

The ETA ceasefire, the Catalan Statute and the fracturing of Spain—Part 1

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This is the first of a two-part article explaining the recent moves to greater regional autonomy in Spain.

On March 24, the Basque separatist group Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom—ETA) announced a permanent end to its 38-year military campaign of bombings and shootings that has resulted in the death of 800 people. Six days later, the Spanish House of Representatives passed a new Statute by 189 votes to 154 giving greater devolved powers to the region of Catalonia. The plan now needs the approval of the Senate before being submitted to a referendum in the region in June.

The source of these diverse political events lies in the fracturing of Spain brought about by the globalisation of production, which has superseded the nation state's status as the primary unit of economic organisation.

In announcing its call for a ceasefire, ETA made no reference to Basque self-determination or independence but referred simply to “our rights as a people.” The organisation has never previously called a ceasefire permanent or talked about “dialogue and negotiation.” Virtually the only demand made by ETA was that people in the Basque-speaking areas of Spain and France should be allowed to decide their own future without “interference” from Madrid or Paris.

Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of the ruling Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) declared formal talks with ETA could begin within months provided that the organisation's cease-fire is total and that it ended street violence and its “revolutionary tax” on businesses.

The talks are expected to follow the “two-tables” model put forward in November 2004 by Arnaldo Otegi, the leader of ETA's political wing, Batasuna. At one table the government and ETA will discuss questions concerning disarmament and release of prisoners. At the other all the political parties, including Batasuna, will discuss the future of the Basque region.

ETA leaders hope that the organisation will be able to secure greater autonomy for the Basque region and positions in the state apparatus through a power-sharing arrangement, similar to that reached with Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. Former Irish Republican Army (IRA) leaders are believed to have played a key role in ETA talks, travelling to the Basque region several times over the past year.

The involvement of the IRA in the ceasefire process is an indication of what will follow. The Northern Ireland peace process was carried out above the heads of the masses of working people, Irish and British, Catholic and Protestant, North and South. Those involved in the talks represented major factions of the British bourgeoisie, the ruling economic and political interests in the Irish Republic, the Unionist bourgeoisie and the aspiring Catholic/republican bourgeois elements grouped around the leadership of Sinn Fein—all presided over

by the United States, which is the major international investor in Ireland.

For nearly two decades, the Irish Republic had pursued a policy of transforming itself into an investment platform for corporations seeking highly skilled, cheap labour and access to the European market. Northern Ireland, however, had been unable to emulate the success of its neighbour because of three decades of military conflict and partition. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 set out to establish more favourable conditions for profitable investment in the north, as well as the south, by international capital by creating more favourable conditions for the exploitation of the working class.

In seeking to emulate its Irish counterparts, a section of Batasuna has expressed support for the plan for a “self-governing” Basque region in “free association” with Spain drawn up by Juan José Ibarretxe, the leader of the largest Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, PNV), which has dominated the regional government for the last 25 years. For its part, the PNV is keen to welcome Batasuna and ETA into the structures of government, but also fears that it could be eclipsed. Recently, the PNV youth section refused instructions not to participate in a march called by Batasuna that attracted 50,000 people.

The Ibarretxe plan aims to establish a place for the Basque bourgeoisie within the global market place, upholding as it does “the right to private property and a respect for the freedom of enterprise within the framework of the market economy.” The proposals, though shrouded in the language of “self-determination,” aim not at protecting the rights of Basque working people but at selling them as a cheap labour force to the European bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations.

The new Catalan Statute increases the region's powers, allowing it to keep a larger part of its tax revenues, strengthening the position of its judiciary and exercising greater control over issues like immigration policy. The statute will also require residents to learn the Catalan language.

Zapatero and the PSOE are seeking to preserve the general interests of the Spanish bourgeoisie, while making what they consider to be unavoidable concessions to regional interests. If the unity of the Spanish state is to be maintained, they must be seen to have a different attitude to regional dialogue than their Popular Party (PP) predecessors. But there are serious limitations on how far they can go in seeking to appease the separatists without antagonising the most powerful sections of the national bourgeoisie. This accounts for the ambiguity in the Statute document. The preamble makes a reference to the declaration last year by the Catalan National Assembly that the region is a “nation” (although nowhere in the text is it endorsed). At

the same time the document refers to the Spanish constitution and its formulation that Catalonia already has a “national reality as a nationality”—a formulation that was itself ambiguous when the constitution was drawn up in 1978.

However, the architects of the statute in the Catalan assembly—the Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, ERC)—voted against Zapatero’s version saying it was a “fundamental cutback” on the Catalan one and is threatening to boycott its implementation. To remain in power, Zapatero relies on the ERC—also a coalition partner in the Catalan government with the PSOE’s sister party the Catalan Socialist Party (Parti Socialist de Catalunya, PSC).

Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, ERC president, has made it clear that “What ERC wants for Catalonia is not a new regional statute, but a state. Nobody should lose sight of this, especially not us. We know that with 16 percent of the vote, we do not have the majority, so we should support a gradual approach. I think every nation wants a state, though not all nations have one.” Carod-Rovira added, “I’m a separatist and I want a republic.”

To get the Statute through the Spanish assembly the PSOE had to rely for support on the right-wing Catalan Convergence and Unity (Convergència i Unió, CiU), and other regionalist parties including the PNV, which sees the Catalan Statute as a model for its own ambitions. Anxo Quintana, vice-premier of Galicia, said, “We must end the idea that Galicia is subsidiary to Spain, and we need to define a new division of power between the state and the region, as well as new basic criteria on taxation. The final result must be the Spanish state’s recognition that it is not one nation, but rather made up of many nations.” In Valencia, the regional assembly passed its own statute March 27 that defines Valencia as a “historic nationality.”

The largest party to vote against the statute was the right-wing opposition PP. Mariano Rajoy, president of the PP, said the Catalan Statute was “the beginning of the end of the state as it was designed by the Spanish people in 1978.”

“Despite all the claims that this is not a big deal,” he added, “we now find ourselves in all practical terms with two states,” Spain and Catalonia.

The PP has used the issues of the Catalan statute and ETA to mobilise far-right forces such as the Association of Victims of Terrorism and elements within the military in a campaign to destabilise the PSOE government. It accuses Zapatero of coming to power illegitimately as a result of “antidemocratic coercion”—referring to the mass movement that brought down José Maria Aznar’s PP government after it attempted to blame ETA for the March 11 terror bombings in Madrid, even though all evidence pointed to it being the work of Islamic fundamentalists.

Lt. Gen. José Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain’s 50,000 ground troops, warned in January that the armed forces had a “mission” to guarantee the constitution and the “sovereignty and independence of Spain” and warned of “serious consequences” should a statute be passed giving Catalonia status as a nation. His speech was greeted as a “faithful reflection of the opinion, concern and feelings of many commanders and officers.”

The striving for Catalan and Basque independence is bound up with an attempt by bourgeois and upper middle class layers to exploit their already-privileged economic position in two of Spain’s more prosperous regions. Indeed one of the main complaints of the Catalan elite is that they do not want taxes collected there to subsidise Spain’s poorer regions.

Catalonia is by far the wealthiest of Spain’s 17 autonomous regions,

accounting for some 20 percent of the national gross domestic product. Catalonia and Madrid between them provide 80 percent of the inter-regional solidarity fund that is redistributed to poorer regions. In 2002, gross household income in the Catalan province of Girona was almost double that in the impoverished southern province of Jaen in Andalusia.

The Catalonia area is already the base in Spain of more than 3,000 international firms. In 2002, its industries recorded \$146.1 billion in revenues, or 25 percent of Spain’s total. Barcelona has become a magnet for service industries such as call centres with its promises of a cheap and multi-lingual workforce. Last month the car rental group Avis switched its call centre from Manchester to Barcelona, transferring 180 jobs and adding to the 10,000 workers already employed in the industry. According to latest figures, Catalonia attracted over half of total foreign direct investment in Spain related to R&D activities and is fast becoming Spain’s biotechnology centre with 60 percent of the total Spanish pharmaceutical production located in the region.

The present political crisis over the regions also has to be understood as the continuation of attempts by the ruling elite to counter the militancy of the Spanish working class throughout the twentieth century by trying to split it along national lines.

Catalan and Basque nationalism developed at the turn of the nineteenth century in response to the rise of the workers’ movement. Emerging predominantly amongst the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, it sought to find support in the peasantry against the predations of big capital and the state bureaucracy. Each time a revolutionary movement developed, these elements have sought to contain it and use it for their own advantage.

When the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera fell in 1931, ushering in the start of the Spanish Revolution, the PNV declared its objective was “stopping the workers movement and the possibility of a revolution.” It demanded of its members “absolute abstention from participation in any class movement, paying attention to orders which, if necessary, shall be given by the authorities.” This was one of the reasons nationalism never became a major influence in the industrial areas in the Basque region.

In Catalonia, the situation was somewhat different. A referendum for a Statute of Catalan Autonomy in 1931 attracted the support of 99 percent of voters. In Barcelona, where one third of the one million inhabitants were non-Catalan, there were only 3,000 votes against it.

To be continued



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