

Spain - workers unite against 'Socialist' government

Two-thirds of Spain's workforce joined last December's general strike. As KEVIN BRUTON reports, the protest forged a rare unity between Spain's unions and marked an historic split between the UGT and the Socialist government.*

Spaniards knew that the general strike on 14 December last year was for real when the Footballers' Union joined in, with star striker Butragueno declaring, "We are workers too and we are expressing our solidarity with Spain's workforce".

The national one day stoppage - Spain's first general strike for more than 50 years - was monumentally successful. About six million people, two-thirds of the working population, responded to strike calls from the socialist trade union, UGT, and the communist-oriented Workers' Commissions (CCOO).

Spain's major cities were paralysed as all who could stop work did so. The state television network was closed, newspapers were not printed and transport services, including international flights, were shutdown. In city centres only major department stores were open for business, provoking clashes between pickets and police which led to about 50 arrests.

Yet in most cities the atmosphere was calm, partly because the police union, though unable to join the work stoppage, expressed its "understanding and solidarity" with the strikers. By the end of the day, the

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two trade union giants had succeeded in their objective of isolating Felipe Gonzalez' Socialist government. [Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE), does not follow socialist policies as we would understand them in South Africa. It is more accurately described as a social-democratic party, with policies similar to the French Socialist Party or the British Labour Party. In general these parties support "welfare capitalism", which aims to redistribute some of the profits of capitalism to meet the social needs of workers - Editor].

The general strike represents "a definitive break" between the UGT and its sister-party, the ruling PSOE. UGT leader Nicolas Redondo declares that "it will take a miracle for the UGT to support the PSOE in the next election. In six years the government has only listened to employers."

"Jungle law"

The spark for December's general strike was the government's Youth Employment Plan. The plan would allocate £15,000 million to firms to employ unemployed workers below the age of 25. These young workers would be employed on short-term contracts at the minimum wage level. The UGT describes the plan as, "the worst attack on workers since the Franco era", because it would undermine union members who have won wages above the legal minimum. The UGT argues that the plan breaks the principle enshrined in the Spanish constitution of equal wages for equal

work.

The UGT claims that the plan will not solve Spain's problem of long-term unemployment which, at 20% is the worst in the Western world. In the



last two years, Redondo states, only 18% of the jobs in Spain's expanding textile industry were permanent and over 30% of production is in the hidden economy. The labour market, he argues, has become "the law of the jungle".

Young workers in Spain form a reserve army of unemployed for a huge informal economy. Of every two people employed in Spain, one is between the ages of 16 and 25. There are 1,400,000 without work in this age group. Over 800,000 of them have never had a job.

The conflict over the Youth Employment Plan is the culmination of a split between the UGT and the ruling PSOE which has been brewing for a long time. The Economic and Social Accord - an agreement between the

government, the employer's organisation and the UGT - came to an end on 31 December 1986. Since then the UGT has been in bitter conflict with the government. No agreement has been reached on a new accord. The UGT opposed Gonzalez' decision to keep Spain within the western defence alliance (NATO). The UGT pointed out that the PSOE had made election promises to withdraw from NATO. UGT MPs voted against the government over pensions legislation and, finally, Nicolas Redondo resigned his parliamentary seat in protest against the 1988 budget. A fierce struggle then developed in the UGT which has seen the expulsion of regional leaders who are close to the PSOE.

Fair shares

A recent UGT report on the economic and social situation in Spain from 1977 to 1987 spends 300 pages condemning the government for a "monetarist and fiscal policy more conservative than Helmut Kohl or Margaret Thatcher". The report describes the shrinking wages and living standards of Spanish workers, and lower social security provisions for the unemployed. The report also describes the massive sell-off of Spanish companies to foreign multinationals, and the deterioration in major public services. The report concludes that the PSOE government favours the private sector and employers. It points out that the rate of increase in Spain's gross domestic product (GDP) is the fastest in the European Community,

(5.2% last year), but the Socialist government has manifestly failed to redistribute the fruits of Spain's economic growth from the rich to the poor.

In contrast to the unions, the Spanish Employer's Confederation (CCEOE), gives enthusiastic support to the government. Its President, Jose Maria Cuevas, declares that the government "should continue to fight inflation, improve firm's competitiveness and bring more flexibility into the labour market". This is clear evidence that the Socialist government's policies are more favourable to employers than to the working class.

Following the success of the general strike the UGT and CCOO agreed to meet Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez, only if his government met five conditions. These are: scrapping the Youth Employment Plan; compensating public employees and pensioners for their 2% drop in real earnings in 1988; increasing to 48% the number of jobless entitled to unemployment pay; recognising public sector employees' right to collective bargaining, and bringing the minimum pension into line with the minimum wage.

Besides these demands, the unions propose a range of social and economic measures to redistribute wealth, protect employees, and expand trade union rights and participation in the management of industry. The unions argue that when the Spanish companies made low profits in the early 1980s the workforce tightened their belts to boost profitability. Now that



Spanish workers demonstrating during the general strike

Photo: ILR

profits are higher, they argue, the workers deserve their share.

The government isolated

It is not only the trade unions that are disillusioned with the government. There is widespread public condemnation of the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by many top Socialists and the fantastic salaries government appointees receive when they join the private sector. For the government to urge moderation on workers appears increasingly hypocritical to many Spaniards. In a recent opinion poll 41% of Spaniards did not believe that the PSOE was the party which best defends working class interests.

On the day of the general strike the leading Spanish weekly 'Cambio

16' commented, "Parliament offers a grotesque image of divorce from national reality, behaving as if all were normal. It's symptomatic that only a few MPs from minor parties on the left expressed the feelings of millions of citizens." In recent months Gonzalez has isolated himself in the Prime Ministerial residence, leaving only for foreign trips and never replying in Parliament to opposition criticism. His reaction to the trade union challenge is to threaten an early general election, 18 months before time, if the unions do not come to the negotiating table without prior conditions.

Such an election would be the death knell for UGT-PSOE relations. The Socialist Party's campaign would have to include a strong anti-union stance and those UGT leaders curren-

tly in Parliament under PSOE colours would be prevented from standing as PSOE candidates. Furthermore the Spanish Communist Party, encouraged by the CCOO, might well offer Redondo and other UGT leaders the opportunity of standing for parliament as independents under the communist banner. A loss of only 600,000 votes would mean the PSOE losing its parliamentary majority.

Rumours are rife that Gonzalez is tired, fed up and might retire early to lead the Party rather than the government. Although the PSOE is outwardly presenting a united image, internal criticisms are mounting, largely from the Party's tiny leftwing. The only public response has been to call on PSOE leaders to clean up their image and to instigate a mini policy review known as 'Programme 2000'.

Partners

What, though, are the implications for Spain's trade unions? It is clear the UGT and CCOO have no intention of letting up the pressure on the government. The two federations are discussing a second general strike for March in advance of the elections for the European Community Parliament. The mobilisation of nationwide opposition to the government throughout December, which culminated in a 100,000 strong demonstration in Madrid, could be renewed.

Most importantly, the general strike saw the greatest cooperation yet between the UGT and CCOO, both anxious to strengthen the trade union

movement against government and employers. This is no easy task in an economy based largely on hundreds of thousands of small companies and where trade union membership is now less than 25% of the working population. As one UGT leader comments, "With such low membership, the unions are left out of the major economic decisions made in Spain. Most of the government's plans for the economy we learn about through the newspapers!"

The success of the general strike has catapulted the new 36 year old leader of the CCOO, Antonio Gutierrez, into national prominence. Most observers believe that the CCOO have gained most from a strike they could not have staged without the UGT. Gutierrez is bent on sustaining and strengthening co-operation between the CCOO and UGT to exert pressure on the government and to boost support for the Communist Party at the PSOE's expense. Gutierrez was recruited at the age of 16 to the Communist Party, which paid for his university education. He built his reputation in a succession of legendary marathon strikes at Michelin and other companies in the Valladolid area.

His tenuous partnership with the veteran UGT leader Nicolas Redondo may give the trade union movement in Spain a unique opportunity to build its strength and membership. The unions will succeed in this if they continue to campaign for the PSOE government to heed the demands of workers and the unemployed, and honour its election promises. ☆