

## SPANIARDS PROTEST LABOR REFORMS



In a first trial of strength before a general strike called for March 29 to oppose austerity measures, tens of thousands of Spaniards protested on Sunday against a new labor law which hands more power to employers by making it cheaper to fire workers and easier to restrict wage hikes. The demonstrations add to the growing number of street protests against government reforms and spending cuts aimed at putting Spain's finances back on track. The labor reforms, which were passed by decree last month, make it easier for employers to cut pay and lay off workers. As many as half a million people joined the protest in 57 towns and cities, according to organizers which included the two largest unions Comisiones Obreras and UGT. The wide boulevards from the Atocha train station up to the central Sol square in Madrid was filled with loud but peaceful protestors of all ages. The government predicts that Spain's unemployment rate, which already has the highest unemployment rate in the European Union at 23 percent, will hit a record high of 23.4 this year, accounting for nearly a third of the jobless in the euro zone. Desperate to show Brussels it is serious about keeping its budget under control, the government says measures like cutting severance pay to 33 days for every year worked from 45 days and restricting inflation-linked salary hikes will bring flexibility to Spain's rigid labor market. Spain's conservative government feels the reforms are needed to revive the economy and reduce unemployment rates. The reforms, approved by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's government on February 11, give Spanish companies the freedom to pull out of collective bargaining agreements and have greater flexibility in adjusting employee schedules, workplace tasks and wages and making it easier and less costly to fire workers. "When we designed this reform we were thinking of the people who are out of work, who see no future," Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy told a party conference on Sunday. However, Protestors in Madrid said the measures wrecked worker's rights. Irene Jimenez, a 29-year-old health worker says, "It's damaging for workers, it makes it easier to fire people, it benefits employers -- they're laying us off across the public sector". "Contracts are getting worse every year. They say they want to invest in the future while cutting research budgets. They're not looking to the future but to the next election with cuts dictated from Brussels," university researcher Nacho Foche, 27, said. Jose Javier Rodriguez, 53, says the reform will not help Spain's unemployed. "It's absurd to think you're going to bring down unemployment by making it easier to fire people". "There has to be a general strike. They said they were cutting workers rights to create more work. They've cut rights, but not said how they plan to create jobs," teacher Alberto Carrillo, 48, said. According to a recent poll, three-quarters of Spaniards do not believe the labor reform will help will help create jobs. However, 67 percent believe a general strike will not help matters and may make the situation worse. Analysts say Spain's economy, already in a state of recession after the global financial downturn, is expected to enter into a new recession in the first two quarters of 2012. Europe plunged into deep financial crisis in 2008, which has continued to intensify in recent months.