

Strikes erupt across Spain as snap general election campaign begins

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Strikes are erupting across Spain on the eve of the snap elections called by the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government after its electoral debacle in last month's local and regional elections. Drawing hundreds of thousands of workers, the strikes are part of a broader movement across Europe and internationally, with workers raising similar demands in every country, and are met with police crackdowns and legal threats.

Terrified that rising social opposition will cut across its plans to escalate war in the Ukraine and impose €24 billion in cuts and tax increases in 2024, the PSOE-Podemos government called elections for July 23. They hope to hand power to the right-wing Popular Party (PP) and the fascistic Vox party, in order to crush rising social opposition at home and escalate war abroad. This takes place as the trade union bureaucracies are being exposed as state-funded pro-corporate tools to impose real wage cuts amid soaring inflation.

Last week, 33,000 workers from the metal, naval, automaker and aeronautic industries in Pontevedra, Galicia, paralysed industrial activity of the entire area. Workers also blocked main roads and the AP-9 highway, the main highway linking northern Spain with Portugal, and organized protests of thousands of people.

The strike, over a pay increase and better working conditions, was launched on Thursday, June 15, and continued for two days last week. It covers around 3,700 companies impacted by the provincial metal collective agreement.

The CIG, CCOO and UGT union bureaucracies were forced to call the strike by rising anger in the rank and file. Workers have seen their salaries decrease month by month, as 2022 saw inflation rise 8.4 percent, while food inflation far exceeds 10 percent. Unions are now demanding 4 percent raises for 2023, 2024, and 2025, as the metal bosses propose ridiculous 0.5 percent for 2023, and 2 percent for 2024 and 2024. These amount to deep

cuts to wages.

The union bureaucracies are working to weaken the struggle as much as possible so as to impose a concessions contract. They are calling for strike action on different days and without appeals to other metalworkers' struggles across Spain, or even to other striking workers in the same region: 500 Galician firefighters are striking for better wages and conditions.

Behind the backs of workers, the unions are seeking a "compromise" with the metal bosses, which will inevitably mean wage increases well below inflation.

The acting PSOE-Podemos government has responded ruthlessly, deploying hundreds of police firing rubber bullets and using truncheons against strikers, leaving over a dozen injured. Police stopped workers from demonstrating in front of the Ifevi conference centre, which was holding the biannual Metal Industry and Technologies International Trade Fair, Mindtech—the leading industrial fair for the metallurgical and metalworking sector.

The CIG union reported "contusions, baton blows, rubber bullets" and a young man "had a dislocated shoulder due to a police tackle", describing the riot police's action as "very disproportionate". The unions have called for further strikes on July 6 and 7.

Terrified that other metalworkers could join the fight for higher wages and overturn the reactionary union-business framework of "collective agreements" negotiated at provincial level, the union bureaucracies rapidly intervened to close down other metal workers struggles.

In Valencia, the unions, which had previously called for three days of strikes this week, agreed to a new provincial metal collective agreement covering 85,300 workers. It includes below-inflation wage increases of 3 percent in 2023, 2024, and 2025 and 2.5 percent in 2026. In the Balearic Islands, the unions, after days of protests and strikes, agreed to 4 percent increases for 2023, 2024 and

2025 affecting 42,000 workers.

In the retail sector, 4,000 shop assistants from over 100 stores went on strike last Wednesday to demand pay increases at Swedish clothing store H&M. They resumed their strike again yesterday. This takes place as the highly profitable summer sale season is set to kick off. Once again, the unions are trying to dissipate the struggle, calling only for two more strike days in early July.

Shop assistants are striking after months of pay discussions ended in failure and after strikes at H&M's main competitor, Inditex, led by billionaire Amancio Ortega, led to 20 percent raises earlier this year. The main demands of the strikers are that H&M cover the vacancies caused by sick leave or leave of absence, which is provoking work overload, and that contract hours be extended beyond part-time. Most workers hold part-time contracts.

The union bureaucracies are deeply implicated in the deterioration of conditions. In 2021, they accepted the layoffs of 400 workers and the reduction in work time for 170 others, without any pretense of a fight.

In the auto industry, union negotiators imposed a sell-out of over 6,000 Michelin tire workers. Last week, they enforced their collective agreement on 900 striking workers at Lasarte-Oria, the last Michelin factory in Spain that had refused to accept the deal of 5 percent increases in 2023, 3 percent in 2024 and 2 percent for the following two years. The deal is linked to the profits of the company, thereby not guaranteeing workers' purchasing power.

The unions had already enforced the same deal at other Michelin plants in Vitoria, Aranda de Duero, Valladolid and Almería.

In the airline industry, the Spanish Union of Airline Pilots (SEPLA) began a third round of strikes at Air Europa last Monday, Spain's third largest airline, after a verbal deal reached in early June over pay and working conditions fell through. Hundreds of flights have been cancelled.

The PSOE-Podemos government has attempted to break the strike by imposing harsh minimum service requirements on strikers. The Ministry of Transport required that 90 percent of flights to the islands (Canary and Balearic Islands) and 65 percent for flights within Spain and Europe proceed during the strike.

Rather than appeal to tens of thousands of European aircrew workers who have been engaged in mass strikes for over a year against these draconian requirements, SEPLA shut down a strike by pilots at Iberia's Air

Nostrum airline. Air Nostrum pilots had been on intermittent strike since February, striking every Monday and Friday of every week. This culminated in an indefinite strike since the beginning of June.

Last Friday, SEPLA called off the strike, without any concessions from the company, claiming "advances" in negotiations.

In the public sector, intermittent strike action and protests that began in April continued last week. Around 45,000 civil servants are striking against the PSOE-Podemos government, demanding wage increases of €350 to €450. The strike, followed by 80 percent of staff, provoked the suspension of millions of judicial actions, from declarations to notifications, summons, appearances, trials, seizures, evictions and proceedings.

This strike wave exposes the PSOE-Podemos government as a reactionary government of imperialist war and attacks on the working class. It reveals in particular the reason why the PSOE and Podemos called snap elections, even under conditions where it is widely expected that this could return to power a coalition government of the right-wing Popular Party and the fascistic Vox party. The PSOE and Podemos are terrified of massive working class opposition to war, austerity and police-state repression erupting uncontrollably on its left flank.

It also underscores the necessity for the working class of building rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies. Only such bodies can unite workers in Spain and internationally in struggle against war and inflation and the fraudulent July 23 elections. Building and sustaining such organizations require a political break with the union bureaucracies and middle class pro-war parties like Sumar and Podemos.



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