

# Spanish unions support back-to-work order amid raging pandemic

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13 April 2020

Spain's trade unions are endorsing the politically criminal policy of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Podemos government to force workers back to work today, even as the pandemic is nowhere near ending, with over 20,000 deaths. The measure threatens to lead to hundreds of thousands of more infections and tens of thousands of deaths, while big business reaps massive profits.

From today, around 4 million workers return to work in construction and industry, including auto, in crowded public transport and without any proper protection gear. Workers will not only risk their lives, but those of their dependents and partners at home. Spain, ruled by a coalition of the social-democratic PSOE and the populist Podemos party, is one of Europe's first countries to force workers back on the job amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic is nowhere near controlled. Yesterday, authorities announced that 619 people had died in Spain from COVID-19, an increase of almost 100 people over the previous day. There was a blow after Spain reported its lowest daily death count in three weeks on Saturday: 510 people.

Such facts run counter to the government's claims that the pandemic is under control and that confinement is not being relaxed. Minister of Interior Fernando Grande-Marlaska said last Friday that there will be "no relaxation of measures after the return to non-essential work. We are still in the confinement phase and we all have to have this clear. We have not started the de-escalation."

Standing next to him, Health Minister Salvador Illa stressed that the decision was based on "the recommendations of the experts." In fact, the measure has been taken against the scientific advice by the government's own expert committee on COVID-19,

the World Health Organisation and leading epidemiologists. It was soon revealed last Friday that the government did not even bother to consult the committee of experts, aware of its members' opposition to this policy.

The government has not even enforced a health and safety protocol for employees to work in a safe environment. Instead, on Friday, the government made a number of cynical recommendations aimed at saving their face while allowing millions to risk their lives for profits. Workers who have symptoms, "however slight," should not return to their jobs, and all workers will have to maintain a minimum distance of one meter "two, if possible," "wash their hands regularly" and, in some cases in which crowding is inevitable, cover their mouth with masks.

The unions not only do not oppose the criminal policy but have become its chief enforcers. As Renault autoworkers complain they are being sent back to a "slaughterhouse," it is the unions who are bussing them to the catastrophe. Their main concern has been to work with management to extract as much profit as possible. They have only supported lockdown measures when it became impossible to control wildcat strikes and eruptions of anger in factories and workplaces.

In Spain, the PSOE-Podemos government has tasked the unions with developing health and safety protocols with businesses at sectorial and regional level, aware that in most cases business cannot comply. The right-wing daily *La Razón* said that "when asked to keep a minimum separation of two meters between workers, many companies are neither prepared to make this distance effective nor do they have protective equipment (masks, especially) to minimize the risk of contagion if they cannot guarantee those two meters."

Podemos and the unions have even admitted this

publicly. Last Friday, in a press conference after a meeting with Podemos Minister of Labour Yolanda Díaz Pérez, Unai Sordo for the Stalinist CCOO (Workers Commissions), Spain's largest trade union, had to admit: "There are currently thousands of companies that are not in a position to guarantee these health and safety conditions."

The role of the anarcho-syndicalist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, promoted as "radical" by forces around Podemos, is no different. While issuing a few toothless complaints about the back-to-work policy, it is giving the government recommendations for its implementation.

In a statement last Friday, CGT said "that all infections related to COVID-19 suffered by workers, whatever industry they are in, must be considered for all purposes as a labour accident, during the service and while commuting."

Workers will be happy to hear that the CGT is also demanding that, if workers die of COVID-19 making profits for their bosses, this should also be consider a labour-related death.

The pandemic has not only exposed the sharp class divide between the ultra-wealthy oligarchy, and the working-class majority, but also the interests served by petty-bourgeois populist parties like Podemos and unions like CCOO, UGT and CGT. The unions support big business and the government sending workers to work despite the COVID-19 risk. They also say workers must pay back working hours lost by business during confinement by working longer hours and giving up vacation days in coming months.

On the other side, the working class opposes any lifting of any measure which will allow the virus to continue spreading and killing, defending that only essential services remain open.

Internationally, it has been the workers who have forced total confinement measures by shutting down entire industries through wildcat strikes, like those in auto plants in the US, in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and similar walkouts in Italy, Spain and Canada against union-management efforts to continue production despite unsafe conditions.

For decades, the unions have negotiated austerity, wage cuts, redundancies and speed-up in the workplaces. In this period, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), publisher of the

WSWS, stood alone in fighting populist parties like Podemos and exposing the unions as anti-working-class organisations, calling for workers instead to form action committees independent of the unions. Now the unions serve as open policemen for the bosses, extracting profits at the risk of the lives of workers they falsely claim to represent.

Faced with the malign neglect of the ruling elite, and as unions trying to march workers to their deaths, the working class is itself moving into action. After mass wildcat strikes erupted across Italy, workers in several factories in Spain also struck to demand to be allowed to shelter at home. The PSOE and Podemos responded by unleashing regional riot police to violently assault striking steelworkers.

Such struggles, however, requires workers to form independent Action Committees to coordinate strike struggles, opposition to predictable repression by governments across Europe, and a struggle for state power to go to the working class.

These committees can demand the immediate shutdown of non-essential work, with full income for workers affected. No worker should be told to needlessly risk his or her life. Workers laid off must receive full pay, financed by companies and the state. Rent, mortgage and utility payments must be suspended. Where work must continue, as in health care, transportation, food production and other critical sectors, measures must be implemented to guarantee workers' safety and their rights. Every work location must be staffed with trained health professionals and given the necessary equipment like protective clothing, masks and gloves.

The essential principle guiding the response to this crisis must be that the needs of workers take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth.



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