

Spain: Aznar's Popular Party faces electoral rout

Paul Stuart**17 May 2003**

The Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar faces a devastating defeat in Spanish local and regional election on May 25. Whatever the result, Aznar says he does not intend to stand in national elections scheduled for early next year.

Aznar along with Britain's Tony Blair was the most outspoken supporter of the war in Iraq. He hoped the war would transform him from a minor European statesman to a world class player and make Spain—as one Spanish international relations expert declared—"feel part of the core group of nations that lead the world."

His intention was not only to carve out a niche for Spain on the global stage. It was also to turn the attention of the Spanish population away from the domestic economic crisis. This was a serious miscalculation. Aznar did not foresee that the Spanish working class would make the connection between his domestic and foreign policy and mount one of the most explosive political offensives by the working class in recent European history. Opinion polls suggested over 80 percent of the population opposed the war and massive demonstrations swept across the country.

The fate of the PP and Aznar now hangs in the balance.

Aznar personally faces two hundred civil cases charging him with supporting the war without the authority of the Spanish parliament. Last month seven Spanish human shields returning from Iraq detailed 50 cases of attacks on the Iraqi civilian population. Spokesperson Carlos Varea added, "We hope these documents can help build a case to charge Jose Maria Aznar's government with collaborating in war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Political conflict in the Spanish ruling class has

erupted as a consequence of Aznar's "coalition" with the US. Several leading figures have resigned from the PP, including Aznar's mentor and the ideological leader of the party Felix Pastor. Pastor was the architect of the PP's return to office after 14 years of Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) rule and now fears his hard work is in ruins. He declared, "The Spanish people have the right to expect their governments to keep them away from all wars. Bush's policies are so detestable that we should keep well away."

He warned of the consequences of Aznar's policies saying, "The idea of a moderate, humanitarian, Christian Peoples Party has been blown away."

The conflicts in the Spanish ruling class have nothing to do with a progressive struggle against US militarism. It is an attempt by right-wing ideologues who emerged from the fetid swamp of Francoite fascism to steer the election campaign away from the raging war debate to Spanish domestic politics. But this is hardly safe ground for Aznar. It is the widespread public hostility to the free market policies imposed over the last 25 years by the PSOE and the PP that helped fuel the massive antiwar protests. These policies have transformed Spain into a cheap labour, part-time economy with high levels of unemployment. When Aznar recently introduced new labour laws to force the unemployed to accept jobs miles from their homes, a general strike swept the country that made him temporarily back down.

In response to the mass opposition the Iraq war has provoked in Spain, Aznar has made a virtue out of his total isolation. He has compared himself to the British wartime leader Winston Churchill. He reported at a recent press conference with Blair, "Ever since I was small I learnt from a British prime minister whose portrait I saw coming up the stairs, Winston Churchill,

that one has to be up to one's responsibilities and I think that is something citizens appreciate."

The invocation of Churchill is based on an historical falsification. In the period leading up to World War II, Churchill campaigned for war against German aggression in opposition to those in the British ruling class who wanted to appease Hitler—personified in the figure of Conservative Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Churchill used mass popular sentiment in his campaign to shift British imperialist foreign policy. In the Iraq war it was Aznar, Blair and Bush who were the aggressors.

True to form, Aznar's policies are more reminiscent of Franco who leaned on German military might to crush the revolutionary movement of the Spanish working class in the 1936-1939 Civil War. Under conditions of growing hostility and opposition to the PP, Aznar leans on the Bush administration to impose further attacks on living standards and step up political repression.

To curry favour with Bush, Aznar has committed 1,500 troops to the US-led military occupation force in Iraq. Last month the PP organised a protest in Madrid against the imprisonment of opposition figures by the Cuban courts. It was meant for international consumption particularly in Washington, but also served as a provocation against domestic opponents. Aznar launched an attack on the PSOE and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) led United Left coalition for not participating and accused them of supporting Saddam Hussein and Castro against the "democratic world".

Aznar has threatened to bring in legislation making it illegal to oppose the foreign policy of the government—after Javier Madrazo, Basque regional leader of the United Left, called Aznar a "terrorist like those of ETA," the Basque separatist organisation. The Basque Supreme Court will decide if Madrazo's statement warrants a formal investigation that could result in a stiff prison sentence.

On May 5 Aznar secured a deal with Bush placing the Basque separatist party, Batasuna, on Washington's list of terrorist organisations following its ban last year amid accusations of links with ETA. On the same day the Spanish Supreme Court banned 242 political groups from contesting this month's elections in the Basque region, claiming Batasuna was trying to "sneak back"

into politics.



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