

Basque parliamentary negotiations strengthen regionalism

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Some six weeks since the Basque regional elections, horse-trading continues over the formation of a new regional parliament. Various nationalist groups are jockeying for position within the coalition, and parliamentary regulations are being amended to accommodate their manoeuvrings. Even the president of the main nationalist party, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), has warned that regional politics could become a “quagmire.”

The elections were portrayed as a plebiscite on plans by the former regional premier, Juan Jose Ibarretxe, for a “self-governing” Basque state. The ruling coalition of Ibarretxe’s PNV and Eusko Alkartasuna (Basque Solidarity—EA) lost 4 seats and, although they remained the largest parliamentary grouping with 29 seats, lost the balance of power.

The right-wing Popular Party (PP) also lost seats, ending up with 15. The PSE, regional sister party of the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE), gained 5 seats, with a total of 18.

The balance of power now lies with the smaller parties. Ezker Batua-Berdeak, the regional wing of the Stalinist-led United Left, has three seats, and Aralar (a nationalist organisation set up in 2002) has one. The key player, though, is the Communist Party of the Basque Territories (EHAK), which gained nine seats.

Votes were cast for EHAK after the banning of two parties for alleged links with the separatist terrorist group Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom—ETA). The parliamentary party closest to ETA, Batasuna, and a new party, “All the Options” (AG), both called on their supporters to vote for EHAK, which had announced prior to the elections that it would campaign for Batasuna and AG’s programmes in parliament.

While far from a ringing endorsement of Ibarretxe’s

proposals, the elections have thus strengthened the hand of separatist tendencies.

The vote to appoint a new speaker to preside over parliamentary sessions was a contest between the PSE’s candidate Miguel Buen and the PNV’s Juan Maria Atutxa, the speaker of the previous coalition government. Buen was also supported by the Popular Party, while Atutxa received the votes of the larger nationalist parties, the PNV-EA, Aralar and the EB. But in a show of strength, the nine EHAK deputies abstained, leaving a tied vote of 33-33. After three such tied votes, EHAK’s spokeswoman Nekane Erauskin stated that they would “support anybody the PNV presents as a candidate” except Atutxa. The PNV “must be in charge of the presidency,” she continued, “but not with a narrow mind. The party has not negotiated with us.”

The election went through another six tied votes before Atutxa agreed to stand down. His replacement as candidate was his close supporter Izaskun Bilbao, head of the agricultural committee during the last parliament. The nine EHAK deputies promptly voted for her.

Bilbao then appointed Buen as first deputy speaker, with the EA’s Rafa Larreina as second deputy speaker. The PP was given the post of one of the second secretaries, but EHAK did not receive an appointment to the committee—prompting Erauskin to accuse the PNV of seeking “revenge.”

The next step towards the creation of a new Basque parliament is the formation of parliamentary groups prior to the investiture of the new regional premier (*lehendakari*) some time in the middle of June. The PNV’s Ibarretxe (still acting premier) is trying to reconstitute the previous coalition with the EA and EB.

The PP is hostile to any move towards greater Basque autonomy, as is sought by the PNV’s proposals. For its

part, the PSOE argues that a limited extension of regional autonomy is the best way of defending the integrity of Spanish capitalism. But its proposals will nevertheless encourage separatist tendencies, particularly in the Basque country, which already has the greatest autonomous powers of any region within Spain. The PSOE's call for regional negotiations also serves to divide and confuse the working class.

While the PSOE nationally rejected Ibarretxe's proposals as unconstitutional, the Basque wing of the party, the PSE, was putting forward its own proposals for a further extension of regional powers. Patxi Lopez, leader of the PSE, emphasised its determination to see the debate on Ibarretxe's proposals conclude with a review of the current autonomy proposals.

Last month, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero won parliamentary support for opening negotiations with ETA if it renounced violence. Last autumn, former members of ETA also called for it to disband itself, as its perspective of securing independence through a terror campaign had failed. Support for ETA has evaporated since September 11, 2001, and the Madrid bombings last year.

While Batasuna hopes to use these negotiations to restore its position within Basque politics, other sections of the Spanish ruling class are using opposition to ETA to mobilise far-right forces. Former PP Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar and current PP head Mariano Rajoy were both present at a march organised by the Association of Victims of Terrorism (AVT) against any negotiations. Juan Cotino, a former national police chief present on the march, told the press, "The only ones who can talk to terrorists are the police who interrogate them and the judges who lock them up."

There is still support for a confrontation with ETA within the PSOE. Defence Minister Jose Bono, who was attacked by fascist thugs on a previous AVT demonstration, did not participate in this month's march. However, he told *El Pais*, the daily paper closest to the PSOE, "I have more confidence in the Civil Guard than in negotiations."

Workers across Spain must reject the supposed alternatives that are presented to them—between strengthening the repressive apparatus of the centralised state and endorsing a separatist project developed in the interests of the regional bourgeoisie that would only pit them against one another. A different type of unity is

required, founded on the perspective for the independent mobilisation of the working class for a United Socialist States of Europe.



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