Basque separatist ETA offers unconditional cease-fire

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On September 16 the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna--Basque Homeland and Freedom) announced an indefinite and total cease-fire commencing on September 18. This is the first time in its 30 years of armed struggle that such an unconditional truce has been called.

ETA announced its decision in a four-page communique issued in two Basque newspapers, *Euskadi Informacion* and *Deia*. Its decision is said to have been heavily influenced by the Northern Ireland agreement. ETA makes reference to the Good Friday peace agreement in its statement and it is known that discreet meetings had been taking place between its political wing, Herri Batasuna (HB), and representatives of Sinn Fein.

El Pais, the main Spanish daily newspaper, stated in its "Opinion" column on September 17: "Apart from the deep and obvious differences, the development of the situation in Northern Ireland favours peace in the Basque country; the resort to violence, the bombs, the machine gunnings, have lost any halo of heroism; the activist image is today more associated with that of the criminal who placed the bomb in Omagh than with that of the patriot who defends an ideal. Perhaps those in ETA, or at least some of the leaders of its political arm, have understood that this will be their destiny if they don't stop in time: that they will no longer be the Basque IRA but the hated 'real' version of Omagh."

This shift by ETA is indeed motivated by a similar crisis to the one facing the IRA, with the growing alienation of its traditional supporters and the manifest failure of its armed struggle strategy. ETA was founded in 1959 during the Franco regime's suppression of freedoms and democratic rights. Its stated aim was independence for the Basque country from the central government. Over 800 people have been killed since then by the group, as well as scores of ETA supporters killed by the police and as a result of being blown up by their own bombs.

ETA began its armed struggle in 1961 with an attempt to derail a train transporting politicians. It claimed its first victim in 1968 with the killing of a secret police chief in San Sebastian. It enjoyed its biggest growth and popularity in the period leading up to Franco's death and the end of the fascist government in 1975. During that time ETA's chosen victims were always members of the government, the hated civil guard and the military. Its most notorious and popular action was the blowing up of the president in Franco's government, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco.

At a time when the Communist Party was advocating a conciliatory policy towards the fascists of "forgive and forget" and behind closed doors was negotiating a "peaceful transition" from fascism to democracy, many workers wrongly identified ETA's armed struggle as revolutionary and defended them. But its increasingly self-seeking regional policies, years of continuous indiscriminate killings of innocent people and the lack of any genuinely progressive social programme have transformed this support into widespread hostility.

The centre-right government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar of the Popular Party (PP), has taken advantage of this decline in support for the ETA by mounting a clampdown on the organisation. Last year it was able to mobilise 6 million people in demonstrations against the killing of a young PP Basque councillor by ETA. The mass marches were headed by Aznar's government, which includes direct descendants of Franco's regime, but they were supported by liberals, Greens, radicals, representatives of the church, the military, the civil guards, together with the Socialist Party (PSOE), the Communist Party and the trade

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unions.

Many cells of ETA have since been dismantled by the police, its financial network disrupted and the entire leadership of its political wing, HB, tried and imprisoned last December. It is believed there are 500 ETA supporters in Spanish jails. Last month HB's daily paper *Egin* was closed down and its editorial board jailed. This is the first time a newspaper has been banned in Spain since the post-Franco constitution of 1978.

The declaration of a cease-fire or any peace agreement that follows does not mean the end of sectarian politics in Spain. The country is divided into 17 autonomous regions, in which every kind of nationalist, regionalist and racist propaganda has been encouraged in order to divide the working class. ETA is seeking political recognition in order to continue its divisive politics by other means. Autonomous elections in the Basque province are due to begin on October 25. ETA hopes that by renouncing the armed struggle the way will be cleared for a combined front of Basque nationalist parties to take power.

The announcement of the truce has exacerbated government fears of the formation of a united nationalist block encompassing both the Basque parties and the Catalan nationalist Convergencia i Unio (CiU). A key role in developing such an alliance is being played by Izquierda Unida (IU), a Stalinist-led coalition of radical groups.

The IU has established the "Foro de Irlanda" (Ireland Forum) in an attempt to emulate the "peace process" that reconciled Sinn Fein and British imperialism. It is made up of IU plus 19 nationalist organisations and trade unions from the Basque country, including the main nationalists parties, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PN--Basque Nationalist Party) and Eusko Alkartasuna. In the face of accusations by the PP and the main opposition party, the PSOE, of breaking up the "democratic block", last weekend all these parties signed the "Declaracion de Lizarra" in Estella (Navarre). This has opened the road to debating ETA's demands without conditions, i.e., without any stated commitment by ETA to give up arms.

Aznar only heard of ETA's decision while visiting the president of Peru, Alberto Fujimori. He immediately read a statement to a joint press conference in Lima calling for all the "democratic forces to recover unity in the face of terrorism." He has also criticised his coalition partner, the main Basque party the PNV, for establishing relations with ETA's political wing, HB. Aznar is said to be anxious to meet with the leaders of all the parties represented in parliament in an attempt to re-establish some unity and consensus.

The PSOE, sensing a change in the wind, have criticised the PP's refusal to maintain friendly relations with the PNV. They have called on Aznar to reunite the "moderate democratic forces" in order to lead peace talks on the basis of all parties accepting the 1978 constitution and the presently existing autono mous status of the Basque country.

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