

Spanish truckers strike continues in third week, as inflation hits 10 percent

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Tens of thousands of Spanish truckers continue to defy the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government and its demands that truckers end the strike in the name of “fighting Putin.” Truckers have been on an indefinite nationwide strike for 18 days, protesting rising fuel prices amid the NATO war drive targeting Russia and its energy exports over the war in Ukraine.

The strike action has knock-on effects: blocking ports, causing traffic jams, and producing shortages of fuel, building materials, and food products in supermarkets.

The Spanish government, while still claiming the strike is having minimal impact, has authorised supermarkets to ration consumer purchases under a new amendment issued Wednesday. Milk, flour, rice and other basic goods are now rationed, in scenes not seen since the 1940s.

The Platform for the Defense of Road Transport of Merchandise, the association of small trucking firms and self-employed truckers leading the strike, stated yesterday that they “will not give up the fight.” They will hold a National Assembly Saturday in Madrid to “decide the next steps.” The Platform has rejected as inadequate measures proposed by the PSOE and Podemos: a subsidy of 20 cents per litre of fuel, with 15 cents of the reduction being financed by the state and 5 cents by oil companies.

The average price of fuel continues to rise, however. This week the average price of diesel, of which Russia is a leading exporter, overtook that of gasoline for the first time, setting a new historical record. The average price of a litre of gasoline has risen to €1.818 in Spain, while average diesel prices stood at €1.837, according to data from the European Union Oil Bulletin. Over all of the year 2022 so far, diesel prices have risen 36.29 percent and gasoline 22.97 percent.

Yesterday, truck drivers in Catalonia blocked the main road to the industrial and logistics area of Zona Franca in Barcelona. In the southern port city of Algeciras, nearly 200 truckers picketed in front of the port. The Port of Bilbao, the main port in northern Spain, is still blocked by pickets. In the Balearic Islands, over 100 truckers from the recently created Balearic Freight Transport Association announced new protests on April 11-13 in Mallorca to protest the “unsustainable” situation in the sector.

There are some indications that the strike is starting to lose steam after the PSOE-Podemos government deployed 23,000 police against the strike. Spain’s two largest unions, the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the PSOE-affiliated General Union of Workers (UGT), have both denounced and isolated the strike, even after policemen arrested dozens of truckers and even shot and wounded one.

Some regional truckers associations and unions are accepting the government’s temporary concessions. The Hiru Basque Autonomous Carrier Union of over 700 self-employed truckers has voted to end the strike. The union held an assembly in which the proposal to return to work was supported by 50 votes, while 31 voted in favour of continuing the strike and eight abstained.

In Cantabria, the transporters organised under Asemtrasam, the association that brings together 500 truck drivers, called off the strike. As with Hiru in the Basque country, the vote was very close and left out a large number of association members, with 132 votes in favour of ending the strike and 117 against.

The Galician Federation of Freight Transport (Fegatramer) and the Navarrese Association of Carriers (Tradisna) of 212 truckers decided to stop supporting the stoppage, while not disclosing the result of the vote.

In Asturias, Cesintra, one of the two associations of carriers that has supported the strikes in Asturias together with the Independent Union of Autonomous Carriers (UITA) has called off the strike.

The Spanish government also claims that heavy vehicle traffic has been recovering and that yesterday it was 35 percent higher than that registered during the peak of the strike, last Monday.

As repression of the strike mounts, it is clear that the inflation's underlying causes in Spain and internationally remain: bank bailouts that debase the currency by pumping trillions of euros into the pockets of the super-rich and NATO sanctions targeting Russian oil and grain exports. On Wednesday, Spain's National Institute of Statistics reported that inflation is running at 10 percent. This level has not been seen since 1985, amid savage austerity policies pursued by the PSOE government 37 years ago.

According to consulting firm Kantar, during the two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prices of consumer products rose by 5 percent overall. Nonetheless, consumption rose 13 percent as many buyers stocked up amid fears of shortages due to the war and the truckers strike. Prices have skyrocketed: cooking oil was 303 percent more expensive this month than it was a year ago, pasta 183 percent, rice 181 percent and milk 145 percent.

The pro-PSOE daily *El País* wrote: "Faced with this situation, consumers adopt different strategies. In general, the tactics are the following three: using savings or credit, looking for cheaper brands, or buying less. Data for March suggests that so far family savings have been used, which had reached a record during the pandemic when it was impossible to consume."

According to the Association of Manufacturers and Distributors (Aecoc), 15 percent of consumers in Spain, or over one in seven, are already being forced to buy and eat less food.

Inflation is the result of a class war policy of the ruling elite. During the pandemic, capitalist governments refused to adopt a scientific Zero-COVID strategy, allowing the pandemic to continue and disorganize supply chains, even as central banks printed trillions of euros to bail out the super rich. NATO's policy of cutting Russian oil, gas and grain out of world markets amid the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine is further accelerating the underlying surge in prices.

The capitalist class is seizing upon the truckers strike and supply chain problems to sack masses of workers, imposing thousands of temporary redundancy schemes (ERTEs). ERTEs let employers stop paying wages to laid-off workers, who instead receive unemployment benefits, amounting to a 30 percent wage cut.

ERTEs have been or are being negotiated with the unions at automakers Seat, Ford and Renault, airline carrier Air Europa, stainless steel manufacturer Acerinox, food producer Ingapan, chemical company Asturquimia, metalworking companies in Cádiz and ceramic companies in Castellón.

Big business associations are demanding to be able to unilaterally lower salaries. According to *El Confidencial Digital*, the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations (CEOE) is demanding "total freedom to be able to lower salaries in times of crisis."

Truckers can place no faith in the promises of the PSOE and the pseudo-left Podemos party, whose cops are assaulting them on the picket lines. As NATO escalates threats against Russia, these promises are not worth the paper they are printed on. A new political strategy for the strike is required.

The Spanish truckers strike is part of an escalating wave of class struggles internationally as US and Canadian rail workers fight lockouts and anti-strike injunctions, a wave of wildcat strikes shakes Turkey, and tens of millions of Indian workers strike against state austerity policies. There is massive opposition in the entire working against policies of war, inflation and mass infection with COVID-19. The critical issue for truckers is to fight for the broadest mobilization of workers, in Spain and internationally, against capitalist governments that are impoverishing the working class.



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