

Youth protests over COVID-19 mount in working-class districts of Madrid

By Alejandro López
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Protests are mounting against police repression and the “restricted mobility” order imposed in working-class districts of Madrid amid the resurgence of COVID-19. The order, worked out between the right-wing regional government and the national Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, requires workers and youth to continue reporting to work and school and imposes lock-downs only in working-class areas. It thus guarantees that the virus will continue to spread.

As the PSOE-Podemos government threatens to deploy 7,500 soldiers to the streets of Madrid to impose the “restricted mobility” order, the class gulf separating the workers from a ruling elite desperate to keep workers at work at all costs is increasingly obvious.

On Friday, around 5,000 demonstrators, called through social media, marched peacefully in the streets of the working-class district of Vallecas, to denounce the savage police repression of youth who had demonstrated against herd immunity the day before. They shouted “Here we are, the anti-fascists,” “police leave our neighbourhoods,” “freedom for the detainees,” “Madrid always anti-fascist,” and “less police and more health care workers.”

On Wednesday, the PSOE and Podemos sent 30 national police vans to crush a protest by a group of 50 teenagers, which had broken off from a small demonstration called by the Podemos party. Police savagely used their truncheons, leaving six seriously injured and four arrested.

On Sunday, thousands marched again on the streets of Vallecas. Protesters carried their own homemade placards with slogans in favour of public health, against police and military violence and for Madrid regional premier Isabel Ayuso to resign.

Some read “less priests and more vaccines” in

reference to Ayuso’s increase in the budget for the Catholic Church during the pandemic; “more hospitals and less military” in reference to the threat of the Podemos-PSOE government to deploy the army to Madrid; and “this is not confinement, this is the class struggle.”

Podemos, though it had called the initial demonstration to try to prevent an eruption of mass strikes and protests against its reactionary policies in government, could barely hide its hostility.

On Wednesday, they called off what was widely expected to be a large demonstration today, noting that “the epidemiological situation makes it difficult to carry out mass demonstrations.” This only raises the question, however, of why Podemos and the PSOE can order millions of workers and students to gather in large workplaces and schools instead of sheltering at home. Intent on calling off the protest they had just called, however, Podemos instead insisted there should only be “symbolic, decentralized actions.”

Podemos general secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias maintained a deafening silence on the Vallecas protests. This is all the more significant in that, when the media were trying to market Podemos as a “radical left” party, Iglesias, the son of a labour inspector and a lawyer, prided himself on living in Vallecas. He has since acquired a €600,000 villa in the Sierra of Madrid and now sits on the National Intelligence Commission that runs Spain’s intelligence services.

The main Podemos-backed “symbolic” action was held in Madrid’s central Puerta del Sol square. A hundred protesters chanted for Ayuso to resign. The president of the Podemos-backed Regional Federation of Neighbourhood Associations, Quique Villalobos, called for Ayuso to implement a battery of measures,

leaving out the only effective one: a complete shelter-at-home order with full compensation for workers and small businesses.

Instead, Villalobos called on Ayuso for a “science-based plan to strengthen tracing and primary care centers”; “a scientific committee” to pilot the measures against the pandemic; strengthening of public transport and other measures including more resources for retirement homes. He made no criticism of the PSOE-Podemos government, which is as responsible as Ayuso for the disaster in Madrid.

Neither Podemos nor the PSOE sent either of their leading figures to attend the protest, which was clearly an empty and “symbolic” stunt.

The Madrid protests come amid an international upsurge of the class struggle, with strikes and mass high school occupations proceeding in Greece. Internationally, teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the workers are building rank-and-file safety committees in the United States, Britain, Germany and internationally. The affluent middle-class forces making up Podemos are terrified of the growth of the class struggle.

On Friday, the Madrid regional government announced it would extend existing COVID-19 mobility restrictions on 37 health areas in the Madrid region, mostly working-class areas in the south, to eight new zones. Madrid has an extremely high confirmed prevalence of the virus, with 746.2 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. With over 100,000 new infections since August and 3,215 coronavirus patients in its hospitals, its health care system is once again on the verge of collapse. Over 500 people died over the last week throughout Spain.

The same afternoon, Health Minister Salvador Illa held an unexpected press conference, declaring that the ministry had expected “more ambitious measures” from the Madrid government. He called for a limited confinement of the entire capital city.

The following day, Illa again called for a city-wide confinement, accusing the region of Madrid of inaction. He cynically urged the Madrid authorities to “listen to the science” and put aside politics. “We’re very worried about the situation in the Madrid region, where there’s a serious health care risk not only for the people there, but also those in neighbouring regions,” said Illa. He added: “It’s time for proper action and to

take control of the pandemic in Madrid with the aim of flattening the curve.”

In fact, the PSOE-Podemos government, of which Illa is a part, is pursuing a policy of herd immunity, rapidly loosening health restrictions and pushing the population back to work and school, while designing austerity measures to qualify for billions of euros in EU corporate bailout funding.

Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González admitted to *El Confidencial*: “A lot of my opposite numbers in other countries are asking me what we’re doing, because they’re seeing the figures getting worse in their countries, too. ... It’s higher in Spain than in other countries, maybe because we opened up earlier than others and gave ourselves less time between the de-escalation and re-opening measures.”

The Spanish and Madrid regional governments, concerned for the financial elites’ profits, have both opposed total lock-downs at this stage, saying that these are off the table.

The Spanish government is now threatening to intervene and take over the region, either using the State of Alarm or invoking the General Health Law, which empowers it to execute special intervention measures in public health matters—mobilising resources, civil servants, police and soldiers. The government is meeting on Tuesday.

Workers must be warned: calls by the PSOE and Podemos to take over the Madrid region do not aim to implement a “more scientific” approach to fight COVID-19. They aim to somewhat isolate and confuse growing working class opposition, while preparing the police and the army. However, their herd immunity policy and Ayuso’s are indistinguishable from the standpoint of the working class. The way forward for workers and youth is to organise independently in rank-and-file safety committees, to prepare a general strike to halt the resurgence of COVID-19 in Europe.

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