

Spanish unions work with PSOE-Podemos government against postal, metalworkers strikes

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As mass strikes break out every week in Spain, corporate management and the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government are relying on the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) to isolate and suppress these strikes. The unions are no longer serving as workers' organizations in any meaningful sense and are instead being exposed as bureaucracies in the service of management and the capitalist state.

In Cantabria, 20,000 metal workers are on indefinite strike since June 2 against employers' blocking of a collective agreement and a below-inflation pay deal. The strike has support from 95 percent of the workforce. The Pymetal employers' association offered metalworkers two percent in 2021, 2 percent in 2022 and 2.25 percent in 2023, with a review clause in 2024. Inflation already stood at 6 percent in 2021 and 8.7 percent in May of this year.

The unions are demanding a retroactive 6.5 percent raise for 2021 and raises corresponding to official inflation plus one percent this year until 2024, together with small increases in vacation time and disability payments. However, Pymetal dismissed this out of hand, calling it "flatly unaffordable."

The UGT, CCOO and USO unions, which authorised the strike, have made clear they are not in favour of strike actions. Despite the workers' overwhelming vote to strike, they have claimed that workers "do not want to go to such lengths." The fact that they are calling for wage increases in parity with inflation—after proposing below-inflation wage increases, equivalent to a real pay cut, in other industries—makes clear that they are manoeuvring in the face of mass anger among the workers.

Trying to wear the workers down, they absurdly insist the only way forward is talks with Pymetal. Their

statement yesterday complained, "If the employers insist on continuing to lengthen the strike, not only will it be affecting the 1,500 companies, but it will also put the large industries of the region in trouble, which, in part, depend on the services provided by the firms affected by the strike." So far, they have sat down 10 times, with the latest negotiations breaking down last Sunday.

Today they have summoned workers to a supposedly informative assembly to discuss following actions.

The unions have so far refused to call any joint actions with metal workers in the neighbouring Basque country, where negotiations between the unions and the employers associations Metal de Bizkaia have been blocked. Metal de Bizkaia is proposing a 2.75 percent wage increase. The collective agreement affects 50,000 workers in the Basque region.

The CCOO and UGT unions, along with Basque-separatist unions ELA and LAB, have announced three days of strike action, specifically June 23 and 30 and July 1, hoping that by then the metal workers strike in Cantabria will have been sold out.

In Galicia, 16,000 metal workers have been on strike over the past weeks for wage increases. CCOO and UGT have called for strikes for June 8-9 and 28-30, again with the aim of avoiding any united action with its members in the same sector in the neighboring regions of the Basque Country and Cantabria.

In Correos, postal workers carried out a three-day strike, from June 1 to 3, called by CCOO and UGT. The strike was followed on each day by more than 75 percent of the workforce, despite the workers' distrust towards these unions. The stoppage virtually paralysed transport routes to the main distribution centres. The success of the strike highlights the tremendous dissatisfaction among postal workers with their pay and working conditions and

opposition to privatization of the company.

Correos is currently a state company. Originally, its main task was to run a public service, distributing letters together with official certificates and notifications. But as letters have declined in recent years with the rise of Internet and social media, Correos management and successive Spanish governments have aimed for the company to generate profits like any other private firm.

To this end, Correos is shifting its activity more and more towards parcel delivery, seeking to profit from the rise of e-commerce, so that companies such as Amazon can offer very cheap delivery rates to their customers. This model would depend on the availability of many highly exploited and poorly paid workers.

A privatised Correos could also offer its vast public infrastructure (premises, vehicles, distribution centers, etc.) to try to offer competitive rates to these companies.

The privatization of Correos has been underway for decades. Since 2001, staff levels have fallen from 62,000 to 47,000 workers with a significant increase in workload and exploitation. In addition, while at the beginning of the century the base of the workforce was made up of civil servants who entered through a competitive examination process and had more labor and salary guarantees, these exams were ended in 1998.

The bulk of the workforce is now made up of workers who do not have the job protections offered by the status of civil servant. A quarter of the workforce are part-time temp workers. According to the unions, the company's plan is to cut another 8,000 jobs and reach almost 20,000 temp positions (40 percent of the total workforce) before 2025. Their wages, frozen for years, average €1000 a month.

If CCOO and the UGT have called a strike now, it is not to defend the postal workers but because they are terrified at mounting opposition from below and seek to keep it under control by calling strikes to release steam. After briefly trying to project a false image that they are fighting for wages, the unions have now quickly returned to the negotiation table with the company.

Correos has made clear that privatization will continue, stating that the public company “requires a process of transforming the business model that in no case involves a weakening of the service, or closing of offices, or any dismissal process.”

The unions have again refused to broaden the struggle, instead appealing to the PSOE-Podemos government to intervene, the same government that has repeatedly shown its readiness to crush strikes. In last year's strike by

22,000 metalworkers in Cádiz, the government sent riot police and armoured vehicles. Against last April'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.

Even then, the unions insist that the strike has “sent a clear message to the government: it cannot ignore the public postal service, nor endorse with its silence the dismantling of Correos and the terrible management of its president, Juan Manuel Serrano.” In fact, successive governments, including that of the PSOE have presided over the dismantling of Correos, with the complicity of the unions.

The rest of the company's minority unions, CGT or the Sindicato Libre, have made rhetorical criticisms of the larger trade unions, but do not offer any alternative to workers. They have not organised any major protest against privatization, the deterioration of working conditions, or wage freezes.

These struggles underscore that in order to prosecute the class struggle and impose their demands, workers need their own organisations, independent of the trade unions. These are rank-and-file committees built by the workers themselves, and ready to struggle against openly right-wing but also pseudo-left bourgeois parties like Podemos. The struggle against inflation and social attacks carried out by national governments and international financial markets requires coordinating and unifying such struggles in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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