

Spain's union bureaucrats slash real wages, fear revolutionary contagion from France

Santiago Guillen
10 May 2023

The eruption of the class struggle in France and across Europe is terrifying Spain's Socialist (PSOE)-Podemos government and its affiliated trade union bureaucracies, the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT).

Explosive anger is building among workers in Spain as the CCOO and UGT bureaucracies move to endorse contracts with paltry wage increases dwarfed by inflation. The bureaucracies are terrified that mass struggles will erupt at their attempt to slash workers' living standards. The same conditions driving the revolutionary confrontation between workers and the French President Emmanuel Macron exist in Spain and across Europe, with strikes against austerity and inflation growing in Italy, Germany, Britain and beyond.

The state of discussions within the union bureaucracy was reflected in the comments of UGT General Secretary Pepe Álvarez at the union-sponsored May Day rally in Madrid.

Warning about the possibility of revolutionary contagion from the protests against Macron in France, should mass mobilizations of Spanish workers begin, Álvarez said: "We know how mobilizations begin, but not how they end."

Speaking of the French union leaders, he continued: "When they began, they didn't know they were going to take the importance they did." That is, Álvarez let it be known that French union leaders are surprised and dismayed that, having called protests, they no longer know how to call them off due to pressure from below.

This clearly also explains why Spanish union bureaucracies are calling no action against the collapse of workers' living standards in Spain. They are also terrified of working class anger and of the danger of

opposition erupting that they cannot control. For over a year, they have delayed the signing of hundreds of collective agreements to avoid eruptions of strikes demanding higher wages. The number of collective agreements signed in 2022 fell by 70 percent.

The ruling class is very conscious of the union bureaucracies' role in strangling the class struggle as it wages war against Russia in Ukraine. In an editorial, the economic newspaper *Cinco Días* praised "the great work done by the Spanish unions, especially the CCOO and the UGT, so that spiralling prices did not cause an environment of mobilizations demanding wage increases."

The article recognised the importance of the trade unions as the labor police of corporations and banks, recognising that they "agreed to a strong loss of purchasing power" in 2022. Workers had not been called onto the streets to demand wage increases despite the cost of living "skyrocketing, while companies almost doubled profits in 2022 (they rose 91.3 percent, according to data from the Bank of Spain)." In the same year, the article concluded, there were fewer strikes (679) than in 2019 (898), the year before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, throughout the year, the unions made empty threats of "spring mobilizations," then "a hot summer" and finally a "winter of discontent" if salaries were not raised. On May Day, CCOO General Secretary Unai Sordo threatened 'an intense process of mobilizations that will take the form of strikes.' Similarly, the UGT's Álvarez said they would "fill the streets."

Behind the backs of workers, however, they were negotiating wage increases far below inflation. In 2022, 3,084 collective agreements covering 9 million workers saw their average wage increase by 2.7 percent—only one-third of average inflation that year, which reached

8.4 percent. According to calculations by Oxfam, workers have lost an average of €1,500 a year, or an average of 5.6 percent of their purchasing power.

Now, the Spanish union bureaucracies are making clear they are committed to continuing the plunder of the working class for the next several years. Days after the May Day Rally, the unions signed the fifth Agreement for Employment and Collective Bargaining (AENC) with the main business group, the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations (CEOE).

The AENC sets out a nationwide framework for contracts and pay raises in over 1,300 collective agreements pending renewal this year, affecting millions of workers. It includes a 4 percent wage increase for 2023, and 3 percent in 2024 and 2025—all below inflation.

Annual core inflation, which strips out volatile fresh food and energy prices, is currently at 6.6 percent. However, the rise in food and energy prices, which disproportionately impact workers who spend much of their budget on food and energy, means real inflation is far higher. Over the past year, food and beverages have risen by 16.5 percent; meat by a record 14 percent; milk, cheese and eggs 24 percent; and legumes and vegetables 22 percent. The average mortgage has risen 54 percent.

If inflation were to continue to run at around 10 percent over the next three years, as it did last year in the euro zone, the AENC would stipulate a staggering 20 percent cut to workers' real wages.

The unions nonetheless hailed the AENC, with shameless lies claiming that it protects purchasing power. Álvarez (UGT) stated: "it will allow not only to maintain the purchasing power of wages, but to recover it." Sordo (CCOO) said, "What we are sealing here today is good news," calling the agreement "a collective success."

The PSOE-Podemos government also hailed the deal. Yolanda Díaz, deputy prime minister, labor minister and leader of a split-off of the pseudo-left Podemos party, Sumar, thanked "social agents for such an important agreement aimed at protecting the wages of working people."

These are all lies, especially as the agreement does not even compel management to grant the raises suggested by the AENC. These raises are advisory, not mandatory, and union officials and big business are free

to impose even lower wages than those stipulated in the AENC. Nearly seven million workers are not even covered by the AENC, moreover; they are subject to collective agreements signed before, most of them with raises far below inflation.

CEOE president Antonio Garamendi bluntly declared that he hopes the AENC will prevent strikes and "guarantee social peace until 2025."

On top of this, the PSOE-Podemos government plans to impose mass austerity. It has promised the European Union to impose €24 billion in cuts or tax hikes to slash the public deficit next year to 3 percent of GDP.

There is nothing for workers to negotiate with the CEOE or with the PSOE-Podemos government. They are enemies of the working class, whose living standards they relentlessly attack. No less than Macron—who rams through his cuts in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and mass strikes, counting on the union bureaucracy to block a struggle against the capitalist police-state machine in France—they rule against the population.

While the union bureaucracies in France appeal for "mediation" with Macron to block a political movement to bring down the Macron regime, the Spanish union bureaucracies similarly are complicit in massive attacks on wages, social rights and living standards. Demands by pseudo-left groups for the union bureaucracies to wage a struggle are a dead end.

The way forward for workers in Spain, France and across Europe is to build rank-and-file committees in workplaces, independently of the union bureaucracies. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees has been established to coordinate and unify workers struggles in Europe and internationally against the attack on jobs, living standards and working conditions. Building such organizations is the only way to break the crushing grip of the PSOE-Podemos government and its union functionaries over the class struggle.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact