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Al Jazeera

Trade unions strike in Italy and Spain

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Spanish demonstrators are protesting against a constitutional change to keep a long-term deficit cap [Reuters]

Protestors in Italy and Spain are holding a day of action against their government's latest austerity measures.

In Spain, protests are taking place in the capital Madrid, calling for a halt to constitutional reforms which could cap any future budget deficits.

In Italy, trade unions have begun a general strike against the government's latest austerity measures as parliament debates \$64bn in cuts over the next two years.

The strikes have caused cancellations to some flights, trains and buses, while most government offices have been closed for the day.

CGIL, which called Tuesday's strike, is Italy's largest union federation.

Smaller, more moderate union federations are rejecting the strike, saying there is no point in taking action against employers when everybody's jobs are at risk.

"This is a plan the country doesn't deserve," said Susanna Camusso, the secretary-general of CGIL.

"We are on the edge of the abyss, we need responsible government."

Al Jazeera's Nadim Baba, reporting from Rome, said: "Many Italians know that some cuts are inevitable, hence not hundreds of thousands have turned out."

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right cabinet adopted the draft \$64bn plan on August 12 in a bid to calm market fears and bring Italy's budget into balance in 2013, instead of 2014 as was initially planned.

The Italian parliament is widely expected to adopt the plan to help cut government spending and raising some taxes.

On Monday there were further stock market falls and a new rise in interest rates payable on Italian government debt, causing the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel to compare Italy's economic plight to that of Greece.

Unrest in Spain

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero is desperately trying to calm market nerves about the country's ability to service its annual deficits.

Government spokesman Jose Blanco said Madrid was "very worried" because some countries were failing to meet their deficit-reduction targets, and this was affecting investor attitudes to

Spain.

Spain's upper house of parliament is almost certain to approve a constitutional change on Wednesday that will enshrine balanced budgets.

Under the constitutional change, Spain must stick to a long-term deficit cap except in times of natural disaster, recession or extraordinary emergencies and even then only with approval of the lower house.

An accompanying law to be enacted by June 2012 would set the actual figure for the structural deficit at 0.4 per cent of annual gross domestic product from 2020.

But two of the country's biggest unions, the Labour Union and General Workers Union, are demanding a referendum on the reform and have been joined in their campaign by the "indignant" protest movement.

Unions are expecting tens of thousands of people to take to the streets in marches at the end of the working day on Tuesday.