

Ocupación S.A.: Documentary exposes Spain's role in illegal occupation of Western Sahara

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Ocupación S.A. is a documentary film that investigates how the Spanish ruling elite helps perpetuate Morocco's little-reported, decades-long and illegal occupation of Spain's resource-rich but impoverished former North African colony, Western Sahara. Inevitably bound up with that is the repression of the region's Sahrawi inhabitants.

Western Sahara is a country inhabited by half a million people in a territory the size of the UK. It is bordered by a US- and European Union-backed Moroccan regime to the north and the Algerian military government to the east, in the midst of a region destabilised by ongoing imperialist interventions. The territory has been claimed by both the Kingdom of Morocco and the bourgeois-nationalist Polisario Front since the end of Gen. Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship in Spain in 1975.

The documentary's producers, Basque Country NGO Mundubat and Brazil-based Forward Films, and directors Laura Daudén and Sebastián Ruiz-Cabrera deserve credit for exposing the continuing reactionary intervention of Spain, now governed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and pseudo-left Podemos.

The filmmakers declare, "*Ocupación S.A.* is the portrait of a betrayal. With a meticulous and unpublished approach, the documentary exposes the names and surnames of Spanish businessmen and politicians involved in the economic exploitation of Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa and one of the most violent, militarized and censored territories in the world."

Daudén laudably explains, "Telling stories through documentary, to me, it's about commitment and enthusiasm—commitment with the people, the facts, and

the causes we unequivocally engage with; and enthusiasm for the possibility of building a more just and solidary world."

Ocupación S.A. premiered last December soon after the Moroccan government deployed troops to brutally disperse a peaceful Sahrawi pro-independence protest at the Guerguerat border crossing. As a result, the 30-year United Nations-brokered cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario Front was broken, with Polisario declaring a "state of war."

The documentary opens with footage of the protest. Batons rain down on cornered demonstrators. Soultana Jaya describes how she lost an eye and nearly lost the other. She shows us a photo of her terribly bruised body. Other interviewees tell of disappearances for years in Moroccan jails and being forced into exile to avoid persecution.

The film's narrator, Sahrawiya musician Suilma Aali, details Spain's continuing intervention in Western Sahara following its seizure in 1884, part of Western imperialism's "scramble for Africa." She explains that in 1975, in secret talks with the US and Morocco, the Franco regime in Spain, collapsing from mass working class opposition at home, relinquished control of the territory to Morocco.

At the same time, the Polisario Front (armed and financed by Algeria) launched a guerrilla war for the creation of a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Fighting ensued for 16 years until in 1991, the UN ceasefire was declared, with the promise of a referendum. This never took place, leaving Western Sahara divided today by a 2,700-kilometre (1,700 mile)-long mined sand embankment.

Morocco continues to occupy 80 percent of the

territory, including the capital Laayoune, where 40 percent of Western Sahara's 500,000 population lives. The SADR controls a thin strip of desert in the east. Additionally, for the past 40 years, an estimated 175,000 Sahrawis have lived miserably in four refugee camps in Algeria.

Ocupación S.A. reveals how Spain, through its large economic involvement, "has normalised the Moroccan occupation, or to say it better, enables it." Exports to the Kingdom represent 45 percent of the goods and services Spanish companies sell in Africa.

It is the reason why "the powerful families in Spain ... guarantee that whoever enters Moncloa [residence of the Spanish prime minister] has good relations with Morocco and maintains the status quo of the occupied territories in order to maintain that influence, which they do without being very visible."

Daudén and Ruiz-Cabrera painstakingly detail the illegal activities of Spain's largest corporations. Oil giants CEPSA and Repsol secretly provide fuel "essential for Morocco to maintain the occupation of the territory" and Spanish shipping company Rodman has sold military vessels to Rabat for years, passing them off as civilian craft and thus avoiding arms export controls.

Urovesa has sold over 1,200 armoured vehicles to Morocco, many used to police Western Sahara, whilst military hardware producer Indra Sistemas provides a satellite for surveillance purposes.

Spanish-German company Siemens Gamesa has illegally constructed wind turbines in Western Sahara, which provide energy to extract the country's vast phosphate resources, a vital ingredient in synthetic fertilizer.

Spanish and other Western companies also exploit Western Sahara's fishing industry, grabbing most of the annual €1.6 billion (US\$1.9 billion) in profits. In 2019, the European Union declared the sea around Western Sahara a part of Morocco in its latest fishery agreement, contravening a European Court of Justice ruling forbidding it.

The documentary makers powerfully depict the way Spain maintains its imperialist domination of a former colony, but they are seriously hampered by their political perspective. Representatives of Polisario and Podemos are treated uncritically and their bankrupt ideologies, which have continuously betrayed the

working class, left unexplored.

Polisario articulates the interests of a corrupt social elite bankrolled by international aid and the Algerian regime. Mass protests and strikes erupted last year in the Algerian refugee camps over social conditions and the bourgeois nationalists' corruption and police methods.

Like their counterparts around the world, Polisario reacted to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and related processes by rapidly shifting to the right, abandoning its earlier, socialist pretensions and advancing a "pro-business" constitution. It continued to plead with imperialism to support its calls for independence.

However, these were dealt a mortal blow last December when the Trump administration officially recognized Morocco's claims as a result of that regime's agreeing to normalise relations with Israel under the "Abraham Accords." In January, Joe Biden's new Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed the Biden administration's "firm commitment to Israel's security" and the "Abraham Accords" (reactionary agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, respectively).

Ocupación S.A. also contains a lengthy interview with European Member of Parliament for Podemos and Anticapitalistas leader, Miguel Urbán, who proceeds to promote illusions in European imperialism and its institutions and calls for Spain to "assume" its mandate in Western Sahara.

However, Urbán is a member of the current militarist and pro-austerity PSOE-Podemos government that now sells weapons to Morocco to suppress the Sahwari people. In February, the Spanish government reaffirmed its decades-long policy that the country has "no international responsibility" regarding Western Sahara.



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