

# Spain: Ban on Basque separatist party extended

Paul Bond  
4 February 2006

The Spanish High Court has renewed its legal ban on the Basque separatist party Batasuna. The decision prompted a demonstration in the Basque region called in defence of “civil and political rights.”

Batasuna, a parliamentary party calling for the formation of a Basque national state, was proscribed by the Supreme Court in 2003 on the grounds that it constituted the political wing of the armed group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom). Prior to the ban, Batasuna had received some 12 percent of the regional vote.

Although the party remains illegal, a previous court order prohibiting its activities had recently expired. Batasuna had called a rally in Barakaldo, near Bilbao, which it described as the party’s first national assembly since its proscription.

The presiding judge, Fernando Grande-Marlaska of the National Court, said that Batasuna had periodically been allowed to hold rallies and meetings since the ban. (A march in August was allowed to go ahead, for example, but along a different route from the one originally proposed.) But the judge said a congress called to elect a new executive committee would be going too far. Banning the proposed rally, he also extended the ban on Batasuna’s “public, private and institutional” activities for another two years. He described the organisation as “a structure controlled by the leaders of ETA.”

Police immediately moved to close down any remaining premises used by Batasuna. The party’s offices in Pamplona were sealed by police the day after the judgement. On January 19, some 20 police officers shut down premises in Donostia, which the party had used for press conferences.

Basque nationalists promptly called a demonstration outside the Bilbao Exhibition Centre in Barakaldo,

where the rally was to have been held. The decision to allow the rally to proceed was taken by the regional government, a coalition of nationalist parties. The regional justice minister, Joseba Azkarraga, argued that Batasuna’s supporters should be allowed to express themselves. The other nationalist parties condemn ETA, but say that Batasuna will need to be included in any peace process. On the morning of the demonstration, the National Court ordered police to intervene if there were any chants or banners supporting ETA.

Reports of the attendance at the rally ranged from 8,000 according to *El Pais*, the daily paper closest to the PSOE government, to 20,000 cited by nationalist sources. The main speaker was Batasuna’s leader, Arnaldo Otegi. Other Batasuna leaders were also on the platform, along with Northern Ireland’s Sinn Féin parliamentary deputy, Aengus O’Snodaigh. Batasuna holds up the negotiations between the British government and the Irish republican movement as the model for the deal they wish to do with the Spanish state.

In his 13-minute speech, Otegi talked of new provocations and obstacles to the peace process in the Basque region. He again stressed the party’s determination to participate in any further discussion on the region’s status, saying that “a process which will provide solutions to the conflict” was within reach.

Otegi said more about this in a recent interview with *Radio Euskadi*. He appealed to the “good will” of all parties in the region to collaborate in the development of a regional plan, describing the ban on Batasuna as an attempt to disrupt the unofficial relations the party had forged with other nationalist parties in the region.

For the ruling Basque National Party (PNV), the initial composition of any Basque homeland would be

the three Basque provinces in Spain. Batasuna (and ETA) have always insisted that it must also include the Basque province within France. In his radio interview, Otegi was at his most conciliatory towards the PNV. He said that he had met with the PNV's Juan José Ibarretxe after Grande-Marlaska's judgement, and that they had a common understanding of the intentions behind it.

In 2003, Ibarretxe put forward a plan for extending Basque autonomy. Otegi told *Radio Euskadi* that Ibarretxe faced "structural difficulties" in implementing a peace process because of his restriction to three territories. At the same time, though, Otegi said that Ibarretxe could "contribute importantly" to any plan, which would only be realised through the collaboration of "all parties" in the region.

Patxi Lopez, head of the Basque Socialist Party (PSE—the regional sister party of the ruling national PSOE), said that the only obstacle to peace was the continued existence of ETA. Its disbanding was a prerequisite for any talks with Batasuna, he said, and Otegi had missed an "excellent opportunity" to call on ETA to disarm.

Successive Spanish governments have continued to use the Basque region as a testing ground for undemocratic measures aimed at suppressing any domestic political unrest. The banning of Batasuna, which disenfranchised large sections of the Basque country, was the first time a political party had been outlawed in Spain since the end of the dictatorship of General Franco.

The banning of Batasuna was initially carried out by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government of José Maria Aznar. The PP, now in opposition, had demanded the banning of the Batasuna meeting. After the rally, local PP leader Carmelo Barrio said that it had "served only to promote the ideals of ETA-Batasuna." Urging greater intervention, he said that "the weakness of our leaders is directly proportional to the arrogance with which the terrorists and their supporters brandish their antidemocratic arguments." The PP demanded an investigation into the rally, describing it as a front for ETA.

At the same time, the rightist public employees union Manos Limpias (Clean Hands) filed charges against local government officials for "consenting" to the rally in the face of Grande-Marlaska's judgement. Also

filing charges against the rally's "chief protagonist," Otegi, Manos Limpias demanded legal action from the public prosecutor, whose "mission is to promote justice in defence of legality... and the public interest."

Such police and court powers, having been tested in the Basque region, will be used against the whole Spanish working class. Batasuna seeks to exploit this to justify their separatist agenda, which can only further the division of the Spanish working class along regional lines and strengthen the right wing.

PSOE Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was in favour of letting the meeting go ahead and has already offered talks if ETA disarms. He too has learned from the way Britain's Labour government has worked with Washington and Dublin to bring Sinn Féin into a devolved executive, in order to better police the Catholic population in Northern Ireland and ensure that the basic requirements of global investors for stability are met and cuts in government expenditure are pushed through.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**