

Spanish trade unions work to strangle mounting strike wave

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30 October 2022

Spain's union bureaucracies are working to shut down a wave of strikes amid mounting working class opposition to the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government and the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

Last week, the USO union called off its baggage handlers' strike, demanding better conditions, against low-cost air carrier Ryanair in 22 Spanish airports. The USO claimed the PSOE-Podemos' ministry of transport's minimum service requirements 'have made it impossible for workers to carry out the strike', adding that they are 'abusive and clearly detrimental to the exercise of the right to strike, making it absolutely unfeasible.'

Accepting the decision of Spain's large union bureaucracies to isolate the strike and bring out other sections of workers in defence of the baggage handlers, the USO proposed only to challenge the minimum service requirements in court. The USO's capitulation comes amid a wave of struggles that have rocked the European airline industry this year, including Ryanair, Iberia Express, EasyJet, Lufthansa, Air France and SAS. It worked also to prevent the linking of the baggage handlers struggle with a flight attendants strike called by the STAVLA union.

The flight attendant strikes are planned for every Friday, Sunday, and Monday between November 1 and January 31. Workers are demanding a 13.4 percent pay rise for this year. Earlier, the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) had tried to shut down the strike by agreeing to a 6.5 percent increase in August, though inflation is already running at 9 percent or more.

Mounting anger forced STAVLA to refuse to sign and call strike action. Once again, the PSOE-Podemos government has imposed a minimum service requirement that workers work 50 to 80 percent of normal hours to break the strike. STAVLA has yet to denounce these measures and will most likely accept them like USO.

The UGT, CCOO and SEMAF unions have also called

off a 15,000-strong railway strike on Spain's state-operated rail network, Renfe, that was set to start on Friday. Strike action was called over the company's 2 percent wage increase offer, lack of trains, lack of drivers, and the fear that Renfe will transfer its powers to regions across the country, opening to further deterioration of the public railway system.

The unions called off the strike after Renfe agreed to the salary increases announced in the latest PSOE-Podemos budget. The budget includes below-inflation increases for civil servants like rail workers of 3.5 percent for 2022 and 2023 and 2.5 percent in 2024. This has been cynically celebrated as a "victory" by the unions, when it really means 3.5 million civil servants will see a collapse of real wages and purchasing power.

In the Basque country, 52,000 metal workers were called on a two-day strike on Thursday and Friday, with another one-day stoppage planned this Wednesday, demanding a pay rise which meets inflation. Workers reject the metal employer's proposal of only 10 percent increase spread over the next three years. With inflation running at 10 percent per year, this would represent a massive attack on living standards.

The CCOO, UGT and the Basque separatist unions ELA and LAB are not mobilising the whole strength of the metal workers, around 1 million across Spain. On the contrary, they are intervening to prevent any unified action, calling on their members in the same sector to strike at different dates in different regions.

Strikes have been erupting across the metal sector for over a year, since the powerful, week-long strike by 22,000 metalworkers in Cádiz last November. Strikers occupied their workplaces and defeated attempts by the PSOE-Podemos government's riot police to retake the factories. The unions then rammed through wage increases below inflation.

This was followed by strike in Cantabria in June by

20,000 metal workers against employers' blocking of a collective agreement and a below-inflation pay deal. Then, on separate days, the unions called out 16,000 metal workers in Galicia. Both struggles resulted in wage increases way below inflation – In Galicia 5.5 percent this year and 4.5 percent in 2023, and in Cantabria, 4.5 percent increases this year, and 3 percent in 2023 and 2024.

In the province of Barcelona, the CCOO and UGT did not even call for nominal strikes. They signed a pre-agreement in the metal sector last week affecting 160,000 workers which includes salary increases of 4.2 percent this year, followed by 3.9 percent in 2023 and 2024.

Today, 12,000 workers are called out on a three-day strike by CCOO, UGT and ATP at aircraft manufacturer Airbus' eight plants across Spain, in Madrid, Castilla-La Mancha and Andalusia. Airbus' profits have soared amid the massive ramp up of industrial war production for the war against Russia. The company's net profit increased year-on-year by 65 percent between July and September to 667 million euros. Its turnover climbed by 27 percent to 13.3 billion euros in the same period.

Anger mounted when Airbus announced last week that its 120,000 employees globally would receive a cash bonus of €1,500, which is not enough to cope with the loss of purchasing power over the past year.

The unions have not disclosed their salary increase demands, but CCOO has made clear that salary increases above inflation are not on the table. As Javier Pacheco, general secretary of the CCOO of Catalonia declared: "I don't think we are in a position to agree on collective agreements with wage increases at today's inflation levels."

In the region of Madrid, the trade unions shut down last week's indefinite strike. Doctors and nurses anger exploded over working conditions after the regional government run by the right-wing Popular Party announced it would reopen 80 24-hour care centres, with staffing at nearly half pre-pandemic levels. The weekend before, over 23,000 protesters took the streets of Madrid to support the health workers and defend the public health care system.

In an eleventh-hour deal, the SATSE, CCOO and UGT unions agreed to the PP plan. However, mass anger erupted over a deal signed behind workers' backs. The regional government has reported 40 percent sick leaves among health professionals as the plan has put in place, a percentage that has risen to 60 percent of doctors. The doctor's union Amyts rejected the agreement and called

for a strike on November 7.

Mounting social opposition in Spain is part of a global strike wave, which is developing into an open political conflict with capitalist governments internationally. In the US, the cockpit of world imperialism, 120,000 rail workers are voting down a national contract brokered by the Biden administration and union negotiators, which sought to prevent a national strike while meeting none of the workers' demands. In the UK, strikes by rail and dock workers were a significant factor in the downfall of Prime Minister Liz Truss after only six weeks.

In France, a national refinery strike has met with savage police repression by multi-millionaire President Emmanuel Macron's government.

The suppression of strikes by the union bureaucracies and their open sabotage of their own strikes points to the necessity for the working class to organise independently, in rank-and-file committees. The union bureaucracies are not institutions that the working class can use to wage the class struggle, but tools of the capitalist state and its war policy, hostile to the class struggle. They are the chief enablers allowing their respective capitalist states to wage war abroad and class war at home, acting as domestic labour police, holding back the rising tide of social opposition.

Only the building of rank-and-file committees can unite workers in Spain and internationally in struggle against war and inflation. Building and sustaining such organizations requires a political break, not only with the union bureaucracies, but also against middle class pseudo-left parties like Podemos, whose role in government to threaten and crush strikes testifies to its utter hostility to the working class.



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