

Strikes mount across Spain against spiralling cost of living

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The class struggle is erupting in Spain. Strikes by tens of thousands of workers have broken out in industry after industry to demand higher wages amid spiralling inflation, better working conditions and replacing temporary work with full-time jobs.

The strikes take place after talks over the Fifth Agreement for Employment and Collective Bargaining (AENC) between the trade unions, the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) and the Confederation of Spanish Employers Organisations (CEOE) broke down.

The AENC is a sort of “agreement on collective agreements” setting out a nationwide framework for contracts and pay raises. Currently, both the unions and the CEOE agree that wages should rise less than the current 8.3 percent inflation level. The unions are demanding 3.5 percent increases in 2022, 2.5 percent in 2023 and 2 percent in 2024, while the CEOE demands workers allow inflation to eat away their purchasing power even faster. This means the unions are in reality negotiating how much of a real wage cut they can impose on their members without provoking a social explosion.

The unions have since threatened strikes and protests “company per company” to “fight” for these cuts to their purchasing power. Currently, 9 million workers in Spain work without or under an expired collective agreement on working hours, calendar and salary.

The “company per company” strategy, however, effectively sabotages any attempt to unite workers struggles across different industries, regions and pay scales. This is clear in the strikes that have already broken out.

In A Coruña province, 16,000 metalworkers went on strike on May 5, 12 and 18-19, authorised by the

CCOO and UGT unions. They are demanding the recovery of purchasing power, salary review clauses to protect purchasing power, the extension of these rights to workers from subcontracted companies, the limitation of temp work and the regulation of toxic, painful and dangerous work.

The UGT and CCOO have called 20,000 metalworkers on an indefinite strike in nearby Cantabria starting June 2. They make no attempt to unite the steelworkers in A Coruña and Cantabria. In Cantabria, the unions claim, the aim is to “to pressure” Pymetal, the region’s big business association in the metal sector. Pymetal wants a 2 percent wage increase in 2021, 2 percent in 2022 and 2.25 percent in 2023, way below the current 8.3 inflation levels.

The unions are demanding wage increases equal to inflation, but are calling their own policy “extreme” and preparing to betray it as soon as possible. They claim the long delay in the Cantabria strike, meant to avoid it intersecting with the A Coruña strike, gives Pymetal “more than 15 days of margin” to address “injustice” of the industry.

On May 13, the unions called for a national strike of call centre workers for wage increases, in a sector where average monthly wages are €800 (\$845) for a 30-hour week. According to the unions, almost 85 percent of the 120,000 workers went on strike. Over the past three years, workers in the sector have lost an estimated 16 percent of their purchasing power. After this, the unions said they will call a one-day strike one day a month until a new collective agreement is signed, but they are demanding only a token salary increase.

On the same day, around 11,000 workers in the textile, general and leather and footwear sectors in the Basque country went on a strike called by the Basque-nationalist trade unions. Hundreds of protesters

marched in Bilbao, the region's capital. Collective agreements have not been reached since 2015 for the textile sector, 2018 for leather and 2007 for footwear.

Last Wednesday in Barcelona, hundreds of taxi drivers took to the streets in one of the most important demonstrations in the ride-hailing sector's history in Catalonia. The protest brought together nearly 4,000 vehicles. Taxi unions and associations want the ratio of taxis to ride-hailing services to be set at 30 to 1. Dozens of taxis have filled the three central lanes in the heart of Barcelona's Gran Via and then moved on a slow march to the Parliament of Catalonia.

Also in Catalonia, teachers have been carrying out weekly stoppages against decades of austerity in the public education system by successive Catalan-nationalist regional governments and the latest reactionary decision of the Supreme Court to require that 25 percent of classes be held in Spanish.

In the Madrid region, 11,000 doctors called off the 10-day-long strike against temp contracts, which exceed 50 percent of total employment. CCOO and UGT had already betrayed the strike, but other unions and medical associations continued the strike to demand 3,000 fixed contracts. In the end, the strike was sold out after the region accepted 2,500, amid mass anger among striking doctors who wanted to continue the strike until its demands were won.

In recent weeks, smaller strikes have erupted throughout the country, involving hundreds of workers. This includes workers at Osakidetza hospitals and mental health clinics in the Basque country, old folks homes in Navarre, cleaning workers in Bizkaia, public transport workers in Terrassa and Ourense and factory workers at the LGC factory in Cordoba. In Barcelona, 200 workers at H&M clothes retailer called several strikes to demand a salary bonus for languages.

Calls for new strikes are mounting. Ryanair pilots and cabin crew may strike this summer, in Spain and other European countries.

At Correos, Spain's state-owned postal services company, CCOO and UGT have called for a strike on June 1, 2 and 3 against the dismantling of the public postal service.

The upsurge of the class struggle in Spain is part of an emerging international movement of the working class against inflation and rising inequality, accelerated by the NATO-EU war on Russia and the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic. In the US, a series of powerful strikes and social protests have broken out across different industries against the intolerable social conditions and breathtaking levels of social inequality. In Sri Lanka, mass anti-government protests and strikes are calling for the toppling of the country's repressive executive presidency.

As the WSWS noted: "[W]orkers internationally are confronting not only individual bosses or corporations, but powerful global financial institutions backed by the world's governments, police and armies."

In Spain, workers face the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, which violently represses strikes. In last year's strike by 22,000 metalworkers in Cádiz, the government sent riot police and armoured vehicles. Against last month's drivers strike, the government launched a brutal crackdown, arresting and fining hundreds of strikers and deploying over 23,000 police—the largest deployment ever against a strike in Spain.

But besides the police and the army, the PSOE-Podemos' main weapon against the class struggle is the trade unions, which isolate strikes, accept real wage cuts and keep production going.

To break out of the isolation imposed by the trade unions, workers must be mobilised independently of the union bureaucracies and Podemos. At the same time, the bankruptcy of the unions and the ruthlessness of the ruling class demonstrates the need for workers to unite internationally. The alternative, as the International Committee of the Fourth International has explained, is building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, mobilised in a struggle for socialist policies against exploitation and imperialist war.



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