

Spain's PSOE-Podemos government assaults protests vs. herd immunity policy

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On Thursday evening, Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos coalition government sent police to brutally assault demonstrators in Madrid protesting its herd immunity policy. As protests spread across Greece and the PSOE-Podemos government threatens to deploy 7,500 troops to Madrid amid a Europe-wide resurgence of COVID-19, this crackdown is a threat aimed at the entire working class.

On Thursday evening, a protest of around 300 demonstrators gathered at a health care centre in the working class neighborhood of Vallecas. They were protesting a “restriction of mobility and reduction of activity” order designed by the right-wing Madrid regional government of Isabel Ayuso and the national PSOE-Podemos government. The order affects 37 Madrid districts housing 850,000 people, most of them working class neighborhoods worst-hit by the virus.

The demonstration was one of the dozens organised over the last week, some gathering thousands, amid mounting social anger against the herd immunity policies of the Spanish ruling class, which have led to the deaths of nearly 50,000 people and over 700,000 infections.

The Madrid “restriction” order has nothing to do with a health care policy aimed to stop the spread of the virus by ensuring social distancing and letting non-essential workers shelter at home. It requires residents to continue to report to work or school, though 90 percent have a daily commute taking them outside the targeted districts. It has legitimately provoked widespread anger at an order that will not halt the spread of COVID-19 but imposes restrictions exclusively targeting working class areas, whereas in fact a nationwide shelter-at-home order is necessary.

Podemos officials in Madrid have cynically postured as sympathetic to this social anger. Podemos Madrid region spokesperson Isabel Serra joined the small protest Thursday.

When 50 young protesters left and marched towards the regional parliament, however, they were suddenly confronted by 30 national police vans from the anti-riot squad. The police—which just months ago allowed far-right protesters to march in the affluent neighborhoods to protest during the strict lockdown—violently dispersed the protest, leaving six injured and arresting three.

One 18-year-old protester told El Salto: “We weren't doing anything, we were just shouting, weren't the protesters in [the wealthy neighborhood of] Salamanca shouting? But they came and started beating us with their truncheons. They have opened my friend's head, they have split my ear.”

All those arrested are less than 20 years old. A fourth, age 17, was beaten and arrested outside the police station when he inquired about his arrested friends.

This brutal crackdown exposes the cynicism of Podemos, whose officials postured as sympathetic to the protests only to launch a brutal police assault on them shortly afterwards. In fact, Podemos had signaled that it was preparing such a crackdown the day before.

Over the last week, small-scale protests had begun breaking out, with calls of “Ayuso resign!” and “This is not confinement, this is segregation.” These protests were backed, and at times called, by organizations heavily influenced by Podemos, like the Madrid Regional Federation of Neighbourhood Associations (Federación Regional de Asociaciones Vecinales de Madrid, FRAVM).

On Wednesday, however, Podemos, its split-off Más Madrid, and Spain's largest trade unions, CCOO and UGT, decided to call off a demonstration Sunday expected to receive wide support.

In a joint statement they suddenly declared that “the epidemiological situation makes it difficult to carry out mass demonstrations.” They proposed “symbolic, decentralized actions in different areas of Madrid”

instead. A Podemos faction dissatisfied with the decision, Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left), reported that Podemos “sent a message to different organisations and social movements proposing protests reduced to 50 people in six parts of the city, to which they would give no publicity, according to this message.”

The next day, Defence Minister Margarita Robles announced that the PSOE-Podemos government is preparing to send 7,500 troops from the Military Emergency Unit, the Parachute Brigade, the El Goloso military base, the Air Force and the military health unit to Madrid. The regional Madrid government had only requested the support of 130 soldiers to assist in contact tracing. However, Robles said, “The Armed Forces are ready in 24 hours to do whatever it takes whatever Madrid Region asks us, if we can do it, we will do it.”

Hours after Robles’ announcement, the PSOE and Podemos threw police against the protesters.

This is a warning to workers and youth in Spain and internationally, about the middle-class populist organizations that the ruling elite has for decades built up as the “left.” Rooted in affluent layers of academia and the union bureaucracy and theoretically grounded in postmodernism, they are indifferent to and contemptuous of the democratic rights and even the lives of working people.

Predictably, Anticapitalistas, a petty-bourgeois tendency that helped found Podemos but left the PSOE-Podemos government in May this year, is sowing illusions in Podemos. Even as the “left populist” party mobilizes the army to force workers to continue working through the pandemic, it issues appeals designed to provoke expectations that Podemos will suddenly turn to the left.

Advising the government, Anticapitalistas calls on Podemos to avoid provoking a political break by sections of workers to the left of Podemos. Podemos, they say, “should take good note: if they do not break with the PSOE after today's police assault, they will have crossed a red line that much of their social base will find difficult to understand. We directly urge Podemos ... to publicly condemn the assault (including Podemos ministers within the Council of Ministers), to resume Sunday’s call and provide resources so the people below can express themselves.”

Their statement makes no reference to the EU’s criminal herd immunity policy, the danger of military dictatorship, or the austerity measures being prepared by the government. According to *El Pais*, which saw the latest draft rules for Spain to receive €60 billion in

pledged EU bailout funding, the EU is demanding labour and pension reform, tax increases and cuts to unemployment benefits. The PSOE and Podemos are already actively working on these.

Instead, Anticapitalistas proposes that “civil society organisations” call for a general strike, limited to Madrid, to force Ayuso to resign. This means installing a regional government in which Podemos members like themselves would have a better chance of obtaining posts.

Events are confirming the warnings made by the WSWS about Podemos. Five years ago, as Podemos supported the EU austerity policies of its Greek ally, Syriza, the WSWS wrote: “Looking out at the population from the Moncloa Palace through multiple lines of riot police, a Prime Minister Iglesias would be as terrified of the workers as Tsipras or Spain’s current prime minister, Mariano Rajoy.”

The WSWS also warned in June, as Anticapitalistas left the PSOE-Podemos government, that this group was “being sent out of Podemos to serve as a paid agent of the Spanish capitalist state, intervening on social media and in protests and strikes hostile to Podemos to spy on and strangle them.” These warnings have been vindicated.

What is emerging is an explosive confrontation between the working class and all factions of the bourgeoisie.

Workers in Spain and internationally face the task of making a complete political break with “left populist” parties like Podemos. This means building workplace safety committees independent of the unions and a revolutionary, Marxist and internationalist, that is, Trotskyist, alternative to the “left populists”—sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Spain and around the world. Only such organisations can lead a scientifically-grounded fight against the virus, by general strike action to bring down these governments and transfer power to the working class.



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