Spanish police assault steelworkers striking against COVID-19 "back-to-work" order

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On Friday, Spanish police assaulted steelworkers in the Basque country protesting against being forced back to unsafe, non-essential jobs amid the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. One of the worst-hit countries, with 80,031 sick and 6,802 dead—more than twice the death total in China—Spain has imposed strict confinement orders on its population. However, large firms continue to demand millions of workers needlessly go to work to keep producing profits for the ruling class.

Under these conditions, the coalition government of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the petty-bourgeois Podemos party unleashed police to assault workers fighting to defend their health and their lives against the diktat of the banks.

On Friday, workers at Sidenor, a steel firm headquartered in the Basque Country in Spain, struck after Basque-nationalist trade unions had called a "Haserre Gaude" ("We are angry" in Basque) protest. The appeal announced that it aimed to "ensure public health is prioritized against the decision of employers and governments to prioritize economic interests." Workers had been called to organize a work stoppage at noon on Friday.

When the workers began the protest, the Ertzaintza, the Basque regional police, intervened to prevent and then to disperse it. Workers shouted at police, calling on them to verify "the false health and safety measures that exist in the company" against COVID-19, instead of smashing the protest.

One worker present at the protest told the Basque daily *Naiz*: "After the media intervention ended, an Ertzaintza patrol went to the committee members and banned them from carrying out the protest, even though it was being held inside the company premises."

This protest comes a week after a video went viral on social media, showing a worker stopped by police and threatened with a fine for going to work on a bicycle. Police said bicycling was illegal and violated the state of alarm, which requires everyone to remain in their homes unless they are traveling to work or going out for essential goods like medicine or food. The worker retorted that he was going to work and that rather than fining him, they should be going to his factory and inspecting the conditions they are forced to work in.

To protect their lives and impose appropriate public health measures, workers are facing a political struggle against the PSOE-Podemos government and similar governments around the world. To take this fight forward against police repression, the workers need their own organizations: committees of action independent of the trade unions and allied political parties like Podemos.

These committees can fight for critical demands like the shutdown of non-essential production and full pay to idled workers, and to ensure the well-being of workers who are ill or forced to quarantine.

Internationally, the working class has emerged as the principal force fighting for a humane and scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An initial wave of wildcat strikes in Italy, which erupted independent of the unions, staggered the Italian government, forcing it to implement health authorities' calls for mass confinement policies to slow and halt the spread of COVID-19.

In the US, autoworkers, sanitation workers, shipbuilders, transit workers, food warehouse workers, poultry workers and Amazon workers have closed down factories to protest unsafe working conditions. Strikes have also erupted of British postal workers, French bus drivers and auto workers, and Fiat-Chrysler workers in Canada. In Spain, manufacturers like Airbus, Mercedes-Benz, Michelin, Seat, Renault and Nissan closed only when workers walked off the job.

The vicious police repression unleashed under the authority of the Spanish social democrats and the pseudo-left Podemos party is a warning to the working class not

only in Spain but internationally. It faces a bitter struggle not only against individual employers, but also parties of the capitalist political establishment that the ruling elite has for decades falsely promoted as "left."

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed Podemos as defenders of capitalist profits and ruthlessly hostile to the working class, demanding workers risk their lives in non-essential jobs to feed the fortunes of the super-rich.

Not only Podemos, but also the corrupt union bureaucracies stand against the workers. The Stalinist Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and pro-PSOE General Union of Labor (UGT) have maintained a deafening silence on the police assault on the Sidenor workers. Instead, they are busily working with big business, the PSOE and Podemos to impose mass sackings (temporary workforce adjustment plans or ERTE), which let companies suspend job contracts on "economic, technical, organizational or production grounds or due to force majeure."

Hundreds of thousands of workers have been hit by ERTEs, and untold thousands will be in coming weeks. Employees hit by an ERTE can access unemployment benefits, but only under strict conditions, including having paid social security taxes for more than 360 days.

On Saturday, soon after the clash at Sidenor and after Spanish health authorities reported that Friday had seen another record single-day death toll of 832, the government ordered all those in non-essential jobs to stay home until April 9, calling for "extraordinarily tough" measures. "This measure will reduce people's movement even further [but] it will reduce the risk of contagion and allow us to unblock out intensive care units," said Sánchez.

This was a 180° turn after Sánchez, echoing US President Donald Trump's "We have to get back to work" policy, dismissed growing calls by workers and an open letter by 70 prominent scientists, to implement total confinement in the worst-hit regions. Last week, Sánchez mocked such policies, saying: "When they say total confinement measures should be increased, what do they mean? That people cannot go out shopping for bread? Whoever has an autistic child cannot take him out for a walk?"

Millions of workers were forced to go to non-essential jobs in jam-packed buses, metros and trains, and then work in unsanitary conditions in their workplaces, spreading COVID-19 and likely costing thousands more lives.

Deputy Prime Minister and Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, who has kept a low profile during the pandemic, intervened on Sunday to support Sánchez's announcement. On Twitter, he cited Article 128 of the Spanish Constitution that states: "All the wealth of the country in its different forms and whatever its ownership is subordinated to the general interest."

Iglesias attached a video of Labour Minister and Podemos member Yolanda Díaz stating in yesterday's press conference that the government will prioritize the national interest "over private interests" and that it will not "accept pressure of any kind in order to alter the confinement." She pledged that after the pandemic, there will be "more rights for workers, a stronger productive fabric and without a doubt more taking care of our people."

Who does Iglesias think he is kidding? The PSOE-Podemos government is not a friend of the workers, but a ruthless police state implementing the diktat of the banks.

It has pledged to "mobilise up to €200 billion" to bail out the banks and major corporations, while setting aside a pitiful €17 billion for unemployment benefits. Sunday's confinement order, praised by Iglesias, mandates that confined workers will "have to make up lost work hours" by losing vacation days, losing weekends or lengthening working hours. If the lockdown remained in force only until April 9, this would force millions of workers in Spain to work at least an extra 80 hours unpaid.

The struggle for the legitimate and essential health and economic demands of the working class will inevitably lead it into a headlong confrontation with Podemos and the PSOE, and towards a struggle for state power and the implementation of socialist policies.

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