

Spanish dockworkers' unions accept wage cuts and job losses

By Alejandro López
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Less than one week after the Spanish government saw its decree attacking the working conditions of the country's 6,140 dockworkers resoundingly defeated in parliament, the unions and employers are pressing ahead with wage cuts and job losses.

The decree, which would have opened the door to mass redundancies, wage cuts of up to 60 percent, the use of low-paid contract agency workers, and the destruction of safety conditions was defeated by 175 votes to 142 with 33 abstentions.

Its failure was the result of divisions within the ruling class over how best to implement attacks on the working class.

The minority Popular Party (PP)-led government preferred to unilaterally implement a reform without any previous agreements with the unions, ANESCO and the opposition parties. It claimed it was urgently required to abide by a two-year-old resolution of the EU Court of Justice rule demanding Spain liberalise the dockworkers sector or face sanctions.

The social democratic Socialist Party (PSOE) and Unidos Podemos (comprising the pseudo-left Podemos and Stalinist United Left) opposed this line, fearing that such measures undermine the unions' authority to straitjacket the working class in future workers struggles.

PSOE regional premier Susana Díaz criticized the decree for not seeking "consensus and understanding between employers and workers." Unidos Podemos spokesman Félix Alonso made the claim that the PP was not "aware of the economic and social repercussions of a solution that has not been agreed upon" by the unions and port companies in the long-term, adding that the PP's unilateralism would mean future agreements involving the unions would become "a dead letter."

The PP, of course, was aware of the repercussions of its draconian solution—it had the full measure of the PSOE and Unidos-Podemos knowing they would come to its rescue and respond with a slightly less draconian solution. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on February 27, "the PSOE and Podemos may try to delay and manoeuvre, in order to better impose attacks on the workers without provoking a major strike against Spain's minority PP government, which is very weak and unpopular.

They fear that a major port strike could trigger far broader struggles in the working class—ending the 'social peace' overseen by the unions, potentially bringing down the PP government and doing irreparable damage to their economic and political interests."

This scenario is now unfolding.

Following a meeting with the employers association, the National Association of Stevedoring and Ship Consignment Companies (ANESCO) and government officials, the State Coordination of Sea Workers union (CETM) announced it is willing to cut wages by 6 percent. Of this, 1 percent is intended to facilitate early retirement and another 5 percent to increase productivity by upgrading infrastructure in the ports. This represents around 25 million euros annually for early retirement, a measure that had already been proposed by the PP government.

The unions, working with ANESCO, aim to convince older dockworkers—some 1,300 are over 50—to join early retirement schemes with 70 percent of the wage. The aim is to open the floodgates to "precarious" contracts condemning new, younger workers to lower wages and worse conditions.

CETM spokesman, Antolín Goya, made it clear the union's commitment to enforcing an unending assault

on the jobs, wages and conditions on dockworkers, stating that it was “willing to contribute every worker to energize the sector” in the face of “the government’s immobility”.

The government has welcomed the proposal and is reviewing it. However, according to daily *La Razón*, it will present another Royal Decree even if it does not have parliamentary support in the hope that “the PSOE reconsiders and does not block the reform”.

The treacherous role played by the unions has facilitated a situation where workers have been isolated and their ability to block Spain’s ports severely weakened.

Ever since it was reluctantly forced to call strike action last month, the CETM sought to prevent the mobilization of the full force of the dockworkers which could have paralyzed the Spanish economy. Instead, they set out to isolate the struggle—calling the strikes on alternate days in each port, refusing to link it with other struggles in Spain and stopping it from becoming a global battle against the privatization of ports and the destruction of dockers’ jobs and living standards internationally.

Three times the unions called off proposed strike action. That, in turn, provided the International Dockworkers’ Council (IDC) with the opportunity to cancel their own paltry “mobilisations” scheduled at selected ports internationally amounting to token “actions” of between one and three hours, none of which would have had any effect.

IDC General Coordinator Jordi Aragunde duly stated that the defeat of the decree was “a step forward, but also a great opportunity given to us by the opposition parliamentary groups.” This was not a rallying call for the defence of dockworkers against the attacks of global capitalism and the downward spiral in wages and conditions internationally. Instead, Aragunde called for the unions, government and employers in Spain to “come to an agreement on the best conditions for restructuring the Spanish port model and for complying with the ruling of the European Court of Justice.”

At the same time Aragunde claimed the defeat of the decree would never have happened without the “constant show of support” and “actions” from IDC affiliates around the world, which “helped to convince public opinion that the unilateral Royal Decree was

reckless, dishonest, and harmful to the interests of the working class—interests which we proudly represent.”

The whole fraternity of pseudo-left organisations that orbit around Podemos also stand exposed. Throughout the struggle, they have intervened to support the unions’ stranglehold over the struggle and prevent any independent mobilization of the dockworkers. They proclaimed the defeat of the decree a great victory.

Izquierda Revolucionaria, the Spanish section of the Committee for a Workers’ International, described it as “a first triumph”. Clase contra Clase, the Spanish section of the Trotskyist Fraction—Fourth International, declared that the “sole threat of a strike” was enough to force the PSOE and Unidos-Podemos to vote against the decree. “One of the most concentrated, unionized and coordinated sectors of the labour movement has shown ‘muscle’ and this time it has been enough to prevent several parties of the Regime from voting with ‘state responsibility’ that has characterized them at other times”, it added.

No sooner has the ink dried on these articles than the CETM announced its proposals for wage cuts and job losses.

Like the PSOE and Podemos, the main concern of the pseudo-left is that the unions, in which they play an integral part and constitute the bulk of its well-paid leadership, will lose their authority under conditions in which the ruling class relies all the more on the trade union’s role of policing workers.

The lessons of the dockworkers dispute, which has still to say its final word, sharply poses the need for workers to establish new forms of organisation independent of the unions and a new leadership in the struggle against the pseudo-left and the interests of the privileged middle class layers for which they speak.

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