

Political instability in Catalan region of Spain following election losses for ruling party

Vicky Short

4 December 1999

The Catalan nationalist party of Jordi Pujol lost four seats and 150,000 votes in the October elections. The ruling *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union—CiU) in the autonomous Spanish province lost its overall majority in the regional parliament, the *Generalitat*. The new coalition government is an unstable affair, dependent on the votes of Catalan separatists.

The CiU under Pujol had controlled the Catalan government for nearly 20 years, since the adoption of the constitution that replaced Franco's regime and established the so-called *Nación de las Autonomías* (Nation of Autonomous Regions). Spain's right-wing ruling party, the *Partido Popular* (Popular Party—PP), also suffered big losses, dropping down from 17 to 12 seats, reflecting popular hostility to its national coalition that is supported by the CiU.

The main beneficiaries of the rising anti-government sentiment were the social democrats of the *Parti Socialista de Catalunya* (Catalan Socialist Party—PSC), sister party of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers Party—PSOE). The PSC campaigned on the type of “Third Way” rhetoric of Blair's Labour government in Britain, promising “change”, to concentrate on “education, education, education” and limited increases in social provision such as creating places in public nurseries. It increased its seats in the Catalan parliament from 34 to 52.

In total, the PSC won more votes than the CiU, but due to Spanish election procedures they received fewer seats. Their biggest vote came from the industrial areas around Barcelona, achieving an average of 48.17 percent against the 31 percent they obtained in 1995. In Santa Coloma the PSC achieved 59 percent, 20.2 percent up from 1995.

The gains of the PSC were also made at the expense

of the Stalinists, middle-class radicals and the Greens. The election coalition created by the Spanish Communist Party—*Izquierda Unida* (United Left—IU)—was launched in 1986 to bring together the CP, the Socialist Action Party (dissidents from the PSOE), leftist bourgeois nationalists, independents, Greens, and most of the middle-class radical groups. Its stated aim was to pressure the then PSOE government under Philippe Gonzalez to return to its past programme of social reforms.

The IU reached its highest election results in 1994, when support for the PSOE waned and it was returned as a minority government. Since then it has been in continual electoral decline. The IU's response has been to adapt to the right-wing turn of the PSOE, to the point where most of its diverse component forces are clamouring to unite with the PSOE, or at least form joint electoral platforms for the next general election.

In Catalonia internal disarray meant that the IU effectively stood two competing slates.

The main Catalan version of the IU, *Iniciativa per Catalunya* (Initiative for Catalonia—IC), in coalition with the Greens, got three seats. But its vote fell from 16 percent to 4.29 percent, having been overtaken by the *Partido Popular* and *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Catalonia Republican Left—ERC), a more overtly separatist party. The other IU faction standing, led by IU general co-ordinator Julio Anguita, did not manage to win a single seat.

The debacle sustained by the United Left in Catalonia follows hard on the heels of that suffered in last June's European, Municipal and Regional elections, where the IU's share of the vote went down from 13.44 percent to 5.77 percent. The number of IU seats in the European parliament diminished from nine to four; the number of councillors dropped from 3,493 to 2,297 and it lost 39

representatives in the regions. Under conditions where their programme is virtually indistinguishable from that of the PSC—and IU's main campaign slogan was to unite everybody to stop the right wing—workers drew the conclusion that it was best to vote for the PSC.

Disaffection was also expressed in an increase in abstentions, with a turnout of only 59.92 percent—3.7 percent less than in 1995.

To form a government and get Pujol re-elected as president of the *Generalitat*, the CiU needed 12 votes from another party in the Catalan parliament. Both the Popular Party and Esquerra Republicana each obtained 12 seats. An alliance with either would have given the CiU a one-seat majority government, making it extremely unstable. For weeks, the CiU prevaricated over which party it should make an alliance with. The PP demanded a guarantee that the CiU would not force a redrafting of the 1978 national constitution and the regional statutes. The ERC demanded policies leading towards full independence from central government. In the end, Pujol was elected president and formed a government with the support of the 12 PP deputies and the abstention of the 12 ERC members.

The deals struck with both parties have left a mass of contradictions. The CiU promised the PP not to reform the regional statutes in the direction of independence. This was in exchange for a further development of autonomous government within the existing national constitution; the elaboration of a new system of financing from central government and the creation of a Commission to draft a Catalan Civil Code. At the same time, they were forced to make concessions to the separatist ERC, including setting up a Catalan Institute of Cultural Industries and a new law guaranteeing the independent representation of Catalonia in the European Union and Unesco. The CiU also promised greater collaboration with the Valencia, Balearic Islands and Aragon regions. The ERC will hold the balance of power and will use this to push its separatist programme.

The electoral losses of the more moderate Catalan nationalists of the CiU, discredited by the experiences of government and their social policies, have sounded the alarm for the Spanish bourgeoisie. Many of its spokesmen fear the developing social and political polarisation, and particularly a resurgence of more openly separatist forces, which the traditional parties

will not be able to contain. Their answer is to whip up Spanish nationalism instead.

An editorial in the conservative newspaper *El Mundo* warned: “The old peripheral moderate nationalisms are adrift in Spain today. Until recently, leaving to one side some of their occasional strident noises—never too serious—the two major forces of Catalan and Basque nationalism, CiU and PNV, had played the very estimable role of restraining and channelling the centrifugal tendencies existing in their respective communities in a democratic way. Regardless of the higher or lower sympathy anyone had with their perspective, what is undeniable is their efforts to put it forward on the basis of coexistence and good sense. But the last period is bringing forward very disturbingly different tunes.”

The only thing that could bring the nationalists back to their senses, according to *El Mundo*, would be if the PP and the PSOE took things in hand and defended “our collective reality”, (i.e., the Spanish nation state). “But,” it continued, “with the general elections looming ahead and their own internal conflicts, they are hardly able to agree amongst themselves. We will all pay for it.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact