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Spanish State

Mass protests insist pension 'a right, not a handout'

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The government's pension rise is a mere 0.2% a month — well below the 3% inflation rate. In response, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Public Pensions called for demonstrations across the Spanish state on February 22 with the demand "No to 0.25%".

In a statement, the group said: "The country is governed for a privileged minority that controls the economy, the banks, the electricity and gas companies, and the IBEX 35 [the 35 largest corporations listed on the Spanish stock market] — companies on whose Boards of Directors sit the politicians who have made labour and pension reforms with the sole purpose of favouring the interests of these companies.

"From these Boards, filled with ex-politicians of the [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) opposition] and PP, electricity has increased by more than 12% and gas by 10% while pensioners, along with most of the population, are increasingly impoverished."

Hundreds of thousands of people came out in more than 70 cities, including huge demonstrations in Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. As a result, a special parliamentary session was held to discuss pensions on March 14.

Legislation proposed by left-wing group Unidos Podemos to fix pensions rises to inflation was vetoed by the two main right-wing parties, the governing PP and Citizens, and never introduced for debate. This measure would have cost 2.1 billion a year.

Meanwhile, the government has approved a bailout for privately owned toll roads of more than 2 billion to cover their losses.

Many of these toll roads were built by the PP and contracts were awarded to construction companies with strong links to the party. This is in a context where the PP is mired in corruption scandals involving illegal cash payments by large corporations later distributed as back handers to leading members of the government at the time.

On March 17, three days after the first mass mobilisations, the next national day of action for decent pensions mobilised hundreds of thousands more across the Spanish state, despite torrential rain in most cities.

These demonstrations are driven not just by anger at the government's current actions, but also the structurally inequitable social security system.

Changes to social security by the PSOE in 2011 and the PP in 2013 have led to a 35% drop in purchasing power for 9 million pensioners. Spanish pensions are based on contributions to social security and vary depending on the number of years worked and the amount earned.

The average old age pension across the Spanish state is 1074 a month. However, this hides vast differences due to gender (average women's pension is 179; for men it is 1244) and region (in Extremadura, the average men's pension is 925, for women it is 716).

About 300,000 pensioners are paid the basic pension. This is 400 a month and paid to those who have not paid into social security for a minimum of 20 years, mostly women. Overall, 60% of pensioners receive less than 1000

a month and 15% less than €500.

These figures reflect a lifetime of inequality based on gender and employment opportunities. Changes to extend the calculation period on which final pensions are based — from the average salary paid over the final 15 years of employment to the final 25 years by 2022 — dramatically exacerbates this inequality even further.

This change was the result of an agreement between the two main union federations, CCOO and UGT, and the PSOE government in 2011, which also raised the retirement age to 67 and raised the number of years in employment to receive the maximum pension to 38.

Perhaps ironically, both CCOO and UGT support the current round of mobilisations. However, they have called demonstrations in their own name at the same time as those organised by the National Coordinating Committee — but in different locations.

As a result, in many cities there were two demonstrations on March 17, causing frustration and confusion for many elderly militants. This is a generation that overthrew the fascist Francisco Franco dictatorship and built the welfare state now being torn apart, many of whom are lifelong union members.

This lack of unity, the role of these federations in supporting past pension cuts, and their relatively timid response to the huge March 8 Women's Strike, has lowered their standing even further after years of inaction as unemployment soared and wages dived.

On the other hand, the feminist collectives that built the March 8 strike have swung behind the pension's movement. Youth organisations are starting to come behind the mobilisations as well. As well as the astronomical unemployment and precarious low-paid work young people face, they are also watching the right to a liveable pension disappear.

As one spokesperson said at a rally in Las Palmas, pensioners are not going anywhere: "We already did it in the '60s and '70s. We have experience and we are going to tell the union organisations and the political parties that it is on the street where rights are won."

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