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Spain deploys army against refugees fleeing across border with Morocco

Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, backed by the European Union (EU), has reacted to desperate migrants crossing from Morocco into Spain by deploying the army, special forces and antiriot police to round up and expel thousands. It is threatening to use mass violence to prevent new cross-border entries and whipping up tensions with Morocco.

These horrific scenes testify to the barbaric character of the capitalist system. On one side of the Mediterranean, Israel is bombing Gaza's defenceless population with the support of Washington and the EU, and on the other side, the EU is deploying the brutality of its antimigrant policy. While the full force of the EU's military is arrayed against the migrants, thousands of them are left to drown in the Mediterranean each year.

Starting in the early morning hours on Monday, hundreds of migrants, mostly young men, adolescents and children and even whole families with babies, began crossing into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, just north of Morocco in Africa. Most swam around the six-metre fence that juts out into the sea or walked across at low tide. Many used inflatable rings and rubber dinghies. By yesterday evening, the number reached 8,000, including 1,500 minors.



The border of Morocco and Spain at the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, May 18, 2021. (AP Photo/Mosa'ab Elshamy)

Several had to be treated for hypothermia, and at least one person drowned.

Reports indicate that most are from Morocco, where the repercussions of the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a dramatic rise in poverty and unemployment. A third of families have lost their main source of income in the past year.

The PSOE-Podemos government, promoted in the media as having a more “humane” policy towards migrants when it came to power in mid-2018, reacted violently, denouncing these defenceless people as a national security threat.

Referring to Spanish residents of Ceuta, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said his government would respond with “the utmost firmness to ensure their safety and defend their integrity as part of the country in the face of any threat.” Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo called it an “aggression” against the Spanish borders, accusing Morocco of allowing this to happen.

Yesterday, hundreds of soldiers in armoured vehicles were deployed on the beaches. Over 200 antiriot police were mobilised to back the 1,100 police already stationed in Ceuta. Soldiers and police used batons to clear migrants from the beach and threw smoke bombs to discourage others from crossing. The anti-working class unit, the Guardia Civil’s GRS, specialised in suppressing strikes and protests, was also deployed.

Adult migrants found on the street were taken to the Benoliel Stadium and then deported, in violation of international law, with over 4,000 deported to Morocco in 24 hours.

According to *El País*, the deportations were carried out without any legal formality. The Ceuta Bar Association confirmed that its lawyers had not even been asked to legally assist returnees, as required by law and as often occurs when there are sudden influxes of migrants.

The EU quickly endorsed Spain's ruthless response. European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas tweeted that the enclave's frontier was a European border, expressing "full solidarity with Spain" and calling for "strong protection of our borders."

The Spanish Communist Party, part of the Podemos coalition in government, also supported it, cynically saying: "Spain must defend its sovereignty and compliance with international law against blackmail by Morocco, which does not hesitate to put the lives of thousands of people at risk."

This was apparently a reference to heightened tensions between Madrid and Rabat over the Western Sahara war between Morocco and the Polisario, the Sahrawi independence movement demanding independence of Western Sahara from Morocco. Earlier this month, Madrid decided to secretly host Brahim Ghali, the leader of the bourgeois nationalist Polisario Front, which is also supported by Algeria. Ghali was hospitalised in northern Spain, after he was infected with COVID-19.

After this news leaked, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Burita asked whether Madrid plans to "sacrifice relations with Morocco" by failing to inform Rabat of Ghali's presence in Spain. "Why doesn't Spain consider [that] it should have to inform Morocco of the presence of Ghali? Would they rather consort with the enemies of Morocco? This is a test of our relationship," Burita said. Spanish media are implying that Rabat's decision to allow migrants to cross over into Spain was its response to these diplomatic tensions.

Whatever the truth of such allegations that the Moroccan monarchy deliberately opened its borders, the true criminals here are the EU and the PSOE-Podemos government. Masses of victims of imperialist wars, fleeing poverty and hunger in countries brutally exploited by transnational corporations, are being hunted by EU security forces and Frontex, the border

security agency, and being allowed to die in their thousands at sea. Thousands more are imprisoned in concentration camps in Greece and on Spain's Canary Islands.

Sánchez's declaration that he must defend Spain's territorial integrity against migrants arriving in Ceuta is a barely disguised threat to use deadly force against them. In this, Sánchez is aided by a corrupt media, which is denouncing migrant "caravans" and branding arriving migrants as an "invasion."

To understand the nature of such threats, one must recall the 2014 infamous Tarajal Massacre, when heavily armed police fired tear gas and rubber bullets on migrants attempting to swim across Ceuta. They left 15 dead, most of them drowning after suffocating on tear gas in the water. Police were subsequently cleared of all charges.

The violence against these migrants is a warning to the working class in Spain, across Europe and internationally. World capitalism faces its deepest social and economic crisis since the 1930s due to the pandemic and mounting working class anger after governments' calls to "live with the virus" have led to millions of deaths. A government that can so rapidly turn the armed forces against defenceless migrants is preparing to do so at home, as well.

Europe's far right was quick to seize on the PSOE-Podemos government's brutal anti-migrant policy to demand similar measures in their own countries. Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian far-right Lega party, tweeted: "Spain, with a left-wing government, deploys the Army on its border to block illegal entrances. We await news from the Viminale [Interior Ministry]." Salvini suggested that Italy should also deploy the army against migrants.

In France, the leader of the far-right National Rally, Marine Le Pen, blamed the EU for the massive influx of immigrants to Ceuta, saying, "Contrary to the reassuring words of our leaders, the EU is a sieve where everyone enters. This has to stop." This comes just weeks after she supported fascistic letters signed by 23 retired generals and thousands of active-duty military denouncing Muslims and France's working class suburbs and pledging to intervene and kill thousands in France.

In Spain, far-right Vox leader Santiago Abascal attacked Sánchez on *esRadio* for not being violent enough, saying, “There can only be a response of force at this time. You have to send the army but not to watch: to do what is necessary.” Abascal said the migrants “are not refugees, they are soldiers who obey their government,” referring to Morocco.

Such remarks only underscore the reactionary character of the European ruling establishment as a whole. Indeed, the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left Podemos party, after having postured as a “radical democratic” party earlier on after its foundation in 2014, is working with the PSOE to implement an antimigrant policy set by the far right.

Precisely 85 years ago, in 1936, Spanish army units schooled in the use of bloody violence in Morocco launched a coup and a civil war that installed a four-decade fascist dictatorship in Spain under General Francisco Franco. As Spanish officers close to Vox threaten a coup today and denounce strikes demanding a shelter-at-home policy against the coronavirus, urgent warnings are necessary. It is critical to oppose this brutal attack on migrants because history shows this violence is inevitably turned against the workers at home.

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