Spain: Socialist Party government moves to rehabilitate Francoite fascists

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20 October 2004

Former members of the Francoite fascist Blue Division were invited to this year's National Day military parade by Spain's recently elected Socialist Party (PSOE) government. This is an unprecedented political act since Spain became a parliamentary monarchy at the death of the dictator General Franco in 1975. The fascist veterans were given a place of pride as they solemnly followed King Juan Carlos to lay a wreath for all those who died "for Spain".

PSOE Prime Minister Jose Zapatero also tried to organise a fly-past of single-engine military planes from the fascist era, but was prevented by the civil aviation authority on safety grounds. Government ministers described the proposal as a "tribute" to Spain's military past.

The military parade marks the anniversary of Christopher Columbus reaching the "New World". For the Spanish ruling classes, the day has historically symbolised the rise of Spain as a colonial power.

This year, the PSOE government dedicated the parade to a public display of "national reconciliation". As a counterweight to the representatives of the fascist Blue Division, republicans who had fought with the French Leclerc Division, which liberated Paris from the Nazis, were invited to march alongside them.

In addition to the fascist veterans, the PSOE invited disparate political organisations to the military parade, including victims of the Basque separatist ETA's bombing campaigns, relatives of victims of the March 11, 2004 bombings in Madrid, and relatives of soldiers killed in the Yak 42 plane crash. The Socialist Party involved itself in each campaign to ensure that its political implications did not lead to a confrontation between the working class and the former government of Jose Maria Aznar, whose Popular Party has its origins in the Francoite forces.

Troops from several Latin American countries, where the Socialist Party is working to rekindle its colonial ambitions, were also invited. The Socialist Party decided to strike off the guest list a contingent of United States Marines that had participated in the annual parade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In their stead a group of French soldiers were invited to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Paris from the Nazis.

The decision not to invite US troops was a calculated snub. At last year's parade, Zapatero refused to stand when the US contingent passed the dignitaries' box. He campaigned during the elections for the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq and did so once he took office, urging other countries to follow his example.

The attempt to rehabilitate the fascists—the very forces who murdered the cream of the Spanish working class in the civil war of 1936-1939 that followed Franco's coup—demonstrates that the political perspective underlying Zapatero's posture of anti-Americanism and his withdrawal of troops from Iraq in no way constitutes a principled opposition to imperialism or militarism. What is involved is a reorientation of Spanish nationalist foreign policy.

Zapatero's first major act as prime minister was to fly to Germany and France to forge a new axis for Spanish foreign policy, centred on efforts to mobilise an alliance of European imperialist powers as a counterweight to US imperialism. In line with this, his invitation to ex-members of the Blue Division is an appeal to the most reactionary sections of the national bourgeoisie, combined with an attempt to demobilise the working class, using saccharine appeals for national unity and forgiveness.

The Blue Division was no ordinary force. It was formed secretly by Franco during the first period of the Nazis' invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Franco wanted to create a small force to join Hitler's "victorious" march on Moscow, from which he hoped to profit.

Volunteers were sought and tens of thousands from Franco's Falange signed up. The Falange was a fascist political organisation, founded in 1933 by Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, which constituted the sole legal party in Spain between 1939 and 1975. It spearheaded the mass murder of Spanish Socialist Party members, as well as members of the Communist Party, Anarchists, members of the centrist Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), Trotskyists and others affiliated with workers' organisations.

At the end of the civil war in 1939, when Franco's army defeated the Popular Front government dominated by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, these organisations were banned and its members rounded up. Close to 200,000 were murdered and 500,000 imprisoned in concentration camps

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and used as slave labour.

One of the most prominent veterans of the Blue Division, Angel Salamanca, 84, attended the National Day march wearing a tie clasp insignia that includes the Nazi Iron Cross. He described the Nazi Holocaust as mere “atrocities,” and declared he had gone to the USSR not to fight for Hitler but to “fight communism”. Franco’s programme, he said, was for “national reconciliation”—a reconciliation that was to be achieved by liquidating the mass workers’ parties and trade unions. “The people of Spain are worth far more together ... It happened a long time ago, and those resentments have to be eradicated,” he declared.

The Blue Division participated in some of the worst acts of barbarism committed by the German army in the Soviet Union. Soon after Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, Franco offered Spanish help in return for first claims on former Spanish colonial possessions. After Hitler accepted, Franco sent 19,000 volunteers to the Eastern Front, joining the Wehrmacht’s 250th Infantry division. They participated in the horrific siege of Leningrad and, according to Nazi’s officers, served with “distinction”.

Contrary to Salamanca’s attempts to distance the Blue Division from Nazi Germany, on August 20, 1941 they swore an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler. After suffering heavy casualties and the near-collapse of Spain’s military presence, Franco recalled the force in 1943. But 3,000 disobeyed his orders and remained in the German army, attached to the Waffen SS. They were renamed the Blue Legion. Approximately 140 of this legion were attached to the 11th SS Division Nordland, and fought to the bitter end to defend Berlin from the Soviet Red Army offensive.

This year’s military parade was a glorification of all that is nationalistic and reactionary in Spanish society, past and present. Salamanca and other fascist veterans felt sufficiently emboldened not only to proudly display their medals for service on the Eastern Front, replete with swastikas, but also to demand that their members be given free access into the event. Although they were turned down, the Socialist Party extended these forces and their modern heirs a free pass back into the mainstream of political life.

The PSOE government defended Salamanca. Interior Minister Bono declared that he had invited him in order to honour all those Spaniards who fought for what they believed in. Asked to comment on this unprecedented decision, Bono declared, “Look, I’m a socialist. I fought against Franco. I don’t support the Blue Division, but I do support Spain and this is part of Spanish history. On National Day one should be generous. And think about it—if you left out all Spaniards you may not agree with—the Conquistadors, the Carlists and the fascists—you wouldn’t have many people left. It’s all Spain.”

The PSOE’s rehabilitation of Franco’s thugs flows from its entire history of betrayals and its defence of the capitalist order. During the civil war of 1936-1939, the Socialist Party virulently opposed the revolutionary struggles of the working class. When in positions of power in the 1930s, it unhesitatingly used troops to crush workers’ and peasants’ struggles. After the Socialist Party was illegalised under Franco’s dictatorship, it spent its exile in a state of crisis, hoping for a “democratisation” of Franco’s rule and actively working towards it.

Between the fall of Franco’s rule in 1975 and the PSOE taking power in 1982, the party signed a pact with Franco’s state representatives known as “Forgive and Forget”. Backed by the Stalinist Communist Party, this was a power sharing agreement with the representatives of Franco’s state. The government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Felipe Gonzales, 1982-1996, was marked by an abandonment of even a formal commitment to socialism and a systematic attack on the living standards of the working class.

On taking office in 1982, the Socialist Party worked closely with Francoite fascists in the military to form death squads to crush the Basque separatist group ETA. The death squads were responsible for a series of assassinations and a reign of terror throughout the Basque region.

In Paddy Woodworth’s critical study of the first post-Franco government of the Socialist Party, *Dirty War, Clean Hands, ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy*, Woodworth explains that Spain’s transition to “democracy” was regarded as an exemplary model. In its attempts to destroy the ETA, Gonzales’ administration adopted terror tactics similar to those utilized by the Franco dictatorship. To this day, the Socialist Party denies any knowledge of these death squads, despite ample evidence to the contrary.

Inviting Franco’s Blue Division to participate in the National Day parade sends a clear political message. Zapatero’s gesture of friendship to Franco’s most ideologically committed supporters is a sign that the Socialist Party is seeking to mobilise extreme right-wing layers against the working class.

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