

Large Spanish protest against health privatization

January 7 2013, by Harold Heckle



A demonstrator takes part in a National health workers march during the first major demonstration of the year, in Madrid, Monday Jan. 7, 2013. The demonstration was against government-imposed austerity measures and labor reforms in the public health care sector in Madrid. Word painted on her face reads 'Health.' (AP Photo/Paul White)

(AP)—Thousands of Spanish medical workers marched through downtown Madrid on Monday to protest against budget cuts and plans to partly privatize their cherished national health service.

The march is part of a series of such demonstrations, described as a "white tide" because of the color of the medical scrubs many protesters wear. Participants on Monday walked behind a large banner saying, "Health care is not to be sold, it's to be defended."

Monica Garcia, spokeswoman for the Association of Medical Specialists of Madrid, which initiated the march, said her organization would continue to protest "the loss of our public health care, a national heritage that belongs to us and not to the government."

She said the regional government was trying "to obtain economic benefit" from a system it had not invested in.

Health care and education are currently administered by Spain's 17 semi-autonomous regions rather than the central government.



National health workers march during the first major demonstration of the year, in Madrid Monday Jan. 7, 2013. The demonstration was against government-

imposed austerity measures and labor reforms in the public health care sector in Madrid. Main banner reads 'Don't sell it, defend it' (AP Photo/Paul White)

Many regions are struggling financially as Spain's economy has fallen back into recession, having never recovered from a real estate crash in 2008. Some regions overspent in the good times but are now unable to borrow on financial markets to repay their huge debts, forcing them to make savings and even request rescue aid from the central government.

The region of Madrid proposes selling the management of six of 20 large public hospitals in its territory and 27 of 268 health centers. It argues that's needed to fix the region's finances and secure health services.

Doctor Agustin Reverte, 31, said privatizations would lead to less diagnostic tests on patients who will be attended by fewer medical staff, reducing the overall quality of the service.

"Those in government have money, so they don't care if they have to pay for health care," said Aurora Rojas, a 55-year-old nurse. "But the rest of us who just have a regular salary will not be able to afford decent treatment," she said.

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