

Spanish Acerinox metalworkers strike in Cádiz

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Since February 5, 1,800 workers at Spanish stainless-steel manufacturer Acerinox, located in the town of Los Barrios in the province of Cádiz, have been on indefinite strike. The strike has led to disruptions and involved blockades, including of major highways and at the port of Algeciras, one of the busiest transshipment hubs in the world.

The heroic 50-day strike has lost the company almost 1,200 tonnes per day of production and over €3.5 million (\$3.80 million) over the last four weeks. Coupled with the strikes of 1,700 workers in Finland's stainless steel producer Outokumpu since December 2023, in opposition to the government's reforms of the labour market and cuts to social welfare, the stoppage is heavily impacting the European stainless steel market. Several million tons of melt shop capacity have been blocked and prices for stainless cold rolled coil are increasing. There are also reports of stainless steel shortages across Asia.

Acerinox is a Spanish multinational and one of the largest steel producers in the world. Listed on the Spanish IBEX35 stock index, it also has factories in the US, Germany, South Africa and Malaysia.

One of its main shareholders is the Alba Financial Corporation, which brings together the businesses of the March family. The family are infamous for having enriched themselves through arms trafficking, banking and corrupt business practices during the dictatorships of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) and General Francisco Franco (1939 to 1975). Banca March funded Franco's coup d'état in 1936 and the fascist war effort during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Acerinox workers are striking for salary increases, danger pay bonuses and in opposition to flexible hours. Since 2008, their salaries have been practically frozen. Last year, a worker died in an accident that caused burns to 85 percent of his body.

The company is refusing to give in to the workers'

demands, despite immense profits of €228 million in 2023 in Spain alone. It wants to impose a new collective bargaining agreement that will worsen conditions, including adding 18 extra workdays per year. This would translate into working one more month in exchange for half the monthly salary. The company is also demanding the ability to change workers' schedules at will.

The strike was called by the company's majority union, the Steel Workers Association (Asociación de Trabajadores del Acero - ATA) after a vote of 1,313 in favour and 193 against. It took more than a month for the company to recognise the strike committee because it did not have members from the other unions, especially CCOO and UGT.

CCOO and UGT are doing everything to isolate the strike. They are the biggest unions in the sector, representing around 29,000 metal workers in 5,600 main and auxiliary companies in the province. Despite this, they have refused to broaden the strike.

In 2021, the PSOE-Podemos government, with the acquiescence of the CCOO and UGT, launched savage repression against the 22,000 metal workers in the province of Cádiz, deploying thousands of police officers and armoured vehicles to terrorise working-class neighbourhoods. It was left to the unions to betray the strike, ramming through a deal including below-inflation wage increases.

In July 2023, UGT and CCOO betrayed another strike called in the metal sector of Cádiz against the dismissal of four workers and the breach of the collective agreement in the sector's auxiliary companies. The unions called off the strike and then supported the arguments of the Employers' Association that the action was illegal. Months later, the courts ruled in their favour.

ATA, however, is no alternative to the UGT and CCOO. Its leader José Antonio Gómez Valencia is attempting to reduce the issue to flexibility at the expense of wage

increases while promoting the PSOE-Sumar government.

Last week, 500 Acerinox workers travelled to Madrid to protest in front of the company's headquarters. Valencia explained to the *Europa Sur* newspaper his view that "The trip has been positive because we have spoken with the company, we have conveyed our concerns to the managers here in Madrid, especially the issue of flexibility, which is what worries us the most".

Days later, Valencia promoted illusions that the PSOE-Sumar government will intervene to support workers. He told *Diario Area* of the "professionalism" of Yolanda Díaz, Minister of Labor and deputy prime minister of the PSOE-Podemos government, claiming, "Madrid has been worth it... Yolanda Díaz is going to help us with the media, when she is asked questions in parliament, and she is going to give us visibility".

ATA is boosting a government that, like its predecessor PSOE-Podemos government (2020-2023), is driving the repression against striking workers.

In the case of the Acerinox strike, four members of the strike committee have been charged with committing a crime against security for blocking roads. Another worker was arrested and given a quick trial in which he was sentenced to one year in prison. The paramilitary Civil Guard has been sent by the PSOE-Sumar government to savagely attack workers with smoke canisters and rubber bullets.

The PSOE-Sumar government is also attacking metal workers who participated in the 2021 strike. The Prosecutor's Office, under its control, is placing them in the dock on charges of public disorder and demanding three-year prison sentences. The government is terrified that these struggles could spread to other sectors and threaten its ability to wage war abroad and attacks on the working class at home.

In the case of Cádiz, the province contains important military and industrial facilities that are already playing an important role in NATO's rearmament and war plans. A few kilometers from the city of Cádiz is the Rota base, the main base of the Spanish Navy, hosting its flagship, two assault ships and six frigates.

The base is shared with the United States, which has 3,200 troops there. Located near the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, it has strategic importance for the US and NATO. Washington uses it to load planes and ships in transit. Four destroyers, to be joined by two more over the next two years, are deployed there as part of NATO's anti-ballistic missile system. Its Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron can carry out anti-submarine warfare missions,

anti-surface warfare and vertical resupply.

Airbus also has a factory in the province producing parts for Eurofighter jets and the C295 long-range tactical transport aircraft.

Cádiz is also home to Navantia shipyards, the main company of the metal sector, responsible for the repair and maintenance of the US and Spanish warships and for building ships for the Spanish, British and Saudi Arabian navies, among others.

Last year, Defence Minister Margarita Robles visited the province to examine Navantia's Maritime Action Vessel for Underwater Intervention (BAM-IS) programme, which will provide the Spanish Navy with advanced submarine rescue capabilities. Navantia also produces S-80 submarines and F-110 frigates.

Robles said, "This has been a visit that we all have to congratulate, which has revealed the progress of a programme that is so important for the Navy but also for Spanish industry, in this case for Navantia and for the companies that are going to work with it, as well as for the entire Puerto Real region" in Cádiz. "We believe in the Spanish defense industry and in the men and women of this region who are doing immense work to make Spain a great country".

Workers at Acerinox are not just confronted with one of the most powerful families in Spain, but a struggle against the PSOE-Sumar government which cannot tolerate a disruption of the military supply chain.

If Acerinox workers are to win their demands, they must reject all nationalist appeals to subordinate their fight to Spain's war drive and broaden the mobilization to other sectors of the working class in an action that would paralyse the Rota Base and the rearmament operations in which the Navantia shipyards participate, interrupting US-NATO wars across the Middle East and Europe and plans for war against China.

This necessitates a fight against the pro-capitalist and pro-war union bureaucracies and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by the workers. These must be coordinated across national borders to fight the global corporations and the capitalist governments that back them.



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