

Spain deploys army to impose coronavirus lockdown

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The Spanish army is being deployed in major cities under the state of alarm as deaths linked to coronavirus have gone up from 136 to 329 in the past 48 hours. Spain has registered more than 9,191 infections, according to the latest data from the Ministry of Health, becoming the second country after Italy with most newly registered infections.

The army has deployed 1,100 soldiers from the Military Emergency Unit (UME) in 13 provinces throughout Spain. Army personnel have also been dispatched to clean up swathes of Madrid, which health officials fear may have been infected by large crowds, and to the borders. Madrid has closed its borders with France and Portugal.

According to the state of alarm, soldiers will be considered “representatives of authority” which implies that they may issue orders to civilians and that those who fail to comply with them or resist them may be accused of disobedience or resistance to authority.

The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government will deploy the army in the streets for control and surveillance, to ensure compliance with the regulations limiting freedom of movement under confinement. The government has also taken control of state, regional and local police, including that of Catalonia and the Basque Country, while private security officers will be under the command of the police.

Anyone violating “non-compliance or resistance to the orders of the authority” faces fines of €600 to €30,000, according to the Citizen Security Law. They also face up to four years in prison. The same law that the PSOE and Podemos promised to remove once in power, is now being implemented under a state of alarm.

The turn to the army is a warning to workers and

youth.

The UME was created 13 years ago by the PSOE government with the claim that it would serve to fight natural disasters and emergencies. In fact, it represented the militarisation of a service which until then was implemented by civilians. While successive governments cut the budgets of civilian units struggling against fires and natural disasters, UME’s budget increased to the point it currently has 3,500 troops, armoured personnel carriers, helicopters, motorbikes, military police vehicles and a mobile command centre. In 2017, UME even inaugurated the Military School of Emergencies, unprecedentedly meaning the militarisation of job training of emergencies.

In a country which suffered over half a century of military dictatorships during the 20th century, where the army launched a coup in 1936 which plunged the country into a war during which they allied with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, and sealing their victory with mass executions of 200,000 political oppositionists and militant workers, there is wide opposition to militarism and fascism. UME became one of the main vehicles of the ruling class to legitimise the role of the army in domestic and foreign affairs.

The state’s reliance on the army and UME reflects its slashing of resources for public health and research, whose bitter costs are being revealed by the pandemic. While successive right-wing Popular Party and PSOE governments imposed massive cuts in healthcare and research, they showered the army with billions of euros. Now, the ruling class, desperate and isolated in the face of economic meltdown, strikes and growing anger at their mismanagement of the virus, are deploying the army because it views every social problem as a military-police problem.

From Monday on, millions of people will be confined

to their homes for at least two weeks. The government has already said it will extend the state of alarm beyond the 15 days mandated by law. Under the state of alarm, people can only go to specific shops individually, and stay in them for the time “strictly necessary”, avoiding crowds and stay at least one meter away from other people. Only food, beverage, products and essential goods establishments will remain open such as pharmacies, medical supply stores, opticians, shops for orthopaedic and hygienic products, press, fuel and pet food stores.

Millions of other workers who cannot work from home are being forced to go to their workplaces, travelling in unhygienic conditions and working in an unsafe environment. These are not health workers, nurses, pharmacists or supermarket staff, but factory and construction workers whose companies have decided not to stop production during the following 15 days.

Images have circulated of hundreds of workers crammed in buses, subways and trains in Spain’s major cities as workers try to desperately get to work under conditions where public transport service have been drastically reduced—violating one of the main recommendations of the World Health Organisation of maintaining at least one metre and a half separation from other people.

One subway worker in Bilbao, the Basque Country, told eldiario.org: “It was really crazy. They have shortened the schedules of the subway lines and all those who go, especially to the factories on the left bank in the early hours have had to pile up to wait for the train.”

El País noted, “The subway’s early morning carriages, the transport services of the working class were full.” One deliveryman delivering toys and video games said, “I’m risking my life for stupid things ... I’m delighted to deliver medicines to hospitals or whoever needs them. If someone needs something from the pharmacy, I’ll take it to them. But it doesn’t seem right to risk one’s life for things that people don’t need.”

Vast solidarity exists among workers for a genuine struggle against the virus. Numerous videos have shown quarantined citizens in Spain and Italy coming together on social media to go out to their balconies and clap for a minute in support of healthcare workers

and others who continue to work and risk their lives.

Seeing the capitalist class is incapable of managing the crisis, and is even continuing to prioritize profits over lives, workers are starting to mobilize calling for factories to close.

The Mercedes-Benz plant in Vitoria, the largest factory in the Basque Country with over 5,000 workers, stopped production yesterday after workers stood before the line of departure of finished vehicles to demand that management prioritize the health of workers over production.

In Barajas, Getafe and Illescas, thousands of workers in the world’s largest airliner manufacturer, Airbus, are being called by the unions to not attend work. The union’s actions came after widespread anger erupted after a coronavirus case was detected. The same unions are currently negotiating redundancies for the workforce.

In Valladolid, workers from the industrial vehicle manufacturing plant of Iveco shut down the factory, saying that the company was not taking the appropriate safety measures. The company’s management asked for more time to negotiate the conditions of an eventual shutdown, but workers decided to take action after 4 days of work.

Thousands of workers of car manufacturer Renault and tire manufacturer Michelin have also forced the shutdown of their factories in Valladolid, Palencia and Seville.

It is to suppress this growing anger that the ruling class is preparing to use the army. In October 2017, at the height of the secessionist crisis in Catalonia, Madrid sent thousands of paramilitary Guardia Civil to repress peaceful gatherings and protests. The Spanish government even contemplated declaring the state of alarm and deploying the army.



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