

Valencia floods expose inaction of Spanish trade unions

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The devastating floods in Valencia that cost over 223 lives, shattered entire towns and destroyed tens of thousands of homes, have exposed the bankrupt bureaucracies of the Sumar-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) unions.

There is mounting popular anger at the entire political establishment, from the Valencian regional government led by right-wing Partido Popular (PP) regional premier Carlos Mazón, to the national Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar government and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

Last Saturday, more than 130,000 people participated in a march, shouting “Murderers, murderers,” “Mazón, resign,” and “Only the people save the people.” There were also signs that read “Mazón, your people repudiate you, neither forget nor forgive,” “We are stained with mud, you are stained with blood,” and “Neither Mazón, nor Madrid nor Bourbons [monarchy].” These were the largest protests in the region since the anti-war protests against Iraq in 2003.

The CCOO and UGT bureaucracies are not fighting Mazón and Sánchez, or to pushing for measures to combat climate change, but instead are intervening to stifle and demobilise the workers. They are shielding the capitalist state’s criminally negligent response to the floods and concealing their own role in what the WSWs rightly describes as social murder.

On October 29, the day the deadly floods hit Valencia, CCOO and UGT met with Mazón and the big business platform in Valencia, the Confederación Empresarial de la Comunitat Valenciana (Business Confederation of the Valencia Region) to discuss the regional budget.

In the five days leading up to the meeting, the State Meteorological Agency (AEMET) had issued repeated warnings of a potential heavy storm, predicting heavy rainfall across Valencia. Hours before union officials met with Mazón, AEMET issued a red alert—the highest level—indicating extreme rainfall risks.

Despite these repeated warnings and Valencia’s known vulnerability to flooding, particularly after the 2019 floods that claimed at least six lives, the unions did not issue a

public alert, call to close workplaces, or advise people to stay home. They continued business as usual.

Instead, in front of them, Mazón denounced measures to close the University of Valencia (UV) as “exaggerated.” Indeed, the UV’s emergency committee, created in 2019 for precisely such a storm, had sent a notice the day before to all its students, announcing the suspension of classes due to the forecast of heavy rainfall. This impacted 50,000 students, 3,000 technical, administrative, and support staff, and more than 5,000 professors.

The UV closure should be the standard response to deadly storm conditions, but it was the exception. Union officials could have called union delegates in factories and workplaces across the region to apply Article 21.3 of the Occupational Risk Prevention Law. This law states that when “the employer does not adopt or allow the adoption of the necessary measures to guarantee the safety and health of workers, their legal representatives may, by majority, decide to suspend the activity of workers affected by this risk.”

To date, the number of workers who died remain unknown. Due to the union bureaucracies’ criminal inaction, hundreds of thousands of workers were forced to report to work amid the flooding. Major billion-euro retail giants, including Bershka, Massimo Dutti, Pull&Bear, Lefties, Zara, and La Tagliatella, decided to remain open. In the El Oliveral industrial zone in Riba-roja, over 1,000 workers found themselves trapped by rising waters.

Social media platforms like X and Instagram were filled with videos of witnesses pleading for help, some calling emergency services to rescue friends and loved ones. The situation at Ikea went viral as employees and some customers had to spend the night in the store. More than 400 autoworkers at Ford’s Almussafes plant were stranded.

Many truck drivers were left stranded on the roads: some were not rescued for days, and others died. Among the known victims was José Hernaiz, a truck driver who went missing in l’Alcúdia and was later found dead, and Bassem Zetión, whose DHL truck was suddenly overtaken by floodwaters and remains missing.

After the disaster, as mass anger mounted against the lack of preparedness and the role of Mazón in downplaying storm warnings, the union bureaucracies joined the rest of the political establishment in covering up its role in the social murder. Like the PSOE-Sumar government, they rejected calls for Mazón's resignation.

They posted a joint statement four days later, when Prime Minister Sánchez and Spanish King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia were pelted with mud while visiting Paiporta, one of Valencia's worst-hit towns, as workers chanted, "Get out!," "Pedro Sanchez, where are you?" and "Murderers!"

The unions said: "Without prejudice to the responsibilities corresponding to each level of government, the priority at this time is to unify all efforts to address the emergency."

As anger continued to mount, and hundreds of thousands of workers and their families organised themselves in rescue and cleaning efforts, the unions sponsored a pathetic nationwide, 10-minute work stoppage last Friday. It was organised jointly with the CEOE big business platform, the same business owners who forced their workers to remain at their workplaces during the floods.

The next day, they refused to support a mass demonstration Saturday in which over 130,000 people participated. However, they suspended a planned strike in the road transport sector, claiming transport services could not be suspended during the recovery period. That is, it's good to suspend strikes after a disaster, but not when transport and logistic workers are drowning amid floods.

While strike actions were suspended, the Spanish ruling class has not paused for a single moment in its class war against workers, or its escalating military offensive against Russia in Ukraine. Nor has it hesitated to use Spanish ports to transport weapons to Israel for the genocide in Gaza.

The unions are now collaborating with the PSOE-Podemos government to approve billion-euro aid packages for the region. While some funds will go to hundreds of thousands of workers and small businesses hit by the catastrophe, the main beneficiaries will be large corporations and banks—key contributors to climate change, which has intensified extreme weather events like the Valencian floods. These same corporations insisted on sending workers to their posts amid the floods.

They will no doubt use these funds to further speculate on real estate in the region, where hundreds of thousands of homes have been built in flood-prone areas.

The unions and Sumar leader and labor minister, Yolanda Díaz, are also funneling millions of euros to big business using Spain's Temporary Employment Regulation Files (ERTEs, that were widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic). ERTes allows companies to reduce labor costs by suspending contracts or reducing working hours, with the

government subsidising a portion of workers' wages, effectively shifting the financial burden from big business to the state.

The events of the past week underscore the need for rank-and-file committees in every workplace, enabling workers to take control of their own struggle, break the grip of the trade union bureaucracy, and launch an industrial and political campaign to unite the struggles of workers into a common offensive. Calls for a general strike to bring down Mazón are now being widely discussed, as the unions and the PSOE-Sumar government refuse to call for his resignation.

The pseudo-left, orbiting around Podemos and Sumar, however, are demanding that workers subordinate themselves to these very bureaucracies. The Corriente Revolucionaria de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras (Workers' Revolutionary Current, CRT), state, "it is essential to continue organising class solidarity and to demand that the union bureaucracies break from their criminal passivity and call for strikes."

The Revolutionary Communist Organization (Organización Comunista Revolucionaria, OCR), states the unions "must be compelled" to call a general strike. Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left) called on the unions "to respond with full force and demand the suspension of all non-essential work activities."

The way forward, in reality, is mobilizing the rank-and-file independently of the union bureaucracies. The perspective of "demanding" these bureaucracies take action has been tried and has failed again and again. In Spain as elsewhere, the bureaucracies serve as an industrial police force. Their role is to prevent strikes, impose sell-outs and block an independent movement of the working class, while allowing the ruling class to keep diverting billions of euros from social spending, disaster preparedness and climate-resilient infrastructure into bank bailouts and the army.

A socialist movement must be built in the working class, in Spain and around the world, to take these resources out of the hands of the capitalist financial oligarchy, placing corporations under public ownership and allocating resources based on social need, not private profit.



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