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PSOE-Podemos sends police to attack Spanish metalworkers strike in Cádiz

For four days, over 22,000 metalworkers have been on an indefinite strike in the southern Spanish province of Cádiz, as strikes mount across Europe and internationally. Workers in Cádiz are demanding wage increases and bonuses, including for hazardous work, and opposing the planned closure of an Airbus plant.



Striking steelworkers march in southern Spanish province of Cadiz. (Credit: Twitter, Raul Martinez @raulmtt)

The struggle has rapidly developed into a rebellion against the union bureaucracies and a clash with Spain's government coalition, made up of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the pseudo-left Podemos party.

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Workers occupied the Puerto Real industrial area and built barricades with industrial equipment, burning cars and rail tracks to block police from the area. Bonfires have been lit at the entrances to the factories, manned by pickets, halting production. Military shipbuilder Navantia, European multinational aerospace firm Airbus, construction multinational Dragados, aerospace supplier Alestis and stainless steel manufacturer Acerinox, and their subcontractors are all affected.

Workers at petrochemical plants in La Linea, Algeciras, and Los Barrios have also stopped work, and picketers there blocked major highways.

The strike is widely supported in the region, which has the highest unemployment rate in Spain, with 23 percent unemployment and over 40 percent among youth. The trade unions report that 98 percent of workers are striking as anger surges across the region.

One Cádiz worker wrote on Facebook: “I am the daughter and sister of metalworkers. I remember strikes of the 1980s when my father and mother went onto the streets to look for bread for their six children not knowing whether that night they would sleep in prison or the hospital. ... Cádiz is that, STRUGGLE, it is not always carnival, cruises, beaches and bars to look good in the *New York Times*. Cádiz is First World poverty, working sunrise to sunset but still not making it to the end of the month, shortages, problems and needless workplace accidents to save company profits.”

She appealed for workers more broadly to support the strike, saying: “Even if you don’t work in metalworking, you eat thanks to metalworking.”

The PSOE-Podemos government, however, is supporting the Federation of Metal Companies of Cadiz (FEMCA), which has refused any concessions, only proposing a 0.5 percent wage increase. The trade unions—the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and PSOE-aligned General Workers Union (UGT)—are calling for 2 percent this year and 3 percent the following year. This is still way below inflation and means the union would impose a massive paycut on workers.

The PSOE-Podemos government mobilized riot police against the strike. It deployed a special surveillance unit, with many officers from the Police Intervention Unit dispatched from the nearby city of Seville, together with the provincial Prevention and Reaction Unit.

These forces are now backed by local police and paramilitary Civil Guards, who are now deployed in the industrial zones.

On Tuesday, the government gave the order to attempt to crush the strike, with police marching on the occupied plants and assaulting workers with truncheons, pepper spray and firing rubber bullets. However, police were thrown back without being able to retake the plants by the workers.

While it sends cops to try to directly crush the strike, Podemos and the PSOE are also using bureaucrats in their affiliated trade unions to try to demoralize and sell out the workers. The unions initially called one-day protests to try to blow off steam, with one called on November 10 gathering 4,000 protesters in Cádiz and 2,000 in Algeciras. With CCOO and the UGT having recently agreed to close an Airbus factory in Cádiz, however, they felt obliged to call an indefinite strike, fearing that they would lose control as anger surged among workers.

Now, union executives are openly admitting that they have lost control of the situation and do not know how to order workers to end the strike and accept wage cuts and job losses. The regional secretary of the Stalinist CCOO, Fernando Grimaldi, said, “People are extremely angry; we are going to see how this can be controlled.”

Grimaldi went on to denounce the strikers for setting fires outside refineries to help keep riot police outside of the plants. He complained, “The access routes to the refineries were cut this morning at 6:30 a.m. I saw a fire in Guadarranque, and I raised the alert immediately, because I do not agree at all with that type of action. But people are very angry, and there are outbursts all the time.”

The UGT and CCOO national federations issued a statement demanding that strikers stop blocking highways. “We must manage this conflict well,” they declared, “and therefore we believe it is necessary to concentrate our actions at the entries of the principal workplaces. Therefore, we are asking that highways be left open.”

Workers can give no confidence to these bureaucrats, who are political allies of the ruling parties against the strike and the working class. Their policy is two-faced, claiming to support workers while agreeing to slash their wages and shutter plants where they work,

calling to demobilize protests, and coordinating closely with parties of government who are assaulting workers with rubber bullets and pepper spray.

The same goes for Cádiz Mayor José María González, member of Anticapitalistas, a petty-bourgeois tendency affiliated with France's Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) that helped found Podemos in 2014. Addressing protesters yesterday in Cádiz, González assured them that "the Cádiz City Council was, is and will be with the workers struggle." At the same time, his wife, national Anticapitalistas leader Teresa Rodríguez, is appealing for an alliance to Podemos General Secretary Yolanda Díaz.

Anyone "who is [in] our ideological spectrum, and Yolanda is, will be able to talk to us face to face, they will have an ally in us," Rodríguez said. She said, "We are interested in supporting courageous policies, wherever they are made but carried to the end."

The greatest allies of workers in Cádiz are workers around the world fighting for better wages and against mounting social inequality and the criminally-negligent official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, the same issues that are driving the Cádiz strikes are driving the largest strike wave in decades, including major struggles at Volvo, Deere, Dana and other major firms.

Strikes involving tens of thousands of workers across multiple industries have erupted throughout Portugal. In September and October, rail workers, teachers, pharmacists, subway workers, emergency medical technicians, tax office workers and prison guards all struck.

In Spain, strike notices have multiplied in recent weeks. Meatpackers are to strike at the end of November and another four days in early December, against precarious conditions. Lorry drivers are set to strike in late December, threatening to put Spain in standstill amid the Christmas season. Farmers have also threatened to join their strike in protest at the rising costs of living.

In the region of Castilla y Leon, around 2,000 supermarket workers are set to strike for several days in December. Yesterday saw a city-wide strike in the Galician city of A Mariña and a 10,000-strong protest in a region with little over 80,000 people against factory closures and job losses.

The critical question is forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to organize the struggle, mobilize broader support and link up with the struggles of workers worldwide. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has therefore advanced the call to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This is the basis to oppose police-state repression, austerity and policies of mass infection, and to unite workers internationally in a struggle for power and to build socialism.

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