

Spain: Unions force pay cut on Madrid Metro workers

By Paul Mitchell
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Unions on the Madrid Metro have forced a pay cut and other concessions on workers who have been involved in militant strike action against plans to cut salaries by five percent.

The agreement has been packaged up to give the Metro management everything it demanded and more. Metro will save 2 million euros by imposing a one percent pay cut backdated to June and 6 million euros in other staff costs including overtime, special payments, travel expenses and vocational training. Night transport will also be restructured. Further negotiations will take place to seek “other alternative formulas” allowing “the best application or distribution of the reduction” of wages.

The 7,500 employees of Metro first went on strike on June 28 for three days, rejecting the wage cut rushed through in an Emergency Law passed by the Popular Party-run Madrid regional government led by Esperanza Aguirre. A mass meeting voted almost unanimously to ignore legal minimum service rules, which force workers to maintain 50 percent of normal service. It brought the Metro to a standstill and threw the capital into chaos.

Members of the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government, led by Prime Minister José Rodríguez Zapatero, declared their opposition to the strike and, praising the unions for their “constructive attitude” in national talks about austerity measures and calling on them to control the Metro workers. Interior minister, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, offered the use of the military to run the Metro to the Madrid government.

On June 30, union officials persuaded the workers to resume minimal services for the rest of the week and call off the strike for the weekend “to give the people of Madrid a rest.” They made demagogic speeches promising a fight to the bitter end. One unnamed

official declared that if there was no solution, “We are going to the death and if we have to go to the kill we will go to the kill.” Another stated that “We can again produce a total strike, let them know that you can’t play with the workers.”

At mass meetings this week, strike committee spokesman Antonio Asensio from the Communist Party aligned CC.OO complained that they had no choice but to implement the wage cuts and “negotiate on other items.” He praised the Metro workers for maintaining “unity” before calling off strikes planned on the Metro from July 20 to July 23. He assured them that a committee would be formed to monitor the new agreement.

Vicente Rodríguez of the train drivers union and also on the strike committee admitted that the agreement was not what the workers would have liked declaring, “Is the agreement being touched? Yes it is. To say the opposite would be a lie”.

Rodríguez said the workers had to comply with the law passed by Aguirre, even if they don’t like it. “We will have to kick this lady out in June, if we have the balls,” he said, referring to the regional elections next year in May. Other speakers guaranteed that the threats of dismissal against those who had refused to maintain minimal services will be withdrawn. “There is no danger to anybody,” declared one official.

Teodoro Piñuelas, spokesman of the PSOE-aligned General Union of Workers (UGT), said that the new agreement was “a truce”. It might be possible to restore the wage cut before the end of the year in new negotiations, he said, before adding that it would be difficult “given the situation of the company.” The strikes had sent to the politicians “the message of unity of the workers” and to the company that “pacts must be obeyed.”

“We cannot remove the law because we are not elected, we will do it when it is possible in the regional elections,” he added.

In a revealing comment to the press Piñuelas said the strikes “had served to workers to let off steam” because “they were very, very angry.”

From all accounts there was uproar at the meetings. Workers complained that the strike committee had previously promised them that last year’s collective agreement would not be touched. There would be no wage cuts or disciplining of workers, officials had assured them. According to *El Pais* one worker described how the committee had come to earlier meetings “like Che Guevara telling us that there was nothing to negotiate.”

“We can fight to change this law, we can’t allow them to touch the salaries, it is a trick,” said another worker.

“We are a reference point for other workers...We can’t vote for this”, added another.

Despite this anger, without a political perspective to mobilise independently of the union bureaucracy, 68 percent of the workers voted for the agreement. Some 30 percent voted for a proposal from the anarcho-syndicalist Labour Solidarity union, the only one of the five to refuse the agreement. But all this amounted to was plans for demonstrations in September and taking the issue of the implementation of the Emergency Law to the courts. The Labour Solidarity official declared that Metro management could cut other areas such as advertising and public relations saying, “I don’t know why the Metro has to make publicity to get people to go on it.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned when Metro workers first took strike action at the end of June that the bureaucracy’s demagoguery was “purely for show, while the media, government and trade unions increase pressure on the Metro workers before a vote on indefinite strike action takes place at the next mass meeting on Monday, July 5.”

Their aim was to prevent Metro workers from linking up with others taking industrial action (air traffic controllers are now embroiled in a dispute) and embarking on a political struggle against the PSOE. That is exactly what has happened.

It is clear from the attacks on the Madrid Metro workers that new rank-and-file organisations are

needed through which to conduct the class struggle. The unions are not workers’ organizations, subject to the democratic control of their members, but represent an arm of management. Jobs, wages, pensions and other hard-won working conditions can be defended only on the basis of an independent political struggle of the entire working class based on a socialist programme.

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