Trade unions, Catalan regional government work to suppress teachers' anger after mass strike

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19 February 2026

Last week, a massive strike brought primary and secondary education in Catalonia to a standstill on February 11, with an estimated participation rate of 85 percent—something not seen for more than 15 years.

From early in the morning, pickets of teachers blocked the main streets of Barcelona, such as Gran Via, Avinguda Meridiana and the city's two ring roads, as well as around a dozen motorways and roads across the Catalan road network, causing major traffic congestion during rush hour, especially in the capital.

Demonstrations held throughout the day were massively attended. In Barcelona, they reached 70,000 people, and if marches in other cities across Catalonia are included, the number of demonstrators exceeded 100,000. The total number of teachers in the region is around 90,000, indicating that substantial numbers of students and other Catalan workers supported the teachers during the day of action.

This success was achieved despite the attempt by the Catalan government, the Generalitat de Catalunya, to undermine the strike through minimum service requirements that were higher than in previous disputes. These measures required one in every three primary school classrooms to remain open and up to 50 percent of staff in nursery schools to keep working, ensuring that schools stayed open and that secondary education maintained basic operations.

Minimum service requirements are a common tactic used by administrations and employers to neutralise strikes. The unions' official reaction was limited, as usual, to filing a legal complaint whose ruling will arrive months later.

The strong support for the strike reflects the very poor state of education in Catalonia. Teachers' demands are numerous, beginning with the recovery of the 20 percent loss in purchasing power suffered since the austerity cuts imposed during the 2008 economic crisis.

But the dispute is not only over wages. Teachers complain of overcrowded classrooms, a lack of support staff, excessive bureaucratic work and overloaded schedules. According to the Catalan regional government's Education Department, 34 percent of students require special educational support, whether due to physical disabilities, migrant backgrounds or, in many cases, simply because they come from poor families. The education system in Catalonia is unable to provide that level of support.

Two teachers explained to elDiario.es that "the feeling is one of saturation at every level… You see that you simply don't have enough hands to meet the needs of the classroom." Another described the sense of "frustration" teachers experience, adding that "with 34 students in a class, you just can't cope."

The education scholar from the Faculty of Education at the University of Barcelona, Enric Prats, who has spent years visiting schools and secondary institutions, commented that "Everything can be summed up in one word: exhaustion… Salary is not the main issue—rather, classroom conditions are inadequate and there is a lack of support."

Prats pointed out that "the protest has gone beyond the unions," noting that it was grassroots pressure that forced all the sector's unions—something unprecedented—to call this strike. The teachers' determination to fight has been clearly demonstrated, but the union plan is not to go much further.

In the wake of the strike, the Catalan regional government has put forward what it presents as a first step toward resolving the conflict. On Wednesday, the Education Department announced a proposal to increase the teachers' "specific complement" by 15 percent by 2029, equivalent to a gradual annual rise of 3.75 percent over four years.

The unions have been forced to oppose the meagre concession. Lorena Martínez, spokesperson for UGT, described it as "derisory," after "the great success of the 11F strike." The plan would translate into an increase of roughly €1,500 annually by 2029—around €125 gross per month—bringing the specific complement from approximately €700 per month to just over €800.

Workers are demanding a 100 percent increase in the

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complement, which would raise it to around €1,400 per month. Iolanda Segura, national spokesperson of USTEC, the largest education union in Catalonia, called the proposal “unacceptable” and “a minimum offer.” At the same time, she made clear the union’s readiness to bargain: “We make a maximum proposal, but from there we can negotiate.”

Ester Vila Guillamet of CCOO described the government’s move as “a first approach.”

The government has sought to present the offer as historic, claiming it is the first time in 25 years that it has opened negotiations on the specific complement. However, the proposal is tied to new contractual obligations related to inclusive education and guidance functions, linking any pay rise to an intensification and formalisation of existing workloads. Moreover, the salary increase would be conditional on the approval of the regional budget.

The Catalan government’s proposal contrasts sharply with a recent agreement granting the Catalan Police (Mossos d’Esquadra) a €4,000 annual increase in their specific complement, without similar budgetary conditions or multi-year delays.

This disparity unfolds in the broader context of escalating military spending by the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar central Spanish government, which is channeling billions of euros into rearmament and the army, even as public-sector workers are instructed to moderate their demands. The message is that funds can be found for the instruments of repression and war, but not for education, healthcare or social services.

The government’s announcement has triggered an eruption of anger among teachers. On social media, the first self-organised calls to action have begun circulating, including a proposal to block the AP-7 motorway on March 6—one of Catalonia’s main transport arteries and a key route for commuter and freight traffic. Discussion is intensifying around the week of March 16–20, with proposals for rolling territorial strikes culminating in a new all-out strike across non-university education on March 20.

In the coming weeks, these and other initiatives are expected to be debated in the union-controlled school-based assemblies, where the Education Department’s provocation is certain to meet fierce opposition.

The intensification of the teachers’ struggle is set to intersect with other strikes in March, including medical staff of the Catalan Health Institute (ICS), social sector workers and employees of Barcelona City Council, pointing to a widening wave of unrest across the Catalan public sector.

Across Spain, medical unions are organising rolling strike action against the government’s proposed reform of the Framework Statute regulating the working conditions of public healthcare professionals. Doctors argue that the reform would mean excessive working hours, maintain compulsory on-call shifts under outdated conditions and fail to address chronic understaffing and wage erosion.

The developments of the past weeks make clear that teachers confront not just an intransigent regional administration, but a political establishment that prioritises police, military spending and austerity over public education and social needs.

At the same time, the union leaderships, while compelled to voice opposition under pressure from below, are working to channel the struggle back into controlled negotiations aimed at securing limited concessions below the demands of teachers.

The eruption of anger over the government’s offer and the discussion of broader strike action demonstrate that the real strength of the movement lies in the rank and file. But this strength can only be realised if teachers organise independently of the union apparatuses that seek to contain them.

Rank-and-file committees, democratically elected in every school and linked across regions, are needed to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracies and place it under the direct control of educators themselves. Such committees must reach out to healthcare workers, social sector employees, municipal staff and other sections of the working class who are entering into struggle, forging a unified front across sectors.

A successful fight will not be won through isolated negotiations, but through a broad, coordinated mobilisation of the working class, organised independently and directed toward meeting social needs.

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