Mass anti-austerity protests sweep through Spain

At least 100,000 protesters angered by the country's grim economic prospects turned out for street demonstrations in 80 cities across Spain. This marked the one-year anniversary of a movement that inspired similar activist groups in other countries.

In the capital Madrid, thousands of protesters chanted and beat drums as they marched from different directions to converge on the central Puerta del Sol Square. The square was brimming with demonstrators during the evening, but visibly emptied as some of the protesters left after 10pm local time.

Authorities have vowed to block any attempts by protesters to camp out on the square, which is the popular movement's epicenter. Marches were also held in Barcelona, Bilbao, Malaga and Seville.

The four day-long demonstration marks the one-year anniversary of the "Indignants" protest movement, as Spain’s economic woes deepen by the day.

Joblessness has soared to almost 25 per cent – the highest level in the eurozone – with half of all Spaniards under the age of 25 are out of work. As the country already faces 30 billion euros in cuts so far this year, demonstrators say the cuts have left public services greatly underfunded.

The government is planning a fresh round of austerity measures as the country sinks further into recession, prompting fears that Spain may soon require a Greek-style bailout. These measures include hikes in property and income taxes, freezes on the minimum wage and cuts to health care and education spending, as well as further slashing of pensioners' benefits.

*“We are here because we continue to be angry over the austerity policies which an economic elite is imposing on us,"*21-year-old student Victor Valdes told AFP in Madrid. Another protester said it was important to let the government know *“we are still here.”*

The government has vowed not to see a repeat of last year’s scenario, when the “indignados” managed to erect a sprawling tent city in the heart of Madrid. After violent clashes with police, the demonstrators were forcibly evicted.

Madrid authorities issued a permit for a five-hour long gathering on Saturday, requiring the protesters to vacate the square by 10pm, though they will be allowed to return the following day.

However, many demonstrators stayed on the square even after the deadline, and the police did not appear to try to enforce the curfew.

However, activists said over social media that they would call for a “permanent assembly” to be held on Puerta del Sol throughout the four-day protest.

The government has warned that there will be enough officers to enforce the law, with some 2,000 riot police deployed in the capital.

Victor Sampedro, a professor of political communication, believes the demonstrators have headed to the street in order to participate in politics.

“*These people want to take part in politics, and they cannot take part in politics because they have reached the conclusion that while it is worth voting, it does not reflect the public opinion because only two main parties can govern. Actually it’s a bi-partisan system, de-facto* ,” Sampedro noted to RT, "
and both main parties coincide fully in their economic measures.
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Source: http://rt.com/news/mass-protests-spain-madrid-118/