

Strikes spread across Spain as anger mounts at COVID-19 herd immunity policy

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The last month of the year witnessed mass strikes and stoppages in Spain's health care, transport, agriculture and industrial sectors. Further working-class resistance is emerging in January, as unemployment surged to 16 percent of the population, around 3.7 million workers.

These struggles are part of a global upsurge of class struggle which started in 2018, when workers across the planet began to rebel against obscene levels of social inequality after decades of suppression by the trade unions, social democrats and pseudo-left forces. The COVID-19 pandemic has vastly intensified the struggle, as the ruling class seizes on the pandemic to slash wages and benefits and impose murderously unsafe working conditions.

December started with the end of a 57-day strike by the dockworkers in Bilbao port, one of Spain's largest ports. The 300 dockworkers denounced the "continuous breaches" of rest days, lack of staff and conditions of the machinery, and opposed the proposed wage cuts for senior workers and two-tier system.

The trade unions have enforced the go-back-to-work order to take part in a mediation process. This peace, however, is only temporary. The last mediation meeting is set on January 13. Dockworkers are continuing to fight the consequences of the 2017 betrayal when the trade unions agreed 10 percent wage cuts and huge job losses in the form of early retirement schemes.

In the north-western region of Galicia, a two-month strike by 600 metalworkers at Alcoa continues. Alcoa announced its decision to curtail the smelter's 228,000 metric tons of annual capacity and proceed with the collective dismissal of workers at its aluminium plant. While the courts have struck down the measure, Alcoa workers continue to strike, aware that the company's main aim is to close the plant or sell to Liberty House, another metal company which has not committed itself to securing the current jobs and wages.

In Asturias, 1,300 steel workers from Daorje called two-hour work stoppages for a week against repeated breaches by the company. Daorje reacted by implementing a lockout. The unions cynically declared the lockout is illegal because

it stopped workers who wanted to work against the union-led strike from doing so.

In the same region, gold miners from OroValle carried out work stoppages during the first 48-hours of the year, at the beginning of each shift. The miners are protesting against a breach of the collective agreement. Further strikes are expected in January.

In the Canary Islands, about a thousand postal workers of the publicly owned Correos postal service went on strike in late December against job cuts and the dismantling of the public service. In the past months, postal workers in other regions like Murcia, Almería, Gijón, Guadalajara or Madrid have also gone on strike against staff redundancies and excessive workload, provoked by the increase in demand due to the pandemic.

The government's herd immunity policy is provoking mass anger among workers. Overcrowding in the work centres and the lack of preventive measures have led to 9,300 COVID-19 infections or possible infections out of a total of 55,000 staff according to the unions. The PSOE-Podemos government, which manages Correos, refuses to disclose the extent of the infections among staff.

In southern region of Andalusia, 1,400 workers of Public Radio and Television of Andalusia (RTVA) went on strike in late December against the €14 million budget cuts announced by the regional government controlled by the conservative Popular Party (PP). The cuts were a demand from fascist Vox, who has long targeted regional television and radio channels for promoting "regional identities" instead of Spanish nationalism and chauvinism.

Agriculture is another epicentre of mounting anger. In Valencia, 50,000 workers of the citrus handling and packing warehouses were called on strike between December 14 and 20. The strike was called-off in the last minute, after a new agreement was reached which included minor concessions. The struggle threatens with breaking out again this year.

In the province of Jaen, a centre of olive oil production in Spain, strike action is being discussed against the refusal of employers to sign a collective agreement with a 3 percent

raise. This agreement, which should have been signed more than a year ago, affects around 4,500 workers of more than 350 oil mills in the province, and another 4,000 workers indirectly.

In transport, major cities are facing strike action. In Ourense, bus drivers at Urbanos de Ourense have been called on daily stoppages for January against wage cuts of up to 200 euros a month. In Zaragoza, tram workers are going on strike to demand an increase in salary, improved conditions and more training. In Barcelona, workers of the Transports Metropolitans de Barcelona (TMB), the main public transit operator in the city, are going on strike on January 11, coinciding with the return to school. They are protesting against the new hiring system which indefinitely extends the precariousness of temporary workers.

In a sign of what is to come, a thousand people demonstrated in the industrial city of Getafe, south of Madrid, in sympathy with strikes by workers of the agricultural machinery manufacturing firm John Deere Ibérica, after it announced the dismissal of 11 workers without justification.

The past months have also witnessed the continuation of protests and strikes in the health care sector which first emerged in Spring against the European Union's (EU) herd immunity policy, which has led to over 70,000 deaths and over 1.8 million infections in Spain alone, putting mass pressure on the resource-starved health care sector.

The rising militancy of the working class is facing the conscious efforts of the union bureaucracy to suppress, isolate and demoralise workers' struggles. Rather than attempting to unify these, the major unions, CCOO and UGT, and its numerous split offs and "alternative" unions, are actively sabotaging a unified struggle in order to support the PSOE-Podemos government in its austerity-drive and transfer of wealth to the super rich.

Over the past year, they have played a key role in the EU's herd immunity policy. The unions have enforced non-essential work and back to school to allow corporations to continue extracting surplus value. Meanwhile, they have joined the €140 billion bailout commission as key advisers to disburse the EU funds to banks and corporations.

Such is their reactionary role as auxiliary forces of the state that Podemos leader and Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias called on the trade unions to assume their role in challenging anger with calls for impotent protests and strikes.

In a conference organised by its Citizens Council, the highest body of the "left populist" party, Iglesias said, "Some do not like the word conflict," however, "political conflict is the engine of democracy." Iglesias called for "pressure from social movements, workers' and tenants'

unions, pensioners' organizations, platforms in defense of public services ... these are absolutely essential to achieve social progress." Iglesias concluded with an appeal to the trade unions: "it is essential that the unions and social movements do their work so that we can do ours."

Iglesias is signalling to CCOO and UGT that they have to let off steam, especially after the PSOE-Podemos government announced it is preparing to cut pensions and raise the retirement age to 67 and has announced it will freeze the minimum wage this year.

Iglesias' speech recalls the actions of its sister party in Greece, Syriza, when it supported a 24-hour strike against its own austerity policies in 2015. Syriza called for workers to walk out "against the neoliberal policies and the blackmail from financial and political centres within and outside Greece." In the next four years, Syriza implemented the most brutal spending cuts and pension and labour reforms in Greece's history.

While Iglesias calls the unions on empty actions, the PSOE-Podemos is attempting to suppress whatever struggles erupt outside the union's control. The Interior Ministry has recently approved new guidelines for the Permanent Centre for Information and Coordination (CEPIC) which establish police monitoring for "Alterations of public order and citizen security, which have a certain seriousness or social alarm" such as "demonstrations/ gatherings, strikes, work stoppages or factory occupations, as well as their evolution in real time, if requested."

Any effective action against the escalating COVID-19 pandemic and austerity requires a political rebellion against the trade unions, the PSOE-Podemos government and the European Union, across Spain and internationally.



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