One-day general strike hits Spain in run-up to November 29 elections

WSWS reporters
13 November 2026

On November 11, workers walked out in Spain's first nationwide strike in 14 years, protesting soaring rents, falling real wages and the rising cost of living. Calls for a general strike circulated widely amid mass housing protests in early October, and ultimately the Workers Commissions (CCOO) and General Labor Union (UGT) were forced to call a strike. At least 4 million workers struck on November 11, and hundreds of thousands marched despite pouring rain.

The strike pointed to the growing involvement of the working class in the wave of protests for housing, education, and against inequality, militarism and fascism that are spreading across Europe. It comes amid a wave of one-day national strikes called in France (November 17), Italy (November 20) and Greece (November 25) and amid mass youth protests against conscription in Germany. A sense of a new, emerging political radicalism permeated the Spanish strike, like protests elsewhere in Europe.

The stoppage hit hardest in heavy industry. Participation reached 90 percent in the car industry, with stoppages at Seat in Martorell, 85 percent in meat processing and 82 percent in refuse collection. In the Basque Country, production at Petronor, Mercedes and ACV was minimal. In Galicia, even the metal employers' association Asime admitted 60 percent participation in shipbuilding. The ports were brought largely to a halt. The unions put participation there at 90 percent, especially in Valencia and Algeciras, and at 100 percent among Algeciras dockers.

The marches were the largest in Spain in years. In Madrid, state officials counted 120,000 marchers in the rain, the Tenants' Union 400,000. In Barcelona, officials counted 55,000, organizers 400,000. About 40,000 marched in Valencia, by the government's count. Marches in Bilbao drew 70,000 people, according to union figures. Police repeatedly charged protesters; the Interior Ministry recorded 919 incidents, and at least 60 people were arrested nationwide.

They also exposed Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who after mass protests over housing on October 3 called snap elections for November 29. This aimed to hold a gun to workers' heads, trying to force them to support his ruling Socialist Party (PSOE) or allied parties like Podemos and Sumar against the fascist Vox party and its ally, the right-wing Popular Party (PP).

In reality, the strike saw an outpouring of opposition not only to the PP and Vox but also to the record of militarism and austerity of the PSOE and its political and trade union allies. It is evident that the fundamental questions driving millions of people into struggle in Spain and across Europe will be resolved through the class struggle, not via maneuvers inside the capitalist political establishment.

WSWS reporters in Madrid interviewed workers and youth on neighborhood marches in the morning and the main protest march in the evening. They spoke to Blanca and Sergio, two public sector workers. Blanca said, "We have to support the strike, especially on housing. Salaries aren't keeping up, everything is super expensive, it's become impossible. … Public spending goes ever more to the military, if the right wins in the November 29 elections, there will be unrestrained hikes in military spending."

While opposing Vox and the PP, Blanca added that she is disillusioned with the PSOE, Podemos and the Sumar-led Broad Front coalition: "If we are here today it's because the PSOE, Podemos and the Broad Front all were worthless in terms of doing what had to be done, to meet people's needs. If the housing situation got to this point, it is due to the cowardice of the government."

Sergio was enthusiastic when WSWS journalists proposed to independently organize workers in rank-and-file committees of action in Spain and across Europe, to prepare a European general strike. He said, "Europe must develop a movement uniting all Europe's nations, France and Italy like Holland and Portugal, all the European Union: We're all in the same boat, ultimately. The situation is similar everywhere, and I think the mobilization can't be just one day. What does a single day of general strike resolve? And it must be massive."

He added, "I think the unions like CCOO and UGT just

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follow the government, in eight years of progressive government they were led by the hand, they did not press for any measure. We need something totally different—that is not tied to public funding, because in this case the unions in Spain receive a lot of public funding, and in that sense they're pretty much controlled."

Rafael, a retiree, told the WSWS: "We're protesting for the right to housing, against high living costs, the rise of food, light, gas costs. Prices and salaries are not rising equally." He added, "War is where Europe is investing a lot of money, but which belongs to us. … The poor always pay for war, workers are the cannon fodder. Plus, no country has in any way attacked Spain or France."

He stressed his discontent with the union bureaucracies. They "called the strike, organized pickets, but then they failed to take this at all seriously, to organize assemblies in the workplaces." Rafael added that they are "part of the system," a term he applied to the ruling parties, as well: "Podemos is already out of government, now it's Sumar and company, they are complicit in everything … by commission or omission."

Africa, a university student who in October participated in the occupation of the Puerta del Sol to demand decent housing, told the WSWS she was enthusiastic about the growing radicalization of working people: "There is growing consciousness in youth and people of different ages. Struggles are coming together for public services, education, health, housing, a decent life. … Plus we need to struggle against fascism that is emerging."

While she emphasized above all her concern with opposing fascists' attacks on democratic rights, she also welcomed organizing struggles independently of the traditional bureaucracies.

"The PSOE's record is insufficient, many issues were abandoned, ultimately the left advanced very little while the far right makes big steps," Africa said, adding: "Obviously the fact that this is emerging from below is very interesting, the most interesting is that it was born on the Plaza del Sol. People went there all day, we slept there, we went to study in the morning and then after to study. In my opinion it was a great step forward. It meant for the first time we saw things organized from below."

Arturo, an immigrant worker from Mexico, said: "Even for people who work and have relatively decent salaries, it is getting impossible. On average 50, 60 percent of people's wages go to housing, so that you get situations where you have to share rooms with lots of people, and it's almost impossible to be independent. … The very rich are grabbing a large part of total income. It is a world problem, clearly."

Asked about the role of the PSOE, Podemos and Sumar, Arturo replied: "That's the big question. There are critics who say that in eight years of progressive government, theoretically of left-wing government, they did not manage to address the housing problem. The decrees they proposed were shot down by the opposition." He compared them to the Mexican trade union bureaucracies, which he described as deeply corrupt.

When the WSWS asked what Arturo saw as the political basis for building an alternative to them, he replied: "The Marxist-Leninist injunction of internationalism, that the fight must be global. At the end of the day, if states become servants of capital, then even a moderately 'left' government continues to be overseen by global capital and will ultimately capitulate. This means that we are seeing rather that workers' struggles will need to transcend the logic of the nation-state."

Guillermo emphasized to the WSWS that the problem is rooted in the capitalist system. "The capitalist system arranges it so that capital is always more concentrated in fewer hands, and the rest of us don't participate in cutting up the cake," he said, adding: "The role of the PSOE is to preserve the system, seek as few changes as possible. The few changes that were promoted came from Podemos. … It was they who promoted changes that were more, in theory at least, left. But then they were cut off by the PSOE in parliament.

"I think a European general strike would be fantastic, a general strike on the entire planet. The initiative has not come from the trade unions, who are integrated into the institutions. Anyway, the best they can do of their own accord is to support something coming from somewhere else," he said, adding: "Ultimately, Trotsky advocated for these sorts of things, for mobilizations in the street, for organizing among ourselves not in bureaucratic ways that absorb you and impose a series of things on you. So, as I see it, what is happening now in Europe is sort of a Trotskyist movement."

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