

Basque separatists step up terrorist activities

Peter Norden
25 August 2000

The Basque separatist organization ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* —Basque Country and Liberty) has dramatically increased its terrorist activities throughout Spain.

Since announcing the end of its ceasefire a good nine months ago, ETA has killed eleven people and injured several more in a series of terrorist attacks. The victims include members of the military and the Guardia Civil, a journalist working for the conservative daily newspaper *El Mundo*, local politicians from the governing Popular Party (PP), the former Socialist prefect of the Basque province of Guipuzcoa, Ramón Jauregui, and the president of the Guipuzcoa Employers Federation, Korda Uranga.

On August 7, four men assumed to be ETA members were killed when explosives they were transporting in their car ignited. One of them was the head of the so-called “Vizcaya Commando”, Francisco Rementeria.

ETA returned to its terrorist strategy after announcing the end of a 14-month cease-fire at the end of last year. During the cease-fire the organization had attempted to negotiate with the Aznar government on increased autonomy for the Basque Country and, at the same time, to strengthen its political standing within Basque bourgeois circles.

In fact, scarcely any negotiating took place. Aznar was only willing to discuss the transfer of a few ETA prisoners to Basque jails and the disarming of the organization. Under no circumstances was the government prepared to grant ETA more influence in Basque politics— let alone even contemplate the group's maximum demand of state independence and unification of all Basque provinces, including three provinces in France.

On the contrary, Aznar never left any doubts as to his determination to solve the Basque question by police methods, and stepped up the hounding of ETA members during this period. Since ETA had apparently used the ceasefire period to improve its logistics and stock up explosives and weapons, it was only a matter of time before violence would break out again.

The self-induced death of the four ETA members in Bilbao graphically illustrates the political blind alley into which ETA has maneuvered itself.

ETA was founded on July 31, 1959 by a few Basque students and intellectuals. Its origins were in the student organization EKN (“Act”). The establishment of ETA was a reaction to the politics of the traditional Basque nationalist party PNV, which attempted to further the interests of the wealthy Basque bourgeoisie in agreement with the fascist Franco dictatorship. Despite the political, economic and cultural suppression of all things Basque under Franco, the social interests of the Basque bourgeoisie were closely linked to those of the Spanish bourgeoisie. The traditional

sales markets of the heavy industry that flourished around Bilbao and San Sebastian during the 1950s and 1960s were located in Spain. Also, there was a massive influx of workers from Castile, Extremadura and Andalusia who found low-wage work in the Basque industrial centers.

ETA attracted a substantial following in the middle and lower strata of Basque society during the 1960s. Numerous students, small farmers, fishermen and small businessmen turned to ETA because the PNV's orientation towards the Basque financial and economic oligarchy no longer corresponded to their own social interests. Also, the continuously increasing political and cultural repression by the Franco dictatorship gained ETA support in large sections of the population, particularly in the agrarian regions of Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa.

As part of the *transición*, the “transition to democracy” that followed Franco's death, the so-called “Statute of Guernica” was passed on July 19, 1979. This statute granted the Basque Country relatively extensive autonomy rights. The Spanish government of that time headed by Felipe González of the Socialist Party (PSOE) granted the Basques their own parliament, a regional police and judicial system and extensive financial autonomy. Also, the Basque language (Euskera), which had been forbidden under Franco, was set on an equal footing with Spanish. An additional clause entitles the “Basque people” to demand back other “historical rights” within the framework of the Spanish constitution.

Although the Spanish constitution of 1978 explicitly does not provide for the independence of the Basque Country, this clause is interpreted by the nationalists, including the PNV, as meaning that the uppermost political objective must be the complete national independence of the Basque Country. It was against this backdrop that ETA continued its strategy of individual terrorism during the *transición* period, as well.

The Socialist government under Felipe González reacted by giving more powers and weapons to the police and by intensifying repression. It was during this period that the so-called GAL scandal took place. Under the direct responsibility of González, special units called the *Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación* (GAL), which essentially were para-military death squads, were set up from 1983 to 1987. The GAL units hunted down ETA members, carried out assassinations and subjected captives to horrific torture. They killed at least 28 ETA members.

When it emerged, this scandal became one of the main reasons for the PSOE's “historic” election defeat in 1996. For the first time since the end of the Franco dictatorship, the right-wing PP headed by José Maria Aznar, containing in its ranks numerous former

vassals of the Franco regime, assumed power. Aznar continued the anti-ETA policy of his predecessors by attempting to solve the Basque question through police suppression.

By the late 1990s ETA had lost most of its support in broad sections of the population, and important ETA commandos had been smashed by the police. As a result, the organization changed its strategy. Together with other nationalist parties, including the PNV, the parliamentary representation of ETA, EH (*Euskal Herriarrok* — We Basque Citizens”), passed the so-called “Treaty of Lizarra” in the fall of 1998. This declaration contained the obligation to hold open, but exclusively Basque negotiations on the political future of the Basque Country. In connection with the signing of this treaty, ETA announced an unlimited, unconditional ceasefire.

Once the last remaining illusions regarding Aznar's willingness to negotiate Basque independence had disappeared, the nationalist parties declared in the fall of 1999 that the *Statute of Guernica* was revoked, since an autonomy arrangement would mean subordination to the Spanish central state. Following this, ETA announced the end of its ceasefire in November 1999.

The eleven deaths so far, the numerous injured persons and the so-called “street struggle” (*kale borroka*) in the Basque towns and cities have, above all, had two effects: the strengthening of the police apparatus and the complete joining of forces of nearly all political parties, trade unions and other social groups under the sanctimonious banner of the “fight against terrorism”.

Police presence was substantially increased in all parts of the country, particularly in the Basque Country itself, in Madrid and in the holiday resort areas on the Mediterranean coast and in Andalusia. Car and routine identity checks were intensified. At the beginning of August, the biggest police union started calling for an “integrated plan” to combat terrorism involving cooperation between the leading experts in the national police, the *Guardia Civil*, the Basque police *Ertzaintza* and the secret services.

While after nearly every new attack hundreds of thousands of people come onto the streets to demonstrate against ETA (after the assassination of PP local politician Carpena, 300,000 people demonstrated in Malaga, which has a population of 500,000), the government and the opposition are in agreement on the approach to the Basque question—and on many other issues besides that.

It is true that there are some minor differences between the PP and the PSOE, for instance on the question of whether the continuing terrorism of the ETA should be debated in parliament with the PNV. The PP insists that the PNV first formally withdraws from the *Treaty of Lizarra*, while the PSOE is prepared to have a debate with the other nationalist parties without the PNV taking this formal step. But there are no differences with respect to the ETA question.

In an interview with the newspaper *El País*, the new PSOE secretary general José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero said that he intends to lead a constructive opposition and has no problems with being in agreement with the government. This, said Zapatero, applies particularly to such important issues as the fight against terrorism, the regulation of immigration and the pending reform of the constitution. At a commemorative assembly for Juan Maria Jauregui on July 31, Zapatero insisted on observing the so-called

“unity of all democrats” and declared that his party will increase its level of cooperation and loyal relations with the government.

ETA's strategy also plays into the hands of the Aznar government with respect to the government's ongoing dismantling of the social welfare system. Although the PP gained a comfortable absolute majority at the latest parliamentary elections, it is seeking the support of the opposition and the trade unions for its plans for economic liberalization, deregulation of the labor market, the opening up of Spain's economy for foreign investors, the control of national debt, the “reform of the welfare state” and the increase of military expenditure.

The entire Spanish working class is affected by these changes, and there has been no lack of social struggle against this development over the past months. There were large demonstrations by students and university professors in Barcelona demanding the preservation and improvement of the public education system; construction workers throughout Spain went on strike against the worsening of work conditions, the high-handedness of employers and the increase in fatal construction site accidents; from March to June there was a series of walkouts by employees of the RENFE railroad corporation demanding higher wages and better work conditions; dockers, transportation workers, farm workers and farmers repeatedly went on strike over the past months in protest against the cutting of the subsidies and allowances they need in order to survive; there was a 7-day strike for higher wages by the ground personnel of Tenerife airport; etc.

Under the cover of the current anti-ETA campaign Aznar will push forward the “modernization” of the Spanish economy and society, and use the aid of the opposition and the trade unions to keep the mounting protests against this under control. In April of last year, only three weeks after having been re-elected, Aznar met with the trade union leaders Gutierrez of the Stalinist *CCOO* (*Comisiones Obreras*) union and Candido Mendez of the PSOE-affiliated *UGT*, and with representatives of the Employers Federation. The formal subject of these meetings was how to achieve full employment and secure existing jobs. But the real objective of the talks was to reduce the cost of firing workers, decentralize collective wage bargaining and reduce unemployment relief.

ETA is doing the Spanish workers an enormous disservice in their social and political struggles, and is offering its own supporters and sympathizers no more than a political blind alley paved with pathetic political phrases. On August 12, about 5,000 people gathered at a memorial assembly for the ETA members killed on August 7. The speaker of ETA's political arm *Herri Batasuna*, Otegi, called the four ETA fighters killed in the car explosion “patriots” who had given their lives for a just cause, and compared ETA's fight with the *Intifada*, the liberation struggle of the Palestinians against Israeli occupation.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact