

Vote “no” in Spanish referendum on European Union constitution

By Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)/
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On Sunday, February 20, Spain will be the first country to hold a referendum on the proposed European Union constitution.

The ballot has been presented by the Spanish government and much of the political elite across Europe as the first in a series of democratic consultations that will see 10 countries hold referendums on the issue over the next 18 months. In essence, the referendum is an attempt to legitimise the European bourgeoisie's efforts to refashion economic and social relations across the continent in their interests.

The project of European integration is conceived of by the European ruling elites as a means of making Europe's major powers and transnational corporations competitive on the world arena against their American, Japanese and Chinese rivals by destroying the existing living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

This attack is bound up with a drive by the bourgeoisie to create an independent European military capability. The European powers are desperate to secure a share in the new colonial-style redivision of the world's resources epitomised by the illegal war of aggression waged by the US and its allies to seize control of Iraq's oil and establish hegemony over the entire Middle East.

The World Socialist Web Site urges a “no” vote in the referendum as a means of articulating political opposition to the assault being mounted against the Spanish and European working class and the eruption of militarism that threatens to plunge humanity into a new period of barbarism.

We maintain that the unification of the continent is, in principle, both positive and necessary, but it can be accomplished in a democratic and socially progressive manner only by the independent action of the European working class in irreconcilable struggle against big business and its political representatives. In opposition to the plans of the European elites for integration on capitalist foundations, the working class must advance a strategy that embodies its own independent interests. That strategy is summed up in the struggle for the establishment of a United Socialist States of Europe.

Growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms

The efforts of the European bourgeoisie to forge a new constitutional framework for its project of integration are being driven by fundamental imperatives that have been intensified by the globalisation of production and the resulting growth of inter-imperialist rivalries.

Global corporations and financial institutions now have the ability to locate production anywhere in the world, irrespective of national boundaries. With revenues that dwarf the GDP of many nations, they are able to demand of national governments corporate tax cuts and measures to reduce labour costs to a minimum.

The European bourgeoisie has responded to this development by seeking to consolidate a unified trade bloc with an internal market that rivals that of the US, in which all restrictions on the free movement of capital are eliminated and where each national government can be held accountable to the banks and stock markets for cutting taxes and expenditures on welfare.

But such an economic challenge to the US is not, in itself, sufficient. The Bush administration is seeking to assert America's global hegemony by utilising its military superiority to offset the economic challenge represented by Europe. This offensive is directed not only against the smaller countries, such as Iraq, but against America's major imperialist

rivals, who are being told to submit to Washington's diktats.

This is spurring the efforts of the European powers to pool their collective resources and make a dramatic shift in public spending away from welfare and service provision to a buildup of the military and arms industry, which in turn requires even greater attacks on Europe's workers.

Within the European Union's internal market, all restraints on the exploitation of the working class are being removed so as to create an abundant supply of cheap labour, stripped of all social protection.

Across the continent, the right to decent wages, pension and health care provision is being torn up on the grounds that they represent an intolerable burden on the major corporations and the financial oligarchies that dominate political life. The result is the establishment of an ever-lower benchmark, with workers compelled to compete against one another, both within Europe and globally, in a downward spiral of wages and conditions.

The breakdown of transatlantic relations

Spanish politics have been profoundly affected by the vast changes in international social and political relations fueled by economic globalisation.

The Popular Party (PP) government of Jose Marie Aznar became one of the Bush administration's chief allies in its illegal war against Iraq, and sought to reorient Spain's foreign policy decisively towards the US. This met with massive popular hostility from the Spanish people, who took to the streets in their millions to protest against the war in 2003. The March 11, 2004, terror bombings, carried out by Islamist forces, and the cynical efforts of the Aznar government to exploit them for its electoral purposes, sparked a mass movement that led to the defeat of the PP government and brought the social democratic PSOE to power under Jose Zapatero.

But events have proved that illusions that the PSOE or any other European government is either able or willing to seriously oppose US militarism serve only to disarm the working class. Like France and Germany, Spain opposes the United States only to the extent that American global hegemony impinges on its own imperialist ambitions.

The policy of the Spanish and European bourgeoisie assumes a twofold character, combining efforts to appease Washington with a parallel drive to reinforce their own military capability and thereby strengthen their hand against their more powerful rival.

Zapatero withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq in order to placate public sentiment, but continues to collaborate with the US militarily in Afghanistan, where Spain has the second-largest force, and in the Balkans. At the same time, Zapatero advanced a policy of cultivating an alliance with France and Germany for a combined European military capability, insisting that “a strong Europe is the most important, historic project of the century, given what is represents for world order.”

The conflict with the US can rapidly deteriorate into direct confrontation. Even now, Washington is seeking to create the conditions for some form of military intervention against Iran, which flies in the face of longstanding efforts by the European powers to cultivate economic and political relations with Tehran. There are strong trade links between Europe and Iran. The latter is Spain's second-largest oil supplier and the fourth-largest market for Spanish-made goods in the Middle East region. Spain exported 403 million euros worth of goods to Iran in the first 10 months of 2004 and imported more than 942 million euros worth of Iranian products in the same period.

The character of the EU

Whatever the future may hold, the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms has produced a fundamental shift in the project of European

integration.

The post-war unification of Europe proceeded under the auspices of Washington, which saw it as a means of strengthening its own hand in Europe and providing a bulwark against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It was characterised by economic and social policies designed to ameliorate class antagonisms and thereby create the conditions for political stability across the continent.

Spain was one of the last countries to join the EU, but it initially benefited from these arrangements. Indeed, the European bourgeoisie, banking on residual illusions in the character of the EU among Spanish workers, calculates that a “yes” vote in Spain can be used to push the EU constitution through in other countries. Such illusions must be dispelled if the working class is to understand the magnitude of the threat it faces.

Following the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1976, the Spanish ruling elite sought to reintegrate the country into the world economy by rebuilding its links with Europe and re-establishing its traditional spheres of influence in Latin America and the Mediterranean. This policy came to fruition following the election of the Socialist Party government of Felipe Gonzalez in 1982 and the entry of Spain into the European Community in 1986 and the Western European Union, Europe’s defence arm, in 1988.

Spanish capitalism benefited from joining the EU, and was paid generous subsidies so that European trade could be regularised and a common currency established. In 2002 alone, EU subsidies to Spain amounted to 9 billion euros, or 1.3 percent of Spain’s GDP. This encouraged a belief amongst workers that the EU was essentially a benign influence on their lives.

All of this is now changing. The downfall of the USSR has signalled a major shift in the policy of US imperialism towards asserting its dominance within Europe and politically dividing the continent—primarily by utilising Britain, the eastern states such as Poland, and, to some degree, Italy and Portugal in order to curb German and French influence. This was epitomised by US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld’s reference to “new” and “old” Europe.

Correspondingly, the European bourgeoisie, headed by Germany and France, sees integration as bound up with emulating US economic and social conditions across the continent and expanding their influence on the world arena.

These changes are clearly expressed in the incorporation into the EU of 10 new member states, mostly impoverished, formerly Stalinist-ruled countries. Eastward expansion has become the spearhead for ending the subsidisation of industry, agriculture and infrastructure. Some 55 billion euros of EU structural and cohesion funds for the years 2000-2006 are to be cut.

Spain became a favoured investment location thanks to its low wages and EU subsidies. Now, it must compete against states with a collective population of 75 million where wage rates are as little as a seventh of those in Spain.

This is a recipe for wage cuts, stepped-up exploitation and job losses. Far from raising the living standards of the new entrants to the EU, the bourgeoisie will seek to lower living standards throughout Europe, not only to the level of the newest member states, but towards those of Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The EU constitution

These twin imperatives of the Americanisation of economic and social relations across the continent and measures to facilitate the growth of European militarism are embodied in the proposed EU constitution.

It is not a constitution based on the rights of European citizens, but one that seeks to enshrine the rights of capital and the ruling elites over the working masses, whilst regulating relations between member states and the EU in order to develop a common economic strategy. To this end, while the constitution codifies the right to freedom of movement for “services, goods and capital,” the rights of working people are to be strictly curtailed and subordinated to the requirements of big business. The concepts of “freedom, security and justice” are linked to a pledge to defend “a single market where competition is free and undistorted.”

The EU is assigned the responsibility for coordinating economic, employment and social policy across member states. The constitution gives it exclusive competence in a number of areas, including “the establishing of the competition rules necessary for the functioning of the internal market,” “monetary policy for the Member States whose currency is the euro” and a “common commercial policy.”

On one question, the constitution explicitly upholds the sovereign rights of member states: the utilisation of the police and military apparatus to maintain internal order. Article 1-5, section 1 states that the constitution “shall respect their [the member states’] essential State functions, including ensuring the territorial integrity of the State, maintaining law and order and safeguarding national security.”

The constitution further envisages the framing of a common military policy to establish Europe as a force independent of the US and NATO, replete with its own command structure and foreign minister. Article 1-16 of the proposed constitution insists that member states “shall actively and unreservedly support the Union’s common foreign and security policy” and “refrain from action contrary to the Union’s interests or likely to impair its effectiveness.”

For the United Socialist States of Europe

It is imperative that the Spanish and European working class deliver a decisive rebuff to the plans of their rulers. But a “no” vote does not imply political support for the opposition campaign in Spain led by the United Left (Izquierdas Unida—IU). IU leader Gaspar Llamazares complains that the constitution “doesn’t mirror the social and anti-war attitudes of the European people... It could have been an ideal opportunity for Europe to design its own social model, distinct from the North American one, but this constitution is way off the mark” and “leaves the European social and economic model in pieces.”

The notion that any European state or combination of states, resting on capitalist foundations, can provide the basis for a continuation of the post-war economic and social model is false. The extensive subsidies and universal welfare system that existed in Europe were made possible only by the postwar economic boom, which was led by the US. The development of globalised production has fatally undermined the ability of states to implement such policies. This is the driving force for the shift from old-style Keynesian economic policies to strategies based on deregulation and privatisation.

Nor can workers give any support to the agendas of the nationalist and regionalist parties in Spain, which put forward the programme of a “Europe of the regions” as a means of advancing their various separatist agendas. Most are supporting the referendum as a means of building direct relations with the European bourgeoisie, bypassing central government and attracting investment to their areas by offering the Catalan or Basque working class up as a source of cheap labour and luring the transnational corporations on the basis of a low-tax regime paid for through the elimination of social services.

Demands for national sovereignty or regional autonomy provide no alternative to the diktats from Brussels, but would only mean substituting numerous small cages for one central prison. The division of peoples along national, ethnic and religious lines can lead only to a Balkanisation of the continent, with the most terrible consequences.

A genuine alternative for Europe—one that upholds the interests of working people—is not possible without challenging the capitalist profit system. It requires the formation of a United Socialist States of Europe as the only basis for overcoming the division of the continent into rival nation states. This would allow the development of the productive forces of the entire continent under the democratic control of the working class, rather than big business and the financial elite.

A unified Europe would provide the working class with a powerful basis for opposing US imperialism. It would inspire not only the oppressed peoples of the world, but the American working class to take forward their own struggle against the warmongers in the White House and the Pentagon. To this end, determined opposition to the crude anti-Americanism of much of the Stalinist and social democratic left—which equates the American people with the Bush clique—is essential to the political reorientation of the European working class.

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