

2013 JULY

ELA newsletter

Solidarity of Basque Workers

The organisations behind the general strike on 30 May very positive about the response to the call to strike

REFLECTIONS ON THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 30 MAY

There was widespread support for the strike in the different sectors in the companies of the Basque Country. In the industrial sector, many workers downed tools in the metal sector and the strike affected nearly all the building sites in construction.

In the Public Services, special mention should be made of the support in the education sector, with over 70% of the workers in the publicly-run centres out on strike. There was good support in local and provincial council, as well as in the autonomous government and Justice.

During the 24-hour strike, there were large demonstrations at mid-day in the four provincial capitals, along with protests in the afternoon in the districts and villages throughout the Basque Country.



A further step: This strike is a further step in the protest and struggle of the different trade union and social agents to stop the destruction of rights and the impoverishment of society. It was the sixth general strike in 5 years, which highlights the existence of a collectively organised society that is ready to fight the policies

leading to such an unprecedented social decline.

The strike had three fundamental core areas:

- to discredit the policies that we are suffering
- to protest to defend and collectivize an alternative
- to consolidate a trade union and social

space that does not accept the extension of poverty.

The social situation is dramatic and requires solutions that prioritise the welfare of individuals and collectives. The people in power tells us that "there is no other alternative": But it is not true. There is an alternative if we are willing to take on the economic powers that be. There is an alternative to challenge the European model, clearly in favour of capital; there is an alternative to end the debt and deficit discipline, to defend worthwhile employment, wages and public pensions, to change fiscal policy and come up with markedly social budgets. Yes there is an alternative.

There is no question over the usefulness of the strike to achieve that aim.

That awareness raising has involved the thousands and thousands of meetings held, the explanation of the alternative proposals, etc., is notably being felt in the social fabric. It is true there was no u-turn in policies the day after the strike. But without the strike, there would be no real deterrent for even tougher policies. This explains the need for a sustained and permanent protest that will lead to a change of policies. Striking is thus an instrument of great value, the best instrument to collectively channel the weariness and indignation of society. It is, in short, a further stepping stone in the fight needed to defend our rights and achieve a fairer and more solidarity society.

ORGANISATIONAL ADJUSTMENT



The latest labour reforms and particularly Rajoy's reform have substantially changed the level playing field in Collective Bargaining, the guarantees to preserve the rights acquired and their collective defence. As a result of the reforms, management is now in a much stronger preferential position in the negotiation sphere.

These changes make up a sphere of labour relations that is very diffe-

rent to the ones we know and ELA has decided to adapt its organisation to those changes in order to continue to be a useful tool for the Basque working class and its aspirations. It is the result of a far-reaching reflection and analysis of the current socio-labour climate.

Consequently, ELA is going to merge its two industrial federations –Metala and Hainbat– into a single Construction and Industry Federation. The final result will be three professional federations that include all sectors:

- Industry and Construction
- GIZALAN, the federation that covers all public services
- ZERBITZUAK, that covers all the private services

All the congresses of the federations will be held on 4 July, after

which ELA will have 3 instead of 4 professional federations.

The current economic climate is a great organisational challenge. ELA's response is clear: unionise companies and work centres to be effective in defending workers' rights and as the only guarantee for the autonomy and viability of our project. The only way to challenge the reforms are good company agreements. Therefore, our organisational challenge consists of adapting our structures to better carry out the trade union work and organisation of the workers. The merger of the federations is fundamental for that to happen.

The effectiveness of the trade union in the new context is going to depend on getting the organisational adaptation right. And that is what is at stake for ELA and the Basque working class.

ELA AT A SEMINAR ON THE ARAB SPRING AND WORKERS RIGHTS



On 27, 28 and 29 May, a seminar on the *Arab spring and its impact on workers rights* was held in Brussels. The seminar was organised by the ITUC in conjunction with the Belgian CSC and ELA. Representatives from different trade unions in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania also took part.

Different aspects of the revolutions in the Arab region were addressed; from how the protests were triggered

and organised in each of the countries involved, with special emphasis on the trade union movement's role, on the analysis of the consequences and the current situation of labour rights in the region. The collusion between the economic and political status quo, the near widespread breach of social and labour rights, along with the persecution and repression of militant trade unionism, with limitations on the right to strike and to trade union freedoms, were patently clear.

Another aspect analysed was the involvement of women in the protests and their current situation in the region. Women played a key role in the protests, highlighting the link that exists between the demands for women's rights and the demands for justice and democracy. However, the analysis concluded that, despite the initial optimism that that the change and transformation that would come after the Arab Spring would substantially improve the situation of women's rights, their expectations would be frustrated, given that far from progressing to a recognition of their rights, a backlash occurred, the result of the growing religious fundamentalism in those countries.

As one of the female trade unionists at the seminar put it: "The poor and workers came out and protested in the revolution, but the ones who came to power continue with the same policies..."

THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT PREPARES FURTHER HARD-HITTING REFORMS



The European Commission has agreed to increase the deficit margin to 6.5% for Spain in 2013, two tenths (equivalent to 2,000 million euros) higher than the 6.3% that Mariano Rajoy's Government had sought. The Commission also confirmed the two-year extension, to 2016, for Spain to cut the deficit to under the 3% threshold set by the Stability and Growth Pact. This decision will hit the working class hard, as it is conditional on a strict calendar of reforms. The main reforms will be linked to pensions and the labour market.

As regards pensions, the Expert Committee set up by the Spanish Government to study the pension reform has just published its report which is very

grim. The measures, which if passed would come into force next year, have two main consequences: the automatic reduction of new pensions and loss of purchasing power for pensioners.

Mikel Noval, head of the Studies Office, stressed that the conclusions of the report were the ones to be expected. "Public pensions have been handed over to the people who make a business out of the private pensions. The majority of its members –8 out of 12– are connected to the financial sector. Therefore, you do not have to be very clever to know what the final outcome will be: destroy the public pension system in favour of private pension plans and the financial institutions. In this context, it is difficult to understand what the head

of the Studies Office of the CCOO trade union – who voted in favour of the report – is doing on this Expert Committee, except to legitimise those who want to put an end to public pensions".

As far as the labour reform is concerned, the Spanish Government is toughening up the previous reform, passed in 2012. Mikel Noval here stressed that the outcome of the 2012 reform could not be grimmer for the wor-

king class, and therefore nothing good could be expected to come from a even tougher one. "There have allowed dismissal to be nearly free; thousands and thousands of jobs have been destroyed; employment has been created and the few that have been in conditions of extreme precariousness; they are considering part time jobs under the Minimum Wage... Which means that the situation is alarming for the workers".



ELA TOOK PART IN THE ALTER SUMMIT ATHENS ON 7 AND 8 JUNE



On 7 and 8 June, European social and trade union organisations met to proclaim the “Athens Manifesto”. They also insisted on the need to foster the convergence of European, national and local action to end debt slavery and austerity policies that are driving people into poverty and slashing social policies and fundamental rights that cost decades of struggle to achieve.

Athens was the scenario chosen for this first Alternative Summit as a show of solidarity with the Greek people, being devastated by the austerity policy imposed by the Greek Government and the European institutions. There was also ample space for shows of solidarity with the social and trade union organisations that have tirelessly been fighting against those policies.

The Manifesto, which the trade unions and social movements belonging to the Alter Summit had been preparing in the lead-up to the event, sets out the main claims underpinning the Alter Summit and which are the basis to construct a European alternative movement in favour of a feminist, green, democratic and social Europe.

After the declaration of the manifesto, 15 work groups worked on themes to make up a programme for the convergence of the action, strengthening and

expanding the network and the organisation of joint action. ELA took part as a speaker in the debate “Work-Precariousness-Unemployment: changing the European policies regarding workers’ rights”, where Unai Oñederra, after providing a brief overview of the struggles in the Basque Country in recent years, noted that “social dialogue no longer exists” and stressed the need “to organise the workers and fight company by company”, clearly without forgetting “the mobilisation in the street”. He also argued that “creating an economic alternative (consumer groups, energy cooperatives, local currencies, etc.) that shows the way and the construction of that model that we must defend” is as important as mobilising the workers.

“In the case of the Basque Country, the latest general strike (30 May) was the first step to implement what we refer to as the Social Charter, created both by trade unions and by social movements, which considers the

radical change of the neo-liberal policies being applied and gives impetus to a social and political transformation to be essential”.

The Alter Summit ended with a demonstration through the streets of Athens on the afternoon of Saturday 8 June.

The next step will be to examine the proposals and to establish the priorities for action shared by the members organisations of the network. These include actions at European level against austerity and the “Fiscal Pact”, against the policies and mandate of the ECB, the progressive privatization of the public health service, the increase of a neo-Nazi and populist right. The proposals regarding how to improve the European solidarity networks and coordination of struggles.

Given the increasingly more obvious social disaster that these policies are causing in Europe and worldwide, there is pressing need for a radical change and that will only be possible if we manage to change the balance of power.

