

Spanish Socialist Party elects "New Way" representative as general secretary

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At its 35th congress last weekend, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) elected José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as its new leader. A representative of the recently formed *Nueva Vía* (New Way) current, Zapatero became the fourth general secretary of the party in as many years, since the resignation of its longstanding leader and ex-prime minister Felipe Gonzalez in 1997.

Candidates standing for the post included: Zapatero; José Bono, the head of the Castilla-La Mancha regional government; and Euro MP Rosa Díez Matilde Fernandez, a former minister, representing the left-wing faction of Alfonso Guerra. Zapatero was chosen by the smallest of majorities, just 9 votes above José Bono, with a total 41 percent of the vote of the 1,000 delegates.

Once Zapatero was selected he picked the line-up of his executive. In a second round of voting, both he and his team were endorsed, this time winning over 90 percent. While this was heralded as demonstrating the new unity of the party, the first round vote had indicated significant divisions.

The executive was trimmed down from the previous figure of 33 to 25. Twenty of these posts selected by Zapatero come from the lower ranks of the party and exclude many veterans and those considered to be on the left wing. The average age of the core leadership is 39.9. Many were not even born when the dictator Franco died in 1975. Most are young lawyers and come from the regional governments. Only three, including Zapatero, come from the last executive, which resigned en masse together with the then General Secretary Joaquín Almunia, following the catastrophic defeat at the March 12 general elections at the hands of Prime Minister Aznar's right-wing Popular Party (PP).

Some of the old leaders were then elected on to the

newly formed Federal Committee, which will be the highest party organ between congresses and will meet every three months. These include several safe pairs of hands, such as Pasqual Maragall, leader of the Catalan delegation that voted for Zapatero; Javier Solana, ex-secretary general of NATO; and Manuel Chavez, leader of the Andalusian delegation and newly elected president of the PSOE, who has kept the party together since March.

The executive team was chosen mostly from people who joined Zapatero in setting up the *Nueva Vía* current, which claims to be untainted by the failures of the old guard. "New Way"—a combination of German Social Democratic Party leader Gerhard Schroeder's "New Centre" and British Labour Party leader Tony Blair's "Third Way"—was set up at the end of March immediately after the general elections. Its members set themselves the task of transforming the PSOE along the lines of New Labour in Britain by abandoning any formal commitment to social reformist policies.

That such an outfit has been able to establish itself as the party leadership in just three months, ousting virtually the entire leadership of a decades-old party with scarcely a murmur of opposition, points to the bankruptcy of the PSOE. The party lost the last elections, in spite of a last minute pact struck with the Communist Party-led Izquierda Unida (United Left), because of widespread abstentions amongst its working class supporters alienated by its pro-business policies.

The PSOE's answer is to head ever further to the right, in an effort to capture the electoral base of the PP and win the backing of big business. Zapatero stands for economic deregulation, institutional reforms and increased devolution, cutting employers' taxes, reducing expenditure on social welfare and privatising pensions.

He has already been dubbed “the Spanish Blair”, an unfortunate epithet given the loss of popularity of his British counterpart. Although he has been in the PSOE for 20 years and an MP since 1986, his name had never hit the headlines. A lawyer, whom the Spanish daily *El Mundo* described as “cold, astute and professional,” he comes from a working class mining area. His father was a Captain in the Republican Army and was shot by Franco in 1936. This served him well in his ascent through the party's ranks in the early years. But he is best known for what one Spanish newspaper called having “a strategy always open to negotiation and forming alliances and pacts with anybody”. In plain words, he is a crass opportunist, lacking in principles.



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