

Spanish trucker on suspending the strike: “Fuel prices will keep rising as the war goes on”

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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Jesus Cuenca, a 41-year old self-employed trucker from Granada, on the 20-day truckers strike. On Saturday, the strike was “temporarily suspended” by the leading association calling the strike, the Platform for the Defense of Road Transport of Merchandise, an association of small trucking firms and self-employed truckers. As it paused their action, the organisation stated that this was only a temporary suspension.

Jesus has worked as truck driver all his life. He started working with small trucks at age 18. When he was 21, he purchased his first trailer. He is the third generation in his family driving trucks, he told the WSWS, and the experience “comes from my grandfather and my father.”

Jesus told the WSWS: “We have gone on strike for many reasons. We work more that we used to. The companies tender the routes to see who can do it the cheapest. It’s like a bidding contest.”

Not only is the bidding competition fierce, but then they have to wait 90 to 120 days to get paid, explained Jesus, “especially for the smaller companies.” During this period, and after 30 days, they are given a “payment confirmation document” which allows drivers to take an advance. However, the “banks then charge you for taking out money.”

Another issue is the waiting period to unload the cargo. Jesus explained this “affects both self-employed truckers and wage workers. Sometimes we have to wait for hours in the cold in the queue until it’s your turn to unload. If you go somewhere for a break and they call you through the megaphone and you don’t hear it, you lose your turn.” He also said that in some places they don’t have an area to wait to take a break and eat a hot

meal.

Fuel prices were however the main “trigger” for the strike, Jesus said. “Fuel is our main cost. Over 12,000 kilometres diesel can be between 40 to 50 percent of our cost.” On top of this, he explains, “we have to pay the insurance of the vehicle, insurance of the product and our own salary. From the fuel side, we can’t cut down costs. We sign contracts with companies saying we can do this route for this amount. If fuel prices go up, it has to come from our own income.”

This is why the Platform included as one of their main demands the mandatory inclusion in all transport contracts of a revision clause for the variation in the price of fuel.

Jesus also explains how costs have only risen in the past years, particularly due to inflation during the pandemic and now after the Ukraine-Russia war. He explains that prices for products like a AdBlue, a liquid that truckers use to reduce air pollution created by diesel engines, has risen. “Maintenance costs on the vehicle have also increased. Even the tires. A few years ago, a tire could cost 360 euros; now it’s at 460 euros. It reaches a point where we just can’t take more from our own income. There is nothing left. We basically pay to work.”

On the strike itself, Jesus was very active in the picket lines in Granada. “The government has never recognised us as strikers. I don’t care. Self-employed and small businesses have joined together to launch this struggle. We are the ones who have suffered most.”

Jesus explains that during the first days, the Platform for the Defense of Road Transport of Merchandise was alone. However, soon after, under mounting pressure from self-employed truckers, other associations in the

National Committee on Road Transport (CNTC)—composed of the main Spanish trade unions and the largest employers in road transport—were forced to join the strike after having bitterly opposed it.

The government, Jesus said, “only met with those who do not represent us, the CNTC. We the self-employed truckers don’t believe in the National Committee. They never solve our issues. They are there only to serve the large trucker businesses.” Many self-employed truckers are part of other small associations just for processing administration documents and taxes. When the strike erupted, Jesus explained, “they turned to their associations to demand that they join the strike. Once they achieved some concessions, they then called of the strikes, leaving us alone.”

This is one of the reasons that the truckers suspended the strike, Jesus indicated: they are trying to gather forces to launch another strike once the 20 cents per litre subsidy ends in June.

“We have achieved 20 cents,” explains Jesus. “It’s a small band aid for a war wound. And this will only last until June. We know fuel prices will keep rising as the war goes on. They are blaming it on the war, claiming they can’t do anything.”

Jesus stressed that fuel prices and the war are international problems.

“This is a global problem, truck drivers in the whole world are suffering,” he said, noting strikes that have broken out among truckers against high fuel prices in Italy and Morocco.

Jesus describes how the truckers received broad support from the Spanish population, who like the truckers are suffering from inflation. Last month, inflation was at 9.8 percent, the highest in 37 years. “I have seen a lot of support from fellow citizens, particularly among the agriculture, livestock farmers and fishermen. Like us, they suffer a lot, especially due to the number of middle men [between the producer and the end consumer] which artificially inflate costs. I have seen a number of tractors joining us in our pickets and protests.”

The trucker also attacked the savage repression they faced from the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government: “It has been outrageous. During the picket lines, we would try to inform truckers about the strike, and then 5 or 6 policemen would stop us. They wouldn’t even let us inform. It was a constant

harassment. It is clear they received orders by the government to boycott our protest as much as possible.”

Jesus described the role of the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) union and the PSOE-linked General Union of Workers (UGT), who throughout the strike worked with the government to isolate the strikers and slander the truckers as neo-fascists.

Jesus said: “UGT and CCOO are useless. They repeatedly claimed this was not a strike, but a business stoppage. This was a lie. We were also fighting for improving the conditions of wage workers. I have friends who are trucker wage workers. They also suffer the same abuses as us. The unions have done everything possible so that the wage workers would not join us. But I know the wage workers had deep sympathy for us. If they had joined us, we would have won everything.”

Jesus said he hoped the suspension of the truckers strike would allow it to return stronger in the future: “We have not called off the strike, it’s a suspension. What happened? The strike lost steam. Continuing with the strike would have been a problem. There were striking truckers who were already going back to work. It’s very difficult to have the trailer stopped for 20 days. We have to feed our families. Now the aim is to make the Platform [for the Defense of Road Transport of Merchandise] strong.”



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