Strikes mount as COVID-19 breaks out in hundreds of Spanish schools

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Opposition is mounting to Spain's homicidal back-to-school campaign, amid a massive resurgence of COVID-19. On Tuesday, Spain passed 600,000 total cases (603,167), just over a week after reaching 500,000. The same day, Spain recorded 156 new deaths, bringing the highly manipulated official death toll to over 30,000 (30,004). Analyses by major newspapers show the real death toll is at least 45,000.

Nevertheless, the Spanish government, headed by the social-democratic Socialist Party (PSOE) and "left-populist" Podemos, is proceeding with its politically-criminal school reopening plans, forcing teachers back to work and threatening to prosecute parents who do not send their children to school.

Madrid education workers began a 20-day strike against the PSOE-Podemos government's back-to-school orders Friday. Called by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT-AIT (National Confederation of Labour-International Workers' Association), this strike comes atop a two-day strike called in Madrid by the CCOO (Workers' Commissions), UGT (General Union of Labour), CGT (General Confedaration of Labour) and STEM (Madrid Union of Education Workers) unions, scheduled for September 22-23.

Strike action has been threatened in the Balearic Islands, Andalucía, Aragón, Galicia, Murcia and the Basque Country, amid reports of coronavirus outbreaks in numerous schools across the country. More than 200 schools have registered coronavirus-related incidents in only the first week of term, before many of Spain's regions had even reopened education centres.

Andalucía is the worst affected so far, reporting that at least 34 schools had seen coronavirus "incidents." Several education centres there have already been forced to close after multiple infections among teachers and students. At least one school in the Andalucían city of Sevilla has already closed; in Málaga, four classes in two schools have had to quarantine. In Granada, two schools have had to postpone opening after reporting cases among teachers. In Córdoba, seven classes in two schools, and a further two infant education centres have also had to quarantine.

The Basque Country has been the next worst affected, reporting around 30 schools with COVID-19 incidents, four of these having to close and the rest to impose measures like partial quarantines. This is followed by Aragón, which has closed 24 classrooms in 21 schools; Castilla-La Mancha, with 20 schools in isolation; Madrid, with 26 classrooms isolated in 16 different schools; and La Rioja, with 14 education centres reporting positive cases and setting up quarantines.

In Catalonia, the school term has started with 253 teachers and 210 pupils in quarantine. Navarra has also reported that 286 pupils are already having to isolate.

The struggle of workers against this manifestly unsafe back-to-school campaign faces not only the hostility of the main bourgeois parties of state, but the collusion and spinelessness of the unions.

In Madrid, the CNT-AIT only called the 20-day strike after industrial action planned by the CGT, UGT, CCOO and STEM was delayed from the start to the end of September, so as to give right-wing regional president, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, time to implement her inadequate safety measures. Four days of strike action on 4, 8, 9 and 10 September were replaced with a two-day work stoppage planned for the end of the month.

Fearing that Madrid education workers' opposition could erupt outside the unions' control, the CNT-AIT announced work stoppages between 10 and 30 September. This announcement in itself only came after a recently-established "Teachers Assembly for an Indefinite Strike" criticised the planned two-day strike

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as “insufficient,” stating that it does not “reflect the concerns of the education community.”

Unions have refused to call out teachers and other workers across Spain in a unified struggle against the reopening of schools. They have limited action to sporadic and isolated one-day or short-term mobilisations, all on different days and in only some of Spain’s 17 regions, allowing workers to let off steam while doing nothing to prevent the reckless reopening.

In the Basque Country, education workers struck for one day, Tuesday, despite the regional government’s attempts to prevent walkouts by imposing minimum service requirements. Officially, 41.9 percent of education workers took part in the strike, while the unions claimed 65–70 percent participation.

Around 40,000 education workers in the Basque Country stopped work on Tuesday, with a further 10,000 subcontractors also joining the strike. The unions reported thousands of workers also took part in demonstrations across the region: 8,000 in Bilbao, 5,000 in Vitoria and 4,000 in Donostia.

On the same day, a mere 53 teachers took part in a strike in Andalucía, called by a new union, Teachers for Public [Education] (DxP), after the main unions delayed all action until 18 September, limiting it then to only a token one-day protest. The DxP strike is to last until 16 October. In a pre-emptive attempt to prevent industrial action, Andalucía’s regional government also imposed minimum service requirements.

A one-day strike in the Balearic Islands, called by the Balearic Workers’ Union (UOB), has been delayed from 14 to 29 September, with the union calling for the regional government to come to the negotiation table.

In Murcia, a one-day strike on 23 September has been called by the CCOO and STERM (Confederation of Teaching Trade Unions), while in Galicia, a one-day work stoppage was held on 10 September. A further strike is planned for 16 September in Galicia.

Turn-out in Galicia was only around 12 percent, as the regional government effectively illegalised the strike, imposing stringent minimum service requirements. The Galician High Court ruled that 100 percent of cleaning staff, kitchen staff, medical staff and educators must be present. It cynically justifying this draconian edict, referring to the coronavirus pandemic: “this may be excessive in a normal situation,” the High Court stated, but it is “reasonable and justified by the grave crisis that we are suffering through.”

The Union of Students has also called for pupils across Spain to stay away from classrooms on three days this week (16, 17 and 18 September).

Thousands of parents and students across the country have also joined protests against the unsafe reopening of educational centres, with many refusing to send their children to school.

In the southern city of Granada, in Andalucía, parents of around half the pupils enrolled at the Tierno Galván primary school refused to send in their children. Roughly 200 of the school’s 400 children were absent, as parents protested the lack of safety protocols and sufficient staffing.

Multiple other protests took place in Andalucía, with the “majority of students” at a school in Jaén staying away, according to 20minutos.

Speaking to *El Periódico*, Ángeles B., mother of two primary school children from Sevilla, denounced the unsafe reopening of schools in Andalucía, stating: “Children have to learn and socialise, but what do we put first, health or education? … We are in a pandemic, people are dying. I don’t understand why the Andalucían government hasn’t hired the teachers we need to have classes with fewer kids. … I’m not going to let them [the government] tell me that I am irresponsible for not sending my children to school.”

Many children in A Coruña, in the northern region of Galicia, were also kept home from school by their parents. Parents, teachers and children protested outside schools, carrying placards reading “My classroom isn’t safe,” “They need to protect us!” and “More ventilation, more security, safe education!,” among other slogans. Similar demonstrations took place across the country.

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