

# Catholic Church steps up campaign to oust Spanish government

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The Catholic Church is using the network of Catholic family organizations known as Concapa to broaden its campaign to oust the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government and return the right-wing Popular Party to power.

Concapa has collected a 3-million-signature petition denouncing PSOE policies. Together with the Church and the PP, it has called a demonstration in December in Madrid to denounce the PSOE's proposals to change religious education policy. They anticipate a turnout of over 1 million.

Under the PSOE's proposals, Catholic families will retain the right to choose a religious education for their children, but it will be optional. The Church is also bitterly opposed to a proposal to allow Islamic clerics to teach religion in schools.

A Concapa spokesman declared that "all actions are legitimate" to counter what it describes as an attack on "freedom and education." The PP accuses the government of sowing "chaos, alarm and confusion and uncertainty" by an education programme that is in the "hands of a radical minority."

Concapa's threats follow the Catholic Church's demand for a campaign of civil disobedience against the PSOE's legalisation of homosexual marriage, which it denounced as "against nature" and "unconstitutional." The call has won the support of ultra-conservative Judge Francisco Javier Garcia de Telde, who presides over the Canary Islands and is threatening to refer the legislation to the Constitutional Court. The Canary Islands has been a stronghold of the far-right ever since General Franco launched his fascist coup from there in 1936.

Spain's Cardinal Antonio Maria Rouco was reported in a *Guardian* article of June 7, 2004 accusing the PSOE: "Some people wish to take us back to 711. It seems as if we should wipe ourselves out of history."

This is a reference to the year Muslim armies conquered the Iberian Peninsula, where they stayed until they were driven out in 1492. The conservative paper *El Mundo* printed an unsigned article denouncing the PSOE's attempts to "erase the past," warning that any attempt to ignore the unique position played by Spain's Christian religious heritage would be fiercely resisted.

The Church is agitating against what it sees as the PSOE threatening the hard won gains it made in alliance with the former PP government. Spain's bishops helped draft the Organic Law of Educational Quality (LOCE). If implemented it would have reintroduced compulsory religious education for primary and secondary pupils. In social studies the courses offered would be either a "confessional" Roman Catholic course or a course that studied "the phenomena of religion" in society. Despite the PP being driven from office in March 2004, the bishops are demanding that the PSOE abandon its own policies and implement the LOCE.

Many teachers opposed LOCE, correctly regarding it as a major regression in children's education. The Association of Parents of Schoolchildren (CEAPA) denounced Concapa's right-wing campaign, pointing out that if the PP had remained in power and the LOCE

implemented, each year every child would end up studying 210 hours of religion and only 180 hours of biology.

The PP and the Church jointly drafted the LOCE to undo what it called the "damage to morality" in the education system inflicted by the last PSOE government, voted out of office in 1996. They accuse the PSOE of responsibility for the virtual collapse of students opting for religious studies. Only 14 percent of youth now describe themselves as practicing Catholics.

However, even within Church-run educational institutions, take-up for its "confessional" courses is rapidly declining. In an interview with the *Washington Post* April 11, 2005, Jose Ignacio Viton, a Jesuit professor of philosophy at Pontificia Comillas University, explained that the institution was originally founded as a seminary to instruct candidates for religious orders but is now known for its programmes in law, business, engineering and economics. (As in many countries, a desire on the part of a young person to attend Church schools is due in large part to their being better funded and thus able to provide a higher quality education.)

Today the Church is one of the most distrusted institutions in Spain, with hostility to its interference in political life growing. During ceremonies to honour the victims of last year's Madrid bombings, victims' families objected to any Catholic tenor to the ceremony, including the pealing of bells.

Concapa has a long history of organising protests against "socialist" infringements on the teachings of Catholicism in education. According to *El Pais* of August 13, it was founded in 1929 during the collapse of the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. After an explosive revolutionary movement in the working class in 1931, the PSOE and Republican parties formed a coalition government that attempted to introduce the first limited bourgeois republican constitution based on a popular demand to end Catholicism as a state religion, which had existed since 1851. However, after the formal disestablishment of the Church, the coalition—fearful of upsetting the ruling class—restored payments to the Church for education.

Avro Manhattan's *The Vatican in World Politics* (Gaer Associates, New York, 1949) explains the Church's reaction to the 1931 coalition government's constitution. The Vatican rallied Catholics to destroy the "Red-Anti-Christ." Spain's primate and the pope urged their flock to join a "holy crusade for the integral restoration of the Church's rights." Both preached open revolt. The threats mounting from the right and the procrastination of the PSOE led workers to revolt, which was crushed in the most brutal fashion.

After the defeat of the Spanish Revolution (1936-1939) due to the class collaborationist policies and political betrayals of the PSOE and the Stalinist Communist Party (PCE), the Church became an integral part of one of the most brutal dictatorships of the twentieth century.

William J. Callahan explains in *The Evangelization of Franco's "New Spain"*:

"On 20 May 1939 General Francisco Franco attended the solemn Te Deum service held at the Royal Church of Santa Barbara to celebrate the

triumph of nationalist over Republican Spain. Surrounded by the symbols of Spain's Catholic past, including the standard used by Don Juan of Austria at Lepanto, the general presented his 'sword of victory' to Cardinal Goma, archbishop of Toledo and primate of the Spanish Church.... [Don Juan of Austria was a Spanish admiral who commanded the fleet that defeated the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth in 1571 on behalf of the Holy League formed by Pope Pius V—the first significant defeat of the Ottoman Empire]

"The ceremony symbolised the close ties between church and state formed by three years of civil war. The new regime had given proof of its commitment to the church even before the conflict had ended, and the clergy now looked forward to the implementation of a full range of measures in education, culture, and the regulation of public morality, measures that had last been seen in Spain over a century before" (journal article by William J. Callahan; *Church History*, vol. 56, 1987).

After Franco's victory the Church was rewarded with huge direct subsidies. It was allowed to censor all books, newspapers and magazines and given control of cinema, radio, television and education.

During the decline of the Franco dictatorship between 1965 and 1975, in order to save its own skin the Church distanced itself from the fascist state and criticized his rule. It positioned itself to survive the revolutionary movement that gripped Spain between 1974 and 1976 and help ensure the survival of capitalism by supporting the transition to parliamentary rule.

The Vatican and the Church hoped to retain its powers and privileges under the new parliamentary system. This appeared threatened at the height of the revolutionary struggle in the working class, and the 1978 constitution referred to the disestablishment of the Roman Catholic Church. Concapa denounced the new constitution for downgrading the role of the Church in society.

The Vatican criticized the Spanish Church for not securing the special relationship with the state that it has retained throughout much of Spanish history. However, as in 1931, the new constitution refused to take up a genuine struggle against the Church. Article 16 of the 1978 constitution states that all the parties involved would re-establish close political ties with the Church, "The public authorities shall take the religious beliefs of Spanish society into account and shall maintain the consequent relations of cooperation with the Catholic Church and other denominations."

Article 27 has been used to justify continued state funding of the Church.

On July 3, 1978, on the same day as the Falange (Spanish fascists founded in 1933 by Jose Antonio Primo De Rivera) marched in defence of the "national flag," Concapa held a demonstration to defend the role of the Catholic Church in education. The Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD), voted into office in the first parliamentary elections, and the Vatican signed a Concordat in 1979 guaranteeing subsidies to the Church and a central role for it in education. As Victorino Myoral, a PSOE deputy, has admitted, the accords meant that Spain was "a secular society, on the one hand, but remained a Catholic state, on the other."

The Catholic Church survived the "transition to democracy" due to the assistance of the PSOE and the Stalinist PCE. They prevented any reckoning with the Church for its collaboration with Franco's fascist regime. According to a 1974 interview with Santiago Carrillo, the general secretary of the PCE at the time, one year before the death of General Franco the PCE made overtures to the Second Vatican Council for unity between "Catholics and Communists" in the interests of "national reconciliation."

As a result, to this day no Church figure has faced trial for its collaboration with Franco's fascist regime. Instead, the Vatican has only recently beatified a number of senior Church officials who were killed during the Spanish Civil War. And in 1983-84, Concapa could again organise mass demonstrations against the first PSOE government when it tried to reduce the role of religion in state education. Concapa's agitation

led to the resignation of the first PSOE education minister.

The Vatican sees its campaign against the PSOE as the starting point for an international struggle against what the new pope has described as a creeping "global secularism." John L. Allen, Madrid correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*, explained, "observers across the Catholic world have been waiting to see if this crisis might stimulate Spanish Catholics to invent a new model of resistance, a new battle plan ... for the struggle against what Pope Benedict XVI has called a 'dictatorship of relativism' in the secular West."

Allen concludes, "Spain is key to Pope Benedict's desire to re-awaken the Christian roots of Europe.... What is coming into focus in Spain may therefore hint at a broader political and cultural strategy of the Catholic Church under Benedict XVI and the tensions inside and outside the church that strategy might generate."

Once again the PSOE's response has been to seek a compromise. Prime Minister José Zapatero's government was brought to power in March 2004 on the backs of a mass movement of millions of workers who opposed the PP's participation in the Iraq war and its efforts to cover over the involvement of Islamic fundamentalists in the March 11 Madrid train bombings. Ever since then, the PP has been working with the Church to destabilize the PSOE government and portray its rule as illegitimate.

In contrast, Zapatero has consistently offered an olive branch to both the Church and the PP. He has on a number of occasions reiterated his commitment to the thrust of the 1979 Concordat with the Vatican. Last September he replied to denunciations from Church officials by declaring his "extreme respect for the institution." In August, Defence Minister Jose Bono summed up the attitude of the PSOE cabinet when he said, "Sometimes I find myself in a war that I have not declared and which I don't want."

On 5 September, eight months after their last meeting, Zapatero met with opposition PP President Mariano Rajoy with the stated aim of clearing the air between them. Despite Zapatero's attempts to secure common policy statements, all he did was provide Rajoy with a platform from which to attack the government. Rajoy stated afterwards that he didn't know why such a meeting was even called and, apart from discussions on education, he disagreed with virtually every aspect of PSOE policy.



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