# Thousands protest Spain's health care austerity

December 9 2012, by Harold Heckle


Protestors hold banners reading, "No financial cuts" and "Public health care system" as they shout slogans during a demonstration against government-imposed austerity measures and labor reforms in the public health care sector in Madrid, Spain, Sunday, Dec. 9, 2012. Madrid residents and medical workers angered by budget cuts and plans to part-privatize bits of their cherished national health service are protesting. (AP Photo/Andres Kudacki)

(AP)—Thousands of Spanish medical workers and residents angered by budget cuts and plans to partly privatize the cherished national health service marched through some of Madrid's most famous squares on Sunday.

More than 5,000 people rallied in Puerta del Sol, according to police estimates, after marching from Neptuno and Cibeles squares. Organizers estimated attendance at 25,000 protesters, many dressed in white and blue hospital scrubs. The march, called "a white tide" by organizers, was the third such large-scale protest this year.

Fatima Branas, a spokeswoman for organizers, said privatization plans were short-sighted because they did not take into account that savings could be made without selling off services.

"What their plans really mean is a total change of our health care model and a dismantling of the system used," she said.

Madrid's government, under regional president Ignacio Gonzalez, maintains cuts are needed to secure health services during a deep recession.

Health care and education are administered by Spain's 17 semi-autonomous regions, rather than the central government, and each sets its own budgets and spending plans. Regions account for almost 40 percent of public spending. The Madrid region is governed by the Popular Party, the center-right alignment also in power centrally under Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

Many regions are struggling as Spain's economy contracts into a double-dip recession triggered by a real estate crash in 2008.

Some, having overspent and being unable to borrow on financial markets to repay their huge debts, are cutting budgets.

"We face a really difficult situation because the Spanish health service is under threat of being sold off," said Dr. Gerardo Anton, 58, who said the changes proposed by Gonzalez would likely attract investors more interested in profit than public service.

Spain's regions have a combined debt of €145 billion ($185 billion) and about €36 billion must be refinanced this year. The country is trying to avoid following Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus in having to ask for international financial bailouts.



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