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Spanish air traffic controllers threaten strike: how the row erupted

Millions of holidaymakers face travel disruption later this month after Spain's air traffic controllers voted to go on strike.



The walkout is expected to begin in the third week of August causing maximum disruption to flights at the height of the summer holiday season Photo: ALAMY

By Murray Wardrop

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The threatened walkout is the culmination of a long-running dispute over pay and working conditions.

The row was ignited in February when the Spanish government slashed controllers' salaries by around 40 per cent as part of its austerity measures to cut the public deficit.

The move followed revelations that some controllers, who are employed by the state-run airport management firm AENA, enjoyed salaries of up to £800,000-a-year.

At the time, Jose Blanco, the development minister, said it was "intolerable for the government to

pay millionaire salaries to civil servants while seeking austerity from the rest of the Spanish people”.

The decision, which cut the average wage from £290,000-a-year to £167,000, sparked fury among controllers raising the threat of a strike over Easter.

Although widespread industrial action has so far been averted, in recent months many air traffic controllers have taken sick leave, prompting government accusations they were staging a strike by stealth.

More than 40 per cent of the air traffic controllers were off sick for a day last month in Barcelona.

However, the dispute intensified last week when a government decree laid down changes to controllers’ working hours and reductions in overtime pay.

Until now much of controllers' pay came from working overtime. Their contracts stipulated a working year of 1,000 hours, which most of them topped up with a further 600 hours of overtime, paid at triple rate.

But the decree reduces rest periods and requires the country’s 2,300 controllers to work 1,600 hours at a normal wage.

In response, the USCA union, representing around 95 per cent of the controllers, held a ballot with 98 per cent in favour of industrial action.

The union accuses the government of enacting the reforms even while the issue was being negotiated.

A date for the strike has not yet been announced but it is thought it could go ahead on August 18 and could last at least three days.

The walkout is likely to affect hundreds of thousands of Britons travelling in and out of the country at the height of the summer holiday season.