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Trade union elections: When the chips are down, ELA

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Mitxel Lakuntza, General Secretary of ELA: "We want to defend the purchasing power of salaries and pensions and to demand some decent social benefits"

On the 19th of November, in the four capital cities of southern Basque Country, over 15,000 people seconded the mobilisations organised in defence of work, pensions and public services. Amongst the convening organisations were ELA, the Euskal Herria Pensioners' Movement, the Charter of Social Rights of the Basque Country and almost another 50 trade unions and social agents. "This mobilisation is not the end; rather it is the start of a journey, with the commitment of tightening collaboration in the defence of these urgent demands."



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At the Congresses, each federation's work lines were approved, as well as their respective General Secretaries and Permanent Committees. Those in charge of the three federations coincided in emphasising the priorities for the next few years: the distribution of wealth as the centre point of collective bargaining, along with the fight against job precariousness and the gender gap.

At the ELA-Zerbitzuak (Private Services) Congress, the delegates re-elected Maricruz Elkoro as General Secretary with 95% of votes in favour. In her speech, Elkoro emphasised that in four years ELA-Zerbitzuak had grown by 2,726 people, of which 78% were women. "In virtually all the federation's sectors, ELA continues to be the majority union and in many of them, it holds an absolute majority. In the period between congresses, we have carried out almost 100 strikes, in spite of the fact that we have experienced two years of pandemic, with very reduced trade union action." Most of the female-dominant and precarious sectors are encompassed in this federation, which has 29,198 members, 62% of whom are women.

At the ELA-Gizalan (Public Services) Congress, a federation that has 33,676 members, of whom 66.9% are women, the federation's line was seconded, which is going to concentrate on the task of improving the conditions in the care sectors, along with the consolidation of public employment and closing the way for privatisation. Additionally, Igor Eizagirre was re-elected as General Secretary (with 94% of votes in favour). In his speech, Eizagirre emphasised that "the Gizalan federation is immersed in the defence of the Public Services: we are promoting mobilisations in almost all the sectors, such as health, education, care, etc. Today, more than ever before, we have marked out our goal, putting the fight against job precariousness and defending public employment at the centre, as being the only way to guarantee the quality of these services."

At the ELA-Industria eta Eraikuntza (Industry and Construction) Congress, a federation that has 38,364 members, Unai Martínez was re-elected as General Secretary (with 94% of votes in favour). Martínez emphasised in his speech that "job precariousness continues to be rampant in the building sector and moreover, they are selling us a 4.0 industry, but without any labour rights. Is this the future? ELA is fighting to make this future different." Likewise, he recalled that "collective bargaining is the instrument that the working class has in its hands to obtain the sharing out of the wealth and therefore, managing to reach salary increases above the CPI is a target, as well as reductions in the working hours." On the other hand, Martínez put particular emphasis on ELA's fight for an "industry and building sector without any discrimination."



TRADE UNION ELECTIONS

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In September the green light was given to a new concentrated period of trade union elections. In the following nine months union elections are being held in many companies: almost half of the elected trade union representatives of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC) and the Regional Community of Navarra (about 12,000) must be renewed. More than half of the wage-earners are called to the polls to choose their trade union representatives, those colleagues who will defend their labour rights in their companies.

In spite of the lack of news items in the media, the result of the trade union elections is enormously important for the future of a company or sector; and even for the country. In the end, the labour relations will differ in terms of the majority trade union model. It is not the same for the majority trade union to opt for a counter-power trade union model, as is the case of ELA. The trade union elections are of great importance because what is decided today could determine tomorrow's working conditions. The future is at stake.

These are turbulent times, full of uncertainties and at this point in time the trade union elections take on a particular importance. We are experiencing the impact of the last labour reform, a collective bargaining agreement in which the employers do not want to link salaries to the CPI with some rampant inflation figures, a war the consequences of which (in addition to the human drama that it involves), directly affect the pockets of the working class, the rise in interest rates all seem to be the forerunners to a new recession... Without any doubt, we are living through complicated times and in this context the majority trade union model is becoming an increasingly more conditioning element.

The trade union model is also a determining factor for turning round the situations of precariousness that is being experienced by a large part of the working class. In the current situation, being able to fight and maintain the fight over time is going to become more decisive and ELA is the only union doing this.

What goals are being marked out by ELA in these trade union elections? Our goal is to be able to unionise all the work centres in the whole Basque Country and break the individualisation of labour relations that are still in place in many companies. Approximately 34% of the salaried workers in the Basque Country have no trade union representation. On a more specific level, we aspire to consolidate our representation of 40.64% in the ACBC and exceed 23% in Navarra. At the end of the year, and still in the middle of the union election period, ELA is obtaining very good results, thus consolidating its majority. But beyond the numbers, we are seeking to consolidate our counter-power trade union model and to strengthen and promote conflict and strikes as instruments for improving living conditions.

“We want to defend the purchasing power of salaries and pensions and to demand some decent social benefits”

On the 19th of November, in the four capital cities of southern Basque Country, over 15,000 people seconded the mobilisations organised in defence of work, pensions and public services. Amongst the convening organisations were ELA, the Euskal Herria Pensioners' Movement, the Charter of Social Rights of the Basque Country and almost another 50 trade unions and social agents. “This mobilisation is not the end; rather it is the start of a journey, with the commitment of tightening collaboration in the defence of these urgent demands.”

The General Secretary of ELA, Mixel Lakuntza, took part in the large demonstration in Bilbao and he indicated that ELA defends “the purchasing power of salaries and pensions” and that from the trade union they are demanding “some decent social benefits.” “Our demands are steps towards improving people's quality of life,” he added.

ELA denounced the process of impoverishment of the working class and demands a fair division of wealth and an in-depth change of social policies. In fact, as the business profits are increasing, the workers, the pensioners and the people who receive social benefits are becoming increasingly poor.

The institutions of the Basque Country, however, refuse to face up to the current energy crisis. “We must put restrictions on the energy oligopoly and establish a public control of prices.” In the words of Lakuntza, “we are asking the Governments of Euskadi and Navarra to distance themselves from the economic powers and put themselves on the people's side.”

And we believe that to do this, some in-depth tax reforms are needed. To be able to face up to the country's social needs, strengthening the public services and carrying out the eco-social transition, taxes on business profits, high incomes and wealth must be increased. But the budgets that have been presented by the Basque Government and the Government of Navarra seem insufficient and indefensible.

The trade unions and social agents that organised the mobilisations issued the following common communiqué:

Under the main banner with the slogan ‘Decent jobs, pensions and public services. With impoverishment, a division of wealth’, over 15,000 people came together in the morning in Vitoria and in the afternoon in Bilbao, San Sebastian and Pamplona. “We urge the Governments of the ACBC and Navarra to stand up to their responsibility and do everything necessary to guarantee some decent public services, pensions and salaries in order that everyone, be they men or women, immigrants and/or racialised people, young or old, can live with quality of life. It is the time to radically change the system's course and, therefore, the public policies that are being applied at present,” they state in the document read out at the end of the demonstration.



Diversity was the predominant note in the mobilisation, the claims made by pensioners from the different regions, the ecological block, flags and insignias from the many organisations present, as well as banners about labour conflicts and an endless amount of proclamations were present at the mobilisations. Those attending recalled the negotiated demands: A minimum wage of 1,400 €, with the aim that the minimum pensions of 1,080 € reach 90% of the aforementioned wage; ending the gender gap in wages and pensions, developing a universal public network of healthcare and social services and the stopping of the cutbacks that are taking place in the ACBC in the Income Guarantee and in the Guaranteed Income in Navarra.

The organisers confirmed that this mobilisation is not the end, but rather it is the start of a journey, with the commitment of tightening the collaboration in the defence of these urgent demands.

Precisely, on December 16 and December 21, new mobilizations will be held in front of the Basque Parliament in Vitoria and the Parliament of Navarre in Pamplona to demand social budgets.

