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ELA newsletter

Solidarity of Basque Workers

ELA has embraced the challenge to turn small and large companies alike into real negotiation scenarios

EXTRAORDINARY CONGRESSES OF ELA FEDERATIONS

The extraordinary congresses held on 4 July marked the culmination of the organisational adaptation process whose outcome is that ELA now has 3 instead of 4 professional federations. On the one hand, a new industry and construction federation, the "ELA Industry and Construction Federation", has been created and includes the Metal federation, the construction sector and the industrial sectors of the former Hainbat federation. On the other hand, new sectors have joined the ELA-Gizalan Federation (Public sector services) and ELA-Zerbitzuak Federation (Private sector services) as a result of this internal reorganisation. The congresses of the three federations concluded with overwhelming support for the proposed organisational adaptations.

The General Secretary of the ELA Industry and Construction Federation will be Unai Martínez (the former General Secretary of ELA-Metal) and the Deputy General Secretary Luis Federación (the former General Secretary of ELA-Hainbat). Mirari Irure will continue as General Secretary of ELA-Zerbitzuak and Igor Eizagirre as General Secretary of ELA-Gizalan.

These changes have sought to adapt the organisation to react efficiently to the latest collective bargaining and labour reforms whose purpose is to make it easier for management to slash jobs, lower salaries and worsen working conditions. These reforms have empowered the employer and have weakened the collective and individual rights of the working class, done away with the level playing field

and checks and balances that existed up to now.

Apart from being a great gift to management and an attack on the rights of the working class, these reforms are a huge organisational challenge for the trade union movement overall: to turn small and large companies alike into real negotiation scenarios. The sole effective alternative to defend labour rights is to unionise companies and work centres.

Unionising and organising involves recruiting members, making sure the trade union units at company level function well and, based on a correct balance of power, negotiating and getting good agreements and setting limits on management's goal. Unionising is likewise the only possible option for the trade union itself if it wants to continue to be autonomous, not dependent on public funding and effective in trade union action.

At the XIII Confederal Congress, held six months ago, ELA undertook to "embark on an organisational reflection to adapt our structure in order to be effective in trade union work. This organisational adaptation is an initial step, but the reflection process is going to remain permanently open. ELA is going to closely monitor the effectiveness of what has been decided and what can continued to be improved as "getting future organisational adaptations right is going to depend - as has been the case in the past - the future effectiveness of the trade union. And that is what is at stake for the trade union and the Basque working class.



The members of the new permanent commissions of the three ELA Federations: Industry and Construction, Zerbitzuak and Gizalan

Collective bargaining: New scenario

TIME FOR ACTION AND ORGANISATION



As ELA has denounced umpteen times, the successive collective bargaining and labour reforms have attacked the very heart of the principles that had governed labour relations up until now. In their rush to end the so-called “lack of flexibility” of the labour market, the successive governments have been increasingly streamlining and cheapening the dismissal process and increasing job “flexibility” to the point of completely jeopardising the labour market.

The reforms affecting collective bargaining have been a lynchpin in this offensive. Two reforms, the first under Zapatero and the second under Rajoy, have completely shaken up the system as we have known it. Among other changes, company agreements now have primacy over sector agreements, state sector agreements prevail over territorial sector agreements, which changes the previous situation and it is easier for companies not to apply the approved agreements, even in the case of company agreements. They have also ended the automatic extension of expired agreements, which is in response to an age-old demand from management.

Ending the automatic extension means that when a collective agreement expires without the agreement having been renewed, its content are no longer be applicable and from that moment onwards, the agreement with a larger jurisdiction, where applicable, or failing that, minimum legislation comes into

force. Many collective agreements thus ceased to be in force on 7 July leaving thousands of workers in a situation of uncertainty.

This has had an immediate effect. From July 7 onwards, following the advice of management, many employers have begun to send out notifications to the workers or to their representative bodies announcing the end of the collective agreement and referring the workers to other agreements with poorer working conditions or announcing far worse contractual terms and conditions for the new contracts, etc.

Alongside those notifications, and also on the advice of Management, there are companies that have announced the loss of the automatic extension of sector or company agreements that did not expire on 7 July. That is the case, for example, of the Direct-Grant Education in the Basque Autonomous Community and Bizkaia Graphic Arts sectors. This attitude goes far beyond the reform as such and leaves no question marks about management's position.

Management, yet again, has made abundantly clear its absolute lack of desire to negotiate and its clear interest to exploit the reforms as far as possible, in this case of lack of automatic extension, to achieve the goal for which the reforms have been designed: To facilitate the lowering of salaries, which will undoubtedly lead to a further job losses.

Management has already stated that it will only negotiate “unless driven to it” and it is therefore clear what has to be done: Give priority to trade union action and force negotiation.

ELA therefore believes that some conclusions need to be spotlight and the relevant action then taken:

- That the main goal of the reforms is to slash salaries and the annulment of trade union activities.
- That we have to safeguard the purchasing power of wages in collective bargaining. It is the best way to defend employment.
- That, after the reforms, the sector agreement have ceased to be mandatory for all companies.
- That only organised and unionised company will be able to negotiate a good agreement that guarantees the working conditions of the workers.

Organised trade union presence in companies and action will be the only way to tackle such belligerent and doctrinal management. It is only by ensuring that the workers are the protagonists of their own interests and expectations, by strengthening the organisation, that we will be able to respond to this government and management offensive.

