

Spanish government to force workers in non-essential industries back to work

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Disregarding scientists and the World Health Organisation (WHO), the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and pseudo-left Podemos coalition government will force workers in non-essential industries back to work on Monday, April 13. With trade union support, the PSOE and Podemos are effectively spreading the deadly COVID-19 disease. As most workplaces still lack basic security measures, they are needlessly sacrificing countless thousands of lives simply to boost corporate profits.

For 10 days starting March 30, Madrid banned non-essential work and, exceptionally, forced employers to keep paying workers in non-essential sectors while they stayed confined at home. Under the terms of this reactionary deal, the unions pledged to business that they would force workers to work unpaid overtime and forgo vacation days to pay back these wages. This is now being phased out, however.

Workers in manufacturing and construction, primarily, are to be forced back to work. Shops, restaurants (except for home delivery) and leisure establishments are to remain closed.

In parliament on Thursday, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez lied, claiming this decision had been taken “based on science.” He added, “What is better, staying home until May or June? There are discrepancies when you speak with epidemiologists and scientists.” He also claimed, “economic hibernation” is “very harsh for our industrial and economic fabric.”

In fact, PSOE and Podemos had not even bothered to check with their government’s own scientific committee, which opposes this reckless policy. Antoni Trilla, an epidemiologist and scientific committee member, told *El País* that they were not consulted and that, in his opinion, “it would be sensible” to maintain total confinement.

Similarly, the WHO’s regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, said on Wednesday: “Now is not the time to

relax measures.”

The government’s argument for ending confinement is based on lies and scientifically unfounded assertions. The first lie is that the pandemic is now under control in Spain. In fact, thousands continue to contract the disease each day. With more than 15,800 fatalities, Spain has the third highest COVID-19 death toll worldwide, after the US and Italy. With 157,053 confirmed infected, 605 patients died on Friday and 3,831 new cases were detected.

Even pro-government sources admit, however, that the official figures hugely underestimate the pandemic, as many die at home or in rest homes. The pro-PSOE daily *El País* confessed, “The number of cases does not reflect the true number of infections in the country, which is unknown, nor all the fatalities caused by the coronavirus. It is not even clear what is meant by the figure of intensive care admissions.”

El País also reported that the PSOE-Podemos government is discussing relying on the development of “herd immunity” to the virus within Spain’s population. According to the Spanish Society of Public Health and Health Administration, this would require at least 60 percent of the Spanish population (28 million people) to catch COVID-19 and become immune, preventing them from spreading it further. This would overwhelm Spanish hospitals, which are already swamped when there are 157,000 cases. Moreover, there is not yet any clear evidence that those infected with COVID-19 cannot get it again.

The trade unions are fully complicit in the formulation of this policy with Podemos and the PSOE. On Friday, the Podemos Minister of Labor, Yolanda Díaz, met with the leaders of Spain’s two largest unions, Unai Sordo of the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) and Pepe Álvarez from the social-democratic General Union of Labor (UGT).

Díaz called this summit “a very productive meeting...it is essential that workers and companies have all the support of the government for the following phases.” The union tops cynically claimed their priority is preserving health—while working to send millions of workers to work without any health and safety assurances! Sordo claimed the return to work “should be subordinated to health and safety of workers.”

These are more lies, and the PSOE-Podemos government has no health or safety protocols in place. Health Minister Salvador Illa said Friday that workers should practice social distancing at work, use masks and avoid public transport—if possible. However, it is not possible, as there are still disastrous shortages of basic protective equipment (masks, gloves, hand gels, testing kits), and no agreed plan to ensure workers can maintain social distancing at industrial workplaces.

The Spanish government’s politically-criminal actions are part of the “back-to-work” call from the financial markets and the ruling establishments, ordering tens of millions of workers to risk contracting a deadly disease in order to continue supplying profits to the financial aristocracy.

In Italy, the country with the highest COVID-19 death toll, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced yesterday, after talks with Italy’s unions, that businesses would start reopening on April 14. Hundreds of academics signed a letter in the Italian financial daily, *Il Sole-24 Ore*, denouncing shelter-at-home orders: “The social and economic consequences risk producing irreversible damage, probably more serious than those caused by the virus itself.” In Austria, the government will allow small shops to resume business after Easter, while the Czech Republic plans to lift a travel ban.

In the US, President Donald Trump is the loudest advocate of prematurely re-opening businesses, stating this week that it would be “nice to be able to open with a big bang, and I think we will do that soon. I would say we are ahead of schedule.”

Such a criminal policy creates the conditions for a clash between the working class and the thoroughly corrupt financial aristocracy that is international in scope. It was a wave of wildcat strikes and walkouts by workers that forced the shutdown of factories and offices and the adoption of limited shelter-at-home orders in Spain, Italy and the US. According to an online survey in the Barcelona-based daily *La Vanguardia*, 80 percent in Spain support continuing confinement.

An initial foretaste of what the financial aristocracy is

preparing came two weeks ago, when the Podemos-PSOE government oversaw the dispatching of police to assault striking steelworkers who were protesting against being forced back to unsafe, non-essential jobs in Spain’s Basque country.

Yesterday, a Renault autoworker in Spain, Miryam Largo, told *Europa Press* that the PSOE-Podemos government and the unions were sending them to the “slaughterhouse.” She added, “We will totally oppose the measures as confinement measures continue and there is no clear indication about pandemic control from the WHO.”

To oppose the ruling elite’s campaign to railroad them back to work, workers need new organs of struggles, action committees independent of the trade unions, and a new political perspective.

The record of Podemos has vindicated the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) principled opposition to pseudo-left populist parties like Podemos. Such forces are not “left,” but represent deeply corrupt layers of the affluent middle class, who seek to defend their position by defending the wealth of the financial aristocracy. The unions meanwhile act as the capitalists’ main agents to send workers back to work despite the pandemic.

The pandemic poses urgent tasks to the working class. All non-essential work must be shut down, with workers and the self-employed granted full pay. In essential sectors like health care, food and transport, emergency measures must be implemented to ensure workers’ safety, including mass production of the necessary safety equipment. And an internationally coordinated campaign must be coordinated and organized to fight COVID-19’s spread around the world.

The fight for such essential policies will bring the working class into direct confrontation with Podemos and similar parties internationally, posing to workers a struggle for state power to implement socialist policies against the pandemic. The critical question facing advanced workers in Spain and in every country is building sections of the ICFI to fight for this program in the working class.



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