

One-day general strike called in Spain

By Alejandro López
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The two main Spanish unions, Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Union General de Trabajadores (UGT), have called a general strike for March 29 against the latest labour legislation.

The labour bill will enable employers to reduce the salaries of workers unilaterally simply by claiming it to be necessary for reasons of competitiveness or productivity. It provides for new “work-experience” contracts under which companies can dismiss workers who have been employed for up to a year without any compensation. It facilitates the expansion of low-wage jobs throughout the economy, in part by terminating jobless benefits for unemployed workers if they reject a job offer three times. The “reform” also limits national and regional collective bargaining. (See: “Spain’s Popular Party government imposes savage labour legislation”).

For the second time in a month, tens of thousands of people demonstrated against the measure on Sunday. In Madrid, Barcelona, Málaga and 60 other cities, students, workers and unemployed took the streets. For the second time, the union leaders demanded talks with the government, declaring that the decision on whether the strike goes ahead is in the hands of Popular Party Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

Fernández Toxo, general secretary of the CCOO, pleaded, “Mr. Rajoy, you have the month of March to start up a dialogue and present a reasonable budget, and the unions will be there.”

Cándido Méndez, leader of the UGT, said the law has “deceived the people of good faith by saying that it would reduce unemployment queues.” He called for a change in European policies to overcome the economic crisis.

These organizations feel the need to call a one-day general strike because of the explosive social tensions that exist in Spain. The chasm that separates the main unions from the workers has been palpable in the recent

demonstrations. The workers are not inclined to accept a mere modification of the labour bill, as the unions wish.

An editorial in *El País* stated, “The Spanish economy, however, does not need a general strike. The fact that it was convened points to a worsening of the political and social climate.”

According to the latest public surveys, 89 percent of the Spanish people consider the economic situation “bad or very bad”—an increase of 50 percentage points since 2008. The greatest worry of most Spaniards, 84 percent, is unemployment, followed by the overall economy. The study showed that 35.5 percent of respondents feared running out of money needed to meet their basic needs and those of their family. Fully 32 percent are afraid of losing their jobs.

Spain has a jobless rate of 22.85 percent and 5.3 million people are out of work. Sixty percent of salaried workers earn less than €1,000 a month.

The poverty rate has jumped from 23.4 percent to 27 percent in the last two years and severe social exclusion has grown by two percentage points, to 18.6 percent, since 2007. Social services now help 8 million people, compared with 5 million two years ago.

The youth have been the worst-hit in this crisis. Unemployment has escalated rapidly, affecting half of the young population, double the European Union average. Most of those who have a job receive wages that do not enable them to live independently, and under new contracts their working conditions are much worse than those of their parents.

Living standards are bound to decline further as the labour “reform” is implemented by the corporations and the social cuts further erode welfare provisions.

The regional governments, which control education and health care, have to reduce their deficit to 1.5 percent, a cut of some €15.6 million. Finance Minister Cristobal Montoro has said that the central government

will stop transferring some 15 percent of tax revenues to the regional governments.

Madrid is facing increased pressure from the troika—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund—and the financial markets because Rajoy announced that Spain would not meet its budget deficit target for this year of 4.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). The deficit would be 5.8 percent, he said.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the euro zone finance ministers, called on Spain to respect its 2013 public deficit target. “We start from the principle that Spain will and wants to achieve its 2013 budget target” of 3 percent of GDP, he said.

The government is planning €30 billion in spending cuts for this year. But Spain is facing a vicious spiral like that experienced by Greece, where spending cuts and tax rises deepen the slump, reducing revenues and leading to calls for further spending cuts and tax rises.

Masses of workers carried out a general strike in late September 2010 against the previous Socialist Party (PSOE) government, and tens of thousands took part in occupations in all of Spain’s main cities and towns during the “Indignados” movement. Since then, the labour bureaucracy has worked to suppress working class resistance against the attacks on living conditions.

According to the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations, in December there were 637,544 hours lost due to strikes, 68 percent less than the same month one year earlier. In January, 564,852 hours were lost, a fall of 20.61 percent from January last year.

As a result, youth and workers face even worse conditions, while social inequality grows. The trade unions act as instruments of social control, but in doing so they have created the conditions for an explosive development of the class struggle in which workers will seek to break free from their organizational and political stranglehold.

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