

22,000 metalworkers strike in northern Spain's Cantabria region

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Around 22,000 metalworkers across Cantabria, an industrial region in northern Spain, are on strike in defence of wages and working conditions. The walkouts, which began Tuesday, June 3, and are set to continue today, have brought production to a near-standstill in workshops and industrial plants in Santander, Torrelavega, Guarnizo, Ampuero, and Reinosa.

According to the unions that called the strike—Workers Commissions (CCOO), the General Union of Workers (UGT), and Workers Trade Union (USO)—participation is above 90 percent.

The strike could escalate into an indefinite work stoppage beginning June 9 if the employers' metal association, Pymetal, continues to reject even the modest 3.5 percent wage increase demanded by the unions, meant only to recover income lost to inflation over the past years. Pymetal has taken an openly aggressive stance, rejecting these demands and threatening to eliminate existing gains such as vacation pay enhancements and the night-shift bonus.

The resistance of Cantabrian metalworkers is entirely justified. For years, they have borne the brunt of Spain's drive to maintain "competitiveness" on the global market, resulting in stagnant wages, longer hours, and a growing transfer of wealth to the capitalist class. These conditions have only worsened as inflation, driven in large part by NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, devoured workers' incomes.

The metal sector, representing nearly 40 percent of Cantabria's industrial GDP and employing nearly half of the region's manufacturing workforce, is economically vital. Yet those who do the labor—machinists, welders, assemblers—see none of the rewards. Now, as they demand fair contracts, employers are telling them there is "no margin" for improvements.

The strike has drawn a hysterical response from Spain's capitalist class. The CEOE employers' federation called

on the PSOE-Sumar government to crush the strike, declaring that "the public administration must respond decisively and not permit the criminal acts taking place." It also demanded that strikers on the picket lines go "to jail."

The danger of repression launched by the PSOE-Sumar government is very real. In 2022, its predecessor, the PSOE-Podemos government, deployed riot police and armored vehicles against striking metalworkers in Cádiz. Months later, it launched the largest police operation in modern Spanish labor history, mobilising over 23,000 officers to break a nationwide truckers' strike.

This exposes the bankruptcy of pseudo-left forces like Podemos, which now sit in parliament backing the PSOE-Sumar coalition. Podemos's regional branch in Cantabria is now accusing big business of "irresponsibly imposing setbacks on workers through threats and contempt," and expressing "support and solidarity" with the metalworkers "who are an example of struggle, dignity, and resistance." But when Podemos was in government, it unleashed police first on striking metalworkers in Cádiz, and again on striking truckers.

Today, it continues to support the PSOE-Sumar government as it carries out Spain's largest rearmament programme since the end of the Franco dictatorship, funnels billions in public funds to big business under the guise of post-pandemic recovery, and enforces sweeping austerity on the working class.

Amid the strike, the PSOE-led Cantabrian regional government is posturing as a neutral party, with Industry and Employment Minister Eduardo Arasti urging both sides to act "responsibly" and respect constitutionally-guaranteed rights to strike and to work. But Arasti has already contacted the national PSOE-Sumar government's representative in Cantabria, in charge of riot police, to enforce "the right to work," a veiled endorsement of strikebreaking.

The unions, CCOO, UGT, and USO, have been compelled by workers' rising anger to call this strike. However, their role remains that of containment, isolation, and—once they judge the time is ripe—betrayal. These organisations no longer function as genuine instruments of class struggle, but as bureaucratic enforcers working to preserve the authority of the employers and the capitalist state.

Their tactics today are a direct repeat of their conduct during the metalworkers' strikes of 2021 and 2022. Then as now, they confined each strike within the narrow framework of local bargaining units, blocking any effort to unify metalworkers across Spain or link up with strikes in other sectors, such as postal workers, healthcare staff, teachers, aircrew, textile and leather workers. The unions refused to call coordinated action, and instead staging isolated protests and short-term strikes that allowed them to gradually demobilize and eventually sell off the strikes.

In 2022, this culminated in the betrayal of the 21-day metalworkers' strike in Cantabria. After three weeks of militant struggle, including mass pickets and bitter confrontations with police, the unions rammed through a deal that failed even to match inflation—that is, a pay cut in real terms.

The UGT union referred to this strike in a statement, declaring: “UGT FICA, CCOO, and USO in Cantabria are merely demanding the recovery of the purchasing power lost during the validity of the previous collective agreement, in a context where companies are currently making profits. Just as in the last round of negotiations [the 2022 sell-out], when workers made a significant effort, it is now the companies' turn to reciprocate in kind and agree, at the very least, to restore lost purchasing power.”

Now, three years later, the crisis has reignited, not because workers “made an effort” to sacrifice their living standards in 2022, but because that deal was a sellout. Yet the same union leaders now present themselves as champions of “dignified conditions,” claiming they think it is time to resist the employers' “dirty game.”

The pseudo-left is actively intervening to uphold the authority of the union bureaucracy and assist in strangling the strike. Groups like the Morenoite Revolutionary Workers Current (CRT), are working to channel workers' anger back into the dead-end of appeals to the unions.

In a recent article published on *Izquierda Diario*, CRT writes that to overcome the “setbacks of the last collective agreement [...] it is not enough to simply reinforce the picket lines. It is necessary to demand that the major

unions call assemblies after each strike day to decide how to continue the struggle and expand it to other sectors. The leaderships of CCOO, UGT, and USO must be pressured to immediately call strikes in the large metal companies that have their own agreements, so that the strike becomes even more powerful and the pressure on these major firms forces PYMETAL to come to the negotiating table.”

This perspective disarms workers, promoting illusions that the same bureaucracies responsible for isolating and betraying past struggles can be pressured into leading a genuine fight. It serves only to maintain the unions' grip over the strike and prevent rank-and-file workers from organizing and taking control of the strike into their own hands.

The strike must be defended not only against Pymetal but also against Sumar, Podemos, and the unions. This requires the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, rooted in the workplaces and democratically controlled by workers themselves. These committees must link with other sectors, health, transport, education, and postal workers, and appeal for solidarity internationally, as part of a broader fight against austerity, militarism, and capitalist exploitation.

A powerful offensive of the working class is emerging. The decisive task is to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate global struggles against exploitation, austerity, and war, and to construct sections of the ICFI in Spain and internationally to provide workers with the political leadership needed to take power and reorganize society on a socialist basis.



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