

# Spanish left agrees to electoral pact

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The Spanish Prime Minister, José María Aznar, leader of the right-wing Popular Party (PP), last month announced early general elections for March 12. Aznar took power from the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) in the summer of 1996. About 90 parties have presented lists of candidates to the different Provincial Electoral Councils.

The early election call is due to the political tensions faced by the Aznar government. These include the decision by the Basque nationalist organisation ETA to end its cease-fire and disputes within the Spanish establishment over the extradition of former Chilean dictator, General Pinochet. There are also indications of an economic downturn and rising inflation, to which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has responded with calls for cuts in public spending.

Aznar also faces increased social tensions, due to the rise in precarious employment and opposition to the privatisation of the welfare state. Some disputes, such as those in the shipyards, are developing into regular confrontations with the police, involving occupations and roadblocks. So extensive is labour casualisation on the docks that at Nagisa shipyard in the north, 231 jobs out of 365 are on temporary contracts.

Aznar's election programme centres on tax reductions for the rich, "modernisation" of the welfare state and law and order. It pledges to cut the public debt in half by the year 2010 and create full employment. This will be achieved, the manifesto states, through the "flexibility of contracts and hours in part-time work, which facilitates the incorporation of women into the world of work and the harmonisation of working and family life". It also proposes to "voluntarily" delay the age of retirement.

Aznar's path to power was prepared by the pro-business policies of the previous PSOE government of Felipe Gonzalez, which ruled for 14 years following the completion of the so-called "peaceful transition" from fascism to democracy following the end of the Franco dictatorship. PSOE General Secretary Joaquin Almunia

told a gathering of employers a few days ago: "We were the ones that liberalised and privatised. Because we believed in it. The only thing we regret is not to have known how to theorise it the way [British Labour Party leader] Tony Blair did."

The PSOE has formed an election pact with the United Left (IU)—a coalition of PSOE dissidents, liberals, nationalists, ex-radicals and the Greens—led by the Spanish Communist Party. The PSOE/IU say that their electoral pact is modelled on the "French plural left". Santiago Carrillo, ex-leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), commented: "The pact is going to appeal to millions of Spaniards who were disillusioned with politics." The two parties estimate that around 2 million people who voted for the left now abstain in elections.

It is hard to see how such a bloc will appeal to the abstainers, many of whom formerly supported the IU out of disgust with the PSOE's right-wing policies. The PSOE's policies of privatisation, relaxation of labour laws that facilitated the sacking and disciplining of workers, and promotion of part-time and casual jobs had already disillusioned many of their supporters. So too had the imprisonment for corruption of several high-level PSOE government officials and ministers.

In 1994, when the PSOE was returned to power as a minority government, the IU achieved its highest ever result in the general election. Since then the IU has steadily adapted its policies to those of the PSOE and has also lost credibility and support. The IU has now only a handful of seats in parliament. Calls for an electoral coalition were made last July by IU branches in Madrid, Aragón and Valencia who feared the alternative was the collapse and disappearance of their organisation. The former opponents of the PSOE hope now to be its partner in government. At the last general elections in 1996 the combined votes for both organisations was 2.5 million larger than that for Aznar's PP.

Spain's electoral system is complex, having developed empirically from 1977. There is a "two-tier" system of proportional representation, combining elections at the

provincial level with national party lists, as well as a “weighting” system to make allowance for demographic and regional differences. To complicate matters further, both the number of seats and the election system for the Senate, which is a Chamber of Territorial Representation, are completely different from those that apply to Congress. This provides the source for varied electoral alliances that can differ from one province and region to another.

Following Aznar's announcement of the election, hurried negotiations were organised between Almunia and IU leader Francisco Frutos. The two toyed with the idea of a full electoral coalition, but it was impossible to constitute the organisation, statutes, acronyms, symbols, etc., in the few days available before the close of registration.

The PSOE then proposed that the IU withdraw its candidates from 34 constituencies. These were constituencies where it was calculated IU's vote was not enough to give them a seat in Congress, but would have given the PSOE enough votes to beat the PP. In face of IU members' objections that this would amount to the complete liquidation of their party, the PSOE reduced the number to 14 and later to nine. IU leaders were unable to push this through, but Frutos has stated that he will not personally campaign in any of the nine constituencies and local IU branches have supported this stance, effectively leaving the field clear for the PSOE.

On February 6, an agreement was finally reached regarding candidates to the Senate. This will be applied in 27 of the 30 provinces proposed by PSOE. No agreement could be obtained from the provinces of Galicia, Cantabria or the Canary Islands. Other agreements will be improvised in the course of the campaign. In exchange, the PSOE will open their electoral lists to leading members of IU in the provinces in which the PP has three parliamentary seats and the PSOE one. PSOE and IU united hope to reverse the position to two PSOE seats, one IU and one PP. The advantage for IU is that it would be able to form its own parliamentary group in the Senate, something it has never been able to do.

The first action of the leaders of the coalition was to consult with the trade union leaders and secure their support, which they readily gave. The coalition partners also hope to push to the “background the privileged role that the [Catalan and Basque] nationalist parties have enjoyed in Spanish politics since 1993”, since when they have served as coalition government partners for both the PSOE and PP.

Regardless of what tactical arrangements are concocted, the pact is a programmatic endorsement of the PSOE's right-wing agenda, with the IU agreeing to liquidate the little that remained of its reformist programme. The IU has ditched its demand for Spain's withdrawal from NATO, to use Europe's “reserve” 0.7 percent of GNP to help poor countries, abolish company's based on temporary work (ETTs) and renationalise privatised industries. It has also abandoned its demands for specific rises in pensions and the minimum wage.

The only concession that the IU can boast to have received in return from the PSOE is an agreement to examine legal measures to reduce the working week to 35 hours. Almunia, meeting with Catalan representatives of big business on February 16, assured them that a government presided over by him would not impose a legal 35-hour week. He said he would not even have considered a pact with IU if it had not been on the basis of implementing the programme of the PSOE.

Further electoral agreements are being sought by the PSOE with the Catalan and Basque nationalists. At the same time Almunia emphasised that “in the matter of peace (against terrorism), the PSOE will back the government”. Only a few weeks ago, after ETA's resumption of bombings, both the PSOE and IU joined in demonstrations alongside the PP, the armed forces, police, the church and employers' organisations to support the government's clamp-down against the separatists.



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