

Spanish train crash at Urda: The fraud of “human error” and the case for workers’ power

Alex Lantier
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At 8:54 a.m. on Wednesday, a Renfe AVE high-speed train slammed into a stationary Iryo train near Urda, in Spain’s Toledo province. At least 69 people are dead and some 110 injured, nine months after a similar high-speed collision on the same Madrid-Andalucia line killed 46 at Adamuz. Images of the wreckage have shocked millions of people around the world.

This catastrophe is not an accident or, as Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar coalition government has claimed, the product of “human error,” in any meaningful sense of these words. Instead, it sharply reveals fundamental problems of capitalist society.

It comes amid an escalating mass movement of youth and workers across Europe against attacks on public services, social inequality, police repression, the far right and war. There are mass protests for housing in Spain, for youth access to education and jobs in France and Belgium, and against war and conscription in Italy and Germany. A European dockworkers strike against port militarization is taking place today, and one-day nationwide strikes next month in Spain, France and Italy.

The Urda crash reveals basic issues facing this developing movement. It exposes capitalism’s subordination of elementary requirements of social life to private profit and militarism. It makes an unanswerable case for a socialist policy placing the railways, and the economy as a whole, under the democratic control of the working class.

The PSOE-Sumar government moved within hours to pin blame on one worker. Transport Minister Óscar Puente said that at 8:30 a.m. a computer failure knocked out the old LZB safety system on a 63-kilometre stretch, automatically halting trains there. At 8:36, he said, an operator at Adif’s control centre in Madrid’s Atocha station told the AVE driver to resume “normal running,”

despite a red signal—even though the Iryo train had told Atocha it was still motionless on the track.

Puente called this “inexplicable,” and the government leaked control-room recordings to the press, trying to substantiate its accusations against the operator.

Blaming the disaster on “human error” is a fraud, however, whether or not human error in fact occurred. All of the problems that led to the Urda and Adamuz disasters could be and were foreseen, and indeed workers warned about them. But management and the PSOE-Sumar government systematically ignored these warnings.

Modern safety engineering exists so that one person’s mistake cannot kill dozens. The danger was known. In 2024, the rail accident investigation commission (CIAF) examined an incident at Cuenca. It warned that replacing automatic systems with human verification is “susceptible to failing,” and recommended switching from outdated systems to a modern, ERTMS Level-2 security system.

As for the Atocha operator, the CSIF union warned in September that Adif staff were working shifts of up to 12 hours, five nights in a row. Exhaustion and understaffing, and the accidents that come with them, were decided upon by management.

In August 2025, the SEMAF train drivers’ union wrote to Adif that drivers were seeing “severe wear and tear” on the tracks, including at the spot where the Adamuz train later derailed. After Adamuz, rail workers struck nationwide on February 9. But SEMAF then called off further strike action that same day after the government promised more hiring, maintenance funding and safety protocols. However, these promises were lies.

On October 16, SEMAF was forced to call a new one-day strike for October 29, as “agreements signed on rail security, emergency weather protocols, new driver hiring and reliability of rolling stock were blocked

administratively. ... [E]verything is paralyzed as it was in May.” That strike took place yesterday, cutting off 48 percent of local train services near Madrid. Yet the PSOE-Sumar government did not reply to the SEMAF strike or promise more hiring or better security conditions.

The victims’ associations of Spain’s 2013 Angrois and 2026 Adamuz crashes drew the conclusion in a joint statement: “It has happened again, and it will happen again.”

Public infrastructure is being run into the ground. Spanish rail liberalization saw Italian and French private operators Ouigo and Iryo arrive on Spain’s high-speed network in 2021 and 2022, under the PSOE-Podemos government, the current government’s predecessor. It multiplied traffic, but hiring and maintenance did not keep pace. By the Andalusian regional government’s calculation, maintenance spending per train-kilometre had fallen 26 percent by 2024.

This is a European phenomenon. In Greece, the 2023 Tempi rail disaster killed 57 people, many of them students, after the pro-austerity SYRIZA (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government privatized the railways. In Serbia, the collapse of the Novi Sad station canopy in 2024 killed 16.

All the European powers endlessly divert social resources into the pockets of the rich and to military build-up, while elementary security procedures are neglected and avoidable catastrophes claim an ever-growing number of lives.

EU billionaires have increased their wealth by nearly 70 percent, from €1.44 trillion in March 2020 to €2.4 trillion in November 2025. French billionaires doubled their wealth to €440 billion during Macron’s decade in office, holding more wealth than half the population. Spain’s 33 billionaires held €197.5 billion in 2025, more than 39 percent of Spain’s population; its richest man, Armancio Ortega, went from €70 billion to €110 billion under the PSOE-Podemos and PSOE-Sumar governments.

The EU is also plundering social programs to fund the army, particularly as it escalates the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine. Since 2021, EU-27 military spending more than doubled, according to the European Defense Agency, from €218 billion to €454 billion. In Spain, according to the SIPRI Institute, defense spending rose 121 percent over the last decade, to €34.3 billion.

The Urda disaster shows how, as countless billions of euros are turned to enriching the oligarchy and building up the machinery of mass killing and repression, society is driven to collapse.

Workers cannot oppose this within the confines of capitalist politics. Spain sharply illustrates how not only the right, but also parts of the capitalist establishment that bourgeois media falsely promote as “left,” bear political responsibility for this.

Like SYRIZA in Greece, successive PSOE-Podemos and PSOE-Sumar governments have massively enriched the oligarchy, built up the army and trampled basic social needs and the interests of workers underfoot. They came to power promising to improve social conditions and end the worst EU austerity measures. Instead, they oversaw bank bailouts, rail liberalization, militarization and growing attacks on the working class.

In the wake of the mass housing protests, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez dissolved the government and called snap elections on November 29. It must be bluntly stated: a vote on November 29 will not change any of the policies that produce catastrophes like Adamuz and Urda.

These catastrophes point, however, to the way forward not only for rail workers, but for workers and youth mobilizing in struggle against capitalist governments across Europe. The companies involved must be seized and turned into European public utilities, subject to democratic control and oversight by the working class. This itself must be bound up with a political movement in the working class, in Spain and across Europe, to halt imperialist wars and expropriate the ill-gotten fortunes of the capitalist oligarchy.

Workers must form rank-and-file committees of action, independent of the union bureaucracies, to unite their struggles across national borders. In the rail industry, they would have the power to oversee and impose the necessary security protocols and modernization, and hire and train needed staff. The struggle to build such organizations is essential to unite the emerging mass movement across Europe, to prepare the transfer of economic and political power to the working class and replace the European Union with the United Socialist States of Europe.



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