

Spain: record abstention in referendum on European Union constitution

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The European Union's (EU's) proposed new constitution passed its first hurdle on February 20 in Spain's referendum, with an overwhelming majority of voters supporting the constitution. But the result was something of pyrrhic victory for Spain's official parties and much of Europe's ruling elites, as fewer than half of those able to vote participated in the referendum—the lowest electoral turnout since the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Of the 42 percent of eligible voters who took part, 77 percent voted for the new constitution, with 17 percent against, and 6 percent returning spoilt ballots.

The referendum was the first in a series of European polls to be held over the next 18 months on the constitutional treaty, which is aimed at consolidating the EU as an economic and military bloc against its major rivals, particularly the United States.

The treaty must be ratified by all 25 EU member states to become law. Ten states are to hold referendums on the issue, with the remainder leaving the matter to a parliamentary vote. The treaty has already been ratified in this manner by Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia.

Prior to the referendum, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a statement calling for rejection of the EU constitution and advancing an independent working class alternative, based on the unification of Europe on socialist foundations. [See "Vote 'no' in Spanish referendum on European Union constitution"]

Since it joined the EU in 1986, Spain has been a major beneficiary of European funds and subsidies. As such, it is considered the country most supportive of the EU project, a major reason why Europe's ruling elites considered it the best place to start a continent-wide campaign in favour of the new constitution.

Although billed as an exercise in popular, democratic

consultation, the campaign around the referendum was an entirely one-sided affair. Both the ruling Socialist Party and the opposition right-wing Popular Party are fully committed to the treaty, as are most of the regional and nationalist parties.

Millions were spent on a glitzy campaign using footballers, actors and other celebrities to proclaim the virtue of a "yes" vote. The purpose of this campaign was to deaden critical faculties and ensure the utmost confusion over the fundamental issues raised by the constitutional treaty.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's unseemly rush to hold a referendum, barely four months after it was officially agreed by the EU member states, was itself an attempt to steamroll public support behind the treaty by curtailing any serious discussion or scrutiny of its 448 articles. Opinion polls found that by the end of the referendum campaign, some nine out of ten Spaniards still did not know what the EU constitution consisted of.

Even then, the Spanish bourgeoisie built in a fail-safe, should they prove unable to swing public opinion. The referendum was deemed a "consultative" affair and was not legally binding, so if the ballot did not deliver the desired result, the treaty could be pushed through a supportive parliament regardless.

This charade is made necessary by the character of the constitution itself. The treaty does not provide for a progressive, democratic unification of the continent. Rather, it is aimed at legitimising the efforts of European finance capital and the major transnational corporations to consolidate a single, "free trade" market on the continent, in order to mount an economic challenge to the US, China and Asia.

The price for this is being paid by working people across Europe. As all restrictions on capital are

eliminated, and each national government is held accountable for cutting taxes and public spending, welfare provision—including decent health care and pension rights—is being ruthlessly dismantled.

The EU's expansion to the east—incorporating the impoverished, mainly former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe—has greatly facilitated this process, by establishing ever-lower benchmarks for wages and conditions, with the aim of forcing workers across the continent to compete against one another.

This is accompanied by the turn towards militarism. The US policy of using military force to establish global American hegemony threatens the imperialist interests of Europe's major powers and is spurring their own efforts to build up an independent military capability, and thus ensure their share in a new colonial-style plunder of the world.

The EU treaty enshrines these economic and military objectives, thereby creating a legal basis for enforcing the diktats of European capital against the working class and reviving neo-colonialism and militarism by Europe's great powers.

By placing itself in the forefront of the campaign for the new treaty, the Spanish government had hoped to carve a major role for itself in this offensive. Ever since it was brought to power last year on the backs of a mass movement against the Iraq war, the Zapatero government has sought to exploit popular opposition to US imperialism as a means of repositioning Spain at the centre of a more assertive agenda on the part of the European bourgeoisie.

Following the referendum result, Zapatero claimed, "Today we Spaniards made European history because our vote is a message directed to the rest of Europe's citizens, who were waiting eagerly for our response."

In reality, the vote indicated the gulf between the mass of working people in Spain and the ruling elite. Despite almost complete unanimity across the official political spectrum and in the media, only two of out five people turned out to endorse the treaty. Even whilst the heads of EU states lined up to congratulate Zapatero on securing a "yes" vote, there was no disguising the fact that the record levels of abstention had generated grave concern. France and the Netherlands are due to hold referenda in the spring, and the outcome is far less certain than in Spain, whilst referendums next year in Britain and the Czech

Republic are even less assured.

The Spanish result has confirmed that the efforts by Europe's ruling elites to try to secure even the trappings of a popular mandate for a treaty that is predicated on undermining the democratic rights and social concerns of working people is an uphill struggle.

From the standpoint of the independent interests of the working class, however, the more fundamental lesson from the referendum is the absence of any progressive alternative within the framework of bourgeois politics and the existing mass parties to the European ruling elite's big-business agenda.

Alienation and enmity towards the EU do not in themselves provide the foundations for the necessary efforts by the working class across Europe to assert their own class interests. The democratic and harmonious unification of the continent is a vital necessity. By overcoming Europe's division into a myriad of competing nation states, the way would be cleared for utilising the enormous technical, cultural and material resources of the continent so as to put an end to all forms of poverty and backwardness.

But this can only be achieved by the European working class in an irreconcilable struggle against big business and its political representatives, based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe. Only this programme provides the essential means through which working people can oppose the drive to militarism by both the US and their own rulers, while defending hard-won social gains and democratic rights from the offensive of the transnational corporations and big-business politicians.



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