

Spanish truckers mount nationwide strike against rising fuel prices

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Spanish truckers began an indefinite nationwide strike yesterday to protest rising fuel prices and poor working conditions in their industry. The strike, targeting Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, was called by the Platform for the Defense of Road Transport of Merchandise, representing smaller truck companies and self-employed truckers. Regional trucking associations in the Basque Country and Navarre have also joined in the strike.

The strike is part of an emerging international movement of truckers against inflation and rising fuel prices now accelerated by NATO-EU sanctions against Russia. Italian truckers are going out on a nationwide strike against high fuel prices and planning protest actions on March 19, and Moroccan truck drivers are currently on a three-day strike protesting fuel prices. Calls are circulating for a French truckers strike on March 21.

The main demand laid out for the Spanish strike by the Platform is a reduction in fuel taxes to compensate for rising fuel prices. The surge in inflation, reaching 7.5 percent in February, the most in 14 years, has hit fuel prices especially hard, a situation worsened by NATO and European Union (EU) sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine conflict, which threaten to cut off its oil and gas exports to Europe. Gasoline hit €1.68 and diesel €1.58 per litre, both the highest prices ever recorded in Spain, rising 13.8 and 17.6 percent respectively since December.

In its call for strike action, the Platform warned that the situation facing truckers is desperate: "Fully 90 percent of small and medium-sized transport companies are in total bankruptcy, even though working conditions are extremely precarious in every sense. These consequences are also felt by self-employed drivers, whom we will defend in the demands we advance."

The strike was widely followed in its first day by 90 percent of truckers represented by the Platform, disrupting the distribution of cargo from key ports, blocking

highways and slowing distribution of food and other key supplies to stores across much of Spain. In certain regions, including Asturias or El Bierzo, all truck traffic was shut down.

Truckers blockaded highway traffic or industrial zones in many of Spain's largest cities including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Murcia, Sevilla, Málaga, Tarragona, and Albacete. They also imposed full or partial blockades of truck traffic into major Spanish ports including Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao, Tarragona, Coruña and San Sebastián. They held protests in front of municipal buildings in cities including Madrid, Barcelona, and Mallorca.

There are growing indications that the truckers strike could rapidly lead to food shortages in supermarkets of major Spanish cities. Striking truckers blocked traffic to Mercabarna, the main food-trading estate concentrating fruit, vegetables, fish and meat-processing activities in the Barcelona area. Madrid mayor José Luis Martínez-Almeida said yesterday that "for now," there are no shortages reported at Mercamadrid.

Manuel Hernández, the president of the Platform calling the strike, warned however that this situation would not last: "If this strike becomes prolonged, it will be felt in the shelves of every supermarket. It will affect everything."

Hernández pledged that the strike would continue if the government did not give satisfaction to the truckers' demands, declaring: "We will continue to aggravate the situation and are relying on the patience of the thousands of families that we represent, and that are striking out of necessity."

One trucker participating in the strike said yesterday morning: "I am happy because I see that people are very eager and they are enthusiastic about striking. We are an industry that, if we go on strike, we completely paralyse the country."

With this strike, Spanish truckers are entering into a struggle against a reactionary PSOE-Podemos government that is determined to slash wages and living standards and wage war on Russia. The way forward for truckers is to turn to the working class, mobilizing broader layers of workers in struggle against the ruthless opposition truckers will face from the state and the banks. Teachers, metalworkers, and public sector workers are already on strike or preparing to strike over contract disputes across Spain and beyond.

Workers must be mobilized independently of Spain's union bureaucracies. The social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) and Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO), which are tools of the ruling parties, PSOE and Podemos, fear a social explosion and oppose the strike. CCOO issued a statement yesterday stating that striking "is not a way forward to solve the problems the industry faces" and called for talks between the state, the unions and the truckers business federation.

This federation, the National Committee on Road Transport (CNTC), is, however, bitterly hostile to the strike. While the Platform represents approximately 85 percent of truck traffic in Spain, which is handled by smaller firms or self-employed truckers, the CNTC speaks for larger enterprises that plan to negotiate price hikes as dictated by the PSOE-Podemos government.

Yesterday, the CNTC issued a statement citing the NATO war drive against Russia and calling to end the strike. It said: "This is not the time to start a transport strike, especially not if it is called as an indefinite action and without any clear goals, because this will simply end up destabilizing even more a complicated situation that we are passing through due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine."

The Platform that is coordinating the strike replied by denouncing the CNTC, saying: "The National Committee has betrayed us, it is continuing to pour fuel on the fire. Transport is essential to all economic activity in this country, and the truck is the key to transport worldwide, without trucks there are no ships. The ministry is listening to no-one."

The PSOE-Podemos government has indeed indicated that it has no intention of helping the truckers and is instead preparing for repression. The Finance Ministry released a statement declaring that there is "little or no margin" to help the trucking industry, as reducing fuel taxes would have "enormous costs." Transport Minister Raquel Sánchez said that "now is not the best time to organize mobilizations or strikes."

One trucking business federation, the Spanish Confederation of Merchandise Transport (CETM), has announced that it is seeking collaboration with riot police to smash striking truckers' pickets.

The PSOE and Podemos are reactionary bourgeois parties, bitterly hostile to the workers, whose international allies have backed sending the police, and even the military, against striking truckers. Syriza, the Greek allies of Podemos, supported the mobilisation of the army in 2010 to crush a truckers strike against EU austerity policies. The Portuguese Socialist Party called out the army in August 2019 to force truckers back to work as gas stations ran dry across the country.

Truckers must reject with contempt the claims of capitalist governments that there is no money. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the EU has distributed trillions of euros in bailouts to the banks and major corporations. At the same time, it claimed there was no money to carry out a Zero Covid policy against the virus, which they allowed to claim over 1 millions lives in Europe. Now, the ruling class claims there is no money to help workers and small businesses make ends meet, as everything must be sacrificed to wage war on Russia.

The decisive question is the broadest international mobilisation of the working class against the financial aristocracy's agenda of global war abroad and war on the workers at home. Building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees against corrupt national unions, and struggling for socialist policies, including generous public aid to small businesses, is critical to organizing and unifying this growing international movement.



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