency allows the government to limit the free movement of people and vehicles; to temporarily requisition any kind of asset; to intervene and temporarily take over industries, factories, workshops, operations or commercial premises; limit or ration the use of services or the consumption of essential items; and issue necessary orders to ensure supply to markets and the functioning of facilities making essential products.

The measure announced complements others taken at the regional level. The region of Madrid has ordered the closure of all hotels, bars and restaurants. The Basque Country has announced a "health emergency", which empowers the regional government to confine municipalities. Regional elections in the Basque Country and Galicia will likely be suspended.

In Catalonia, the regional government ordered a complete lockdown—the first of its kind—of Igualada, Vilanova del Camí, Santa Margarida de Montbui and Òdena, confining a total of 70,000 inhabitants to their towns. In Igualada alone, 58 of the 319 cases in Catalonia have been identified. This was a bid to slow transmission of the largest outbreak of the coronavirus so far identified in Catalonia, after the regional government refused to close down schools and other large gathering places.

Showing the utter contempt of the ruling class for health care workers, they account for 36 of those infected recently in Catalonia, and there are 250 people isolated, including 200 hospital staff.

Murcia decreed the confinement of eight coastal towns and cities on Friday, affecting 376,000 people. No person may enter or leave these locations except for work or health reasons, and all businesses will be closed except for pharmacies and food stores. The decision came as seven new cases were reported in one night, mostly from Madrid residents who fled from the capital to the coastal areas.

The pandemic is rapidly exposing the inability of the capitalist system to deal with such a crisis. The Spanish government, like all others, has responded with a staggering level of incompetence and disarray. Last Sunday, they allowed the March 8 feminist protest, which gathered 120,000 protesters, to go forward, despite receiving warnings that the spread of coronavirus was accelerating. The Ministry of Health was aware the day virus had begun to spread "without control", especially in the region of Madrid.

Prime Minister Sánchez insisted that his ministers attend the protest to "show an image of unity of male minsters against sexism", *El Confidencial Digital* wrote, forcing some "who expressed reservations, like the head of Social Security, José Luis Escrivá."

While Sánchez appealed to patriotism and the "heroism of cleaning one's hands regularly and staying

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at home" in his press conference, social anger is mounting among health care workers over the lack of basic medical equipment. Department heads of large hospitals are telling the media their centres lack personal protective equipment. It is also widely acknowledged that there is a lack of respirators, which are essential to keep coronavirus patients who are in critical condition alive.

At the same time, private health care centres are charging €300 to test for coronavirus. The Catholic Church has announced it will continue holding mass, even though the Ministry of Health is calling on citizens to avoid large crowds. And the notorious detention centres for migrants will remain open, threatening to spread the virus among innocent refugees imprisoned there.

The pandemic is rapidly exposing the anti-working-class character, not only of the Sánchez government, but also of the trade unions. The Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Labour (UGT) are calling for mass redundancies to let companies offload the economic effects of the coronavirus on workers and their families. As at the time of the 2008 Wall Street crash, the ruling class and its trade union agents are doing everything possible to bail out companies at workers' expense.

The day before the government announced the state of emergency, the CCOO, UGT and the big business association CEOE and small business Cepyme, agreed on a joint document, calling for big business to implement a temporary workforce adjustment plan (ERTE). This allows the temporary suspension of job contracts on "economic, technical, organizational or production grounds or due to force majeure."

Employees affected by an ERTE can access unemployment benefits, but only under certain conditions, like having contributed more than 360 days to social security. Labour lawyer Álvaro San Martín told *El Pais*, "Workers will earn less and will have no access to any compensation for dismissal."

Car manufacturer Nissan has already announced a workforce adjustment plan (ERE) affecting 2500 workers. Seat is expected to follow suit. Kostal Eléctrica, which produces components for cars, announced a plan affecting 800 workers. Air Europa's plan will affect 3,600 workers. Hotel group Melia will sack 230 workers. Spanish airline Iberia has announced an ERE affecting 90 percent of its 16,000 workforce.

A wave of mass redundancies is in preparation. Government sources told the Barcelona daily *La Vanguardia* that "in a few days a large number of ERTE requests could arrive so that companies can adjust their workforces." The CCOO has already confirmed that 70 procedures have been opened in the Madrid region alone.

Workers and youth must be warned that the state of emergency will be used against striking workers and protesters. The government is empowered to mobilise the police and the army to crush social opposition against job cuts and safeguard conditions against the virus.

The pandemic is proving the urgent necessity of a mass political movement of the working class in Spain and internationally against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of world economy. This can only be carried out against the misnamed pro-austerity and militarist "progressive" PSOE-Podemos government and the trade unions. An essential principle that must guide the response of the working class to the crisis is that the health and safety needs of working people internationally must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth.

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