Protests erupt in Spanish migrant camps at PSOE-Podemos repression

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Numerous protests have broken out in recent weeks in migrant internment camps on the Spanish Canary Islands. Migrants are protesting appalling living conditions and poor food in the camps, and the lack of medical treatment amid the escalating global COVID-19 pandemic.

Included in their demands is that they be allowed to travel to the Spanish mainland, where many migrants have family members. They are also opposing the violent racism they have faced at the hands of far-right thugs on the archipelago.

At the start of April, dozens of migrants demonstrated at the Santa Cruz de Tenerife internment centre, a former prison. Many are Muslims, but no arrangements have been made for the fasting month of Ramadan, which began this week.

Migrants held at the El Matorral internment camp in Fuerteventura at an ex-school in Las Palmas, in Gran Canaria and in the Las Raíces camp in Tenerife have also taken part in numerous hunger strikes over the last two months.

Last Tuesday, a major protest broke out in the Las Raíces concentration camp, the largest of the six camps on the island chain. Las Raíces, a forest site on loan to the Interior Ministry from the Defense Ministry, currently houses 1,200-1,400 migrants.

Tensions have been running high at Las Raíces since it entered into use in February. According to the charity Asamblea de Apoyo a Migrantes de Tenerife (Assembly to Support Migrants in Tenerife—ASMT), “Many people have been protesting for some time, in a hunger strike etc.”

ASMT continued: “Yesterday [last Tuesday], there was supposed to be a meeting with someone in charge at Accem [an organisation contracted by the Spanish state to run the camps], but it didn’t happen. As a result, protests were held and the situation became quite tense.” Clashes also reportedly broke out between migrants of different ethnicities, including Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans, according to Accem.

Primary responsibility for the outbreak of tensions in the Canary Islands lies with the PSOE (Socialist Party)-Podemos government, which has imprisoned thousands of migrants in squalid conditions in tent camps, pending deportation. They have point-blank refused to allow migrants to travel to the Spanish mainland, claiming that to do so would be a “pull factor” for further migration.

Explaining the broader causes of the protests, ASMT stated: “The main demand is that they be allowed to continue their migration route. The majority have been in the Canary Islands for more than four months and many have family in Madrid or Barcelona. …. There are people who, with their little money, have bought a [plane] ticket and when they arrived at the airport they were held by the police or not allowed to enter.”

ASMT also noted the lack of education for youth and described the appalling health situation in the camps, providing the perfect breeding ground for the coronavirus. “Many minors are not being schooled, and medical care is dire, with sick children who need immediate attention, pregnant women in pain and badly cared for patients.”

Spanish police reacted violently to the protests at Las Raíces, firing rubber bullets and blank cartridges at the migrants, according to videos posted online by ASMT. Police can also be seen attacking migrants with batons and riot shields. Migrants threw sticks and stones in response.

Isora Mesa, a representative from ASMT, said, “Twenty to 25 people had to be taken to hospital with broken ribs and broken arms, [and] injuries to the head from rubber bullets.” According to the local government delegation, three migrants were seriously injured, with another seven also having to be hospitalised.

The organization also posted a video of a trail of blood

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on a stairway leading to the camp's infirmary, which Accem later explained had come from a young sub-Saharan man with "a fracture in his leg which was showing the bone."

Eight migrants were detained by police after the unrest. Last Wednesday, five of them—all of Moroccan origin—were given prison sentences for their role in the protests. PSOE regional President Ángel Víctor Torres responded to the altercations with a vicious anti-immigrant law-and-order campaign, promising that the regional government would immediately deport the migrants involved in the clashes.

"In the face of emergency situations, we have to impose order," he ominously declared.

Responding to hypocritical criticisms last month by former Canary Islands regional President Fernando Clavijo that refugees are housed in unsanitary tent camps, the PSOE-Podemos government defended its anti-migrant policies. "Of course, there are tents," PSOE Minister of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration José Luis Escrivá blithely declared, "like in every refugee centre in the world.

"It would be a waste of public money to erect large facilities for temporary situations," the minister continued. The camps are "the best possible" accommodation and of "the highest standards," he added.

Reports that Spain has been subjecting child migrants to invasive "medical" examinations to determine their age exposes the "high standards" of care migrants can expect from the PSOE-Podemos government. Children had been forced to undress completely and undergo an examination of their genitalia to establish whether or not they are less than 18 years old.

Other migrant children have been subjected to bone tests or to orthopantomographic examinations, also known as panoramic radiographs. The first involves X-raying the wrists, hands or fingers of the children, while the latter is a radiographic examination providing detailed information about their jaw and tooth structure.

Receiving countries are legally obliged to provide underage migrants with some limited care, including shelter and schooling. To avoid this, the Spanish state is stepping up efforts to declare young migrants arriving in the country to be adults, thereby relieving them of any responsibility for these migrants' well-being.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has denounced Spain for using the barbaric and humiliating method of genital examinations, stating that it "infringes on their [the children's] dignity, their privacy and their bodily integrity and should be banned."

The UN committee's statement was made as part of a ruling on the case of a young migrant girl known as Arcange. She arrived in Spain in 2017 aged 16, after fleeing sexual abuse by her father and attempts to force her into marriage with an older man in her home country of Cameroon. Although immigration officials initially had no doubts that she was a minor, Arcange was later subjected to numerous degrading physical investigations, including being stripped naked and forced to undergo genital examinations.

The examinations were conducted without the child having had any legal counsel and without the procedure being explained to her in a language she could understand. She was then falsely found to be 18 years of age or over and cast out onto the street to fend for herself.

This is the fourteenth time that the UN has condemned the Spanish government for violating the rights of migrant children by subjecting them to forced undressing and genital examinations.

Representatives of the PSOE-Podemos government responded to the UN's declaration with feigned indignation. A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Social Rights, which is overseen by Podemos, told news site elDiario.es: "The UN's condemnation of Spain for the Arcange case demonstrates the necessity of substantially amending the procedure for determining the age of children and adolescents who arrive in our country alone. It is essential to avoid carrying out unnecessary tests, especially those that involve the undressing of minors."

The criticisms by PSOE and Podemos ministers are utterly cynical. The coalition government has imposed fascistic anti-refugee policies indistinguishable from those of the far right. The task of defending migrants and asylum seekers falls to the working class, as part of a struggle against the reactionary policies of the entire European Union and for socialism.

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