

Spain: Podemos Labour Ministry accepts that hundreds of thousands will die from COVID-19

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An extraordinary leaked document from the Spanish Labour Ministry, led by Podemos minister Yolanda Díaz, states that the Spanish government accepts that 70 percent of the population will become infected with COVID-19, with one third of employees infected at each workplace. That is, the Spanish government is basing its policies, including its forcing of millions of nonessential workers back to work, on its willingness to accept millions of infections and hundreds of thousands of deaths in Spain.

On Wednesday, the private Spanish wire serve Europa Press reported on a leaked contract from the Public State Employment Service, an agency of the Labour Ministry, with Quirón Prevención, an occupational risk prevention company. The state service was hiring Quirón Prevención to test its employees doing essential work related to COVID-19's economic impact, like processing unemployment claims and temporary redundancies. The department has experienced a number of sick leaves due to COVID-19 in the past month.

To justify applying for the emergency contract, the agency stated: “[T]he experience accumulated in recent weeks shows that the appearance of a case among the staff who provide minimum services may indicate contagion to other workers. This makes it necessary to take measures to find out, on a voluntary basis, whether or not those in contact with our staff are infected or not in order to prevent their return to work, or to do so in a safe way so they don’t transmit the virus.”

It continued, stressing that COVID-19 testing is necessary “given that almost all workplaces will present a case, the transmission ratio is approximately 1 to 3 and the health authorities’ forecast is that around

70 percent of the population will be infected in the coming months.”

This is the first public acknowledgment of the infection forecasts being made by Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government. These estimates signify that around 70 percent of Spain’s population of 47 million, or 33 million people, will be infected. Based on the 3.4 percent case fatality rate for COVID-19 estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO), this means the PSOE and Podemos accept that around 1.1 million people would die.

By way of historical comparison, current estimates are that the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) led to approximately 500,000 deaths from all causes: deaths in combat, bombings and executions, as well as disease, famine and other causes. About 3.3 percent of the Spanish population died in the war, with another 7.5 percent being injured.

Such a massive and horrific death toll irrevocably marked the consciousness of the working class. Eighty years later, Spain still remembers the suffering provoked by the military-fascist coup that sparked the war. Countless paintings, statues, memorials and songs commemorate this historical event. It is estimated that 20,000 books have been written on the civil war.

Now, however, the Spanish government is accepting—in the fine print of a contract for an agency most Spaniards have never heard of—that over twice the number of victims of the Spanish Civil War could die.

This response exposes the bankruptcy and criminality of the capitalist system. The key measures to halt the spread of the virus are lockdown, mass testing, and isolation and treatment of the sick. Workers in essential

industries who must continue working need personal protective equipment like face protection (masks, goggles and face-shields), gloves, gowns or other clothing. However, the ruling class systematically pushes to run business as usual, risking millions of lives in order to railroad workers back to work to produce profits for the banks and major corporations.

In particular, the Labour Ministry's revelations about the PSOE-Podemos government's infection projections make clear the political criminality of the government's back-to-work order issued on April 13. Millions of construction workers, metalworkers, builders, cleaners, factory and shipyard workers, sanitation and security employees, autoworkers and other workers at nonessential jobs returned to work, after factories and construction sites had closed for a two-week shelter-at-home period.

This policy, advanced by the government in collaboration with the social-democratic General Union of Labour (UGT) and the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) unions, is needlessly and recklessly exposing millions to infection. Now it is clear that the government bases this policy on a staggering indifference to human life: it is willing to accept the deaths of hundreds of thousands of workers.

To a remarkable extent, this explosive story has been buried in Spanish media. There has been barely any coverage except for few right-wing newspapers—*La Razón*, *El Confidencial* and *ABC*—which posted back-page coverage, buried amid their right-wing criticisms of the government over the pandemic. While these papers downplayed the story, pro-government papers like *El País* and *eldiario.org* kept silent, as they all support the government's back-to-work policy. All agree that workers must be forced back to work so profits can be extracted, placing profits over lives.

The fact that this policy is acknowledged by the Ministry of Labour, which is under a Podemos minister, underscores the vicious hostility of anti-Marxist populist parties to the working class. Podemos' Greek ally, Syriza, took power and imposed billions of euros in cuts to spending on basic social programmes including pensions, health care and education, shredding basic labour rights and building concentration camps for refugees. Podemos, now that it is in government, is deliberately sending millions of workers to be infected by a deadly virus.

On Wednesday evening, the ministry said the percentage that it had cited in its contract was “inaccurate” and a “misunderstanding.” Trying to explain away the “inaccuracy,” it said that it did not have a forecast for the number of infections in Spain. Instead, “transmission rates and also the incidence of cases in the Spanish population will be determined by Spanish health authorities as a result of epidemiological studies that they are realizing,” and that are in fact slated to start on Monday.

This reply is astonishing and strains credulity. If one is to believe the Ministry of Labour, however, three months after the WHO mission to China reported human-to-human transmission, and seven weeks since the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, one of the countries hardest hit by the virus, with over 22,000 deaths, has still made no forecast of how the pandemic would unfold. Such an argument beggars belief, and strongly suggests that top state officials are simply lying to the public.

If it were to be true, however, it would underscore that the government's back-to-work policy was not based on any scientific assessment or attempt to protect the workforce—but simply a blind demand for workers to go back to work and risk their lives to create profits for the capitalist class.



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