

# The ETA ceasefire, the Catalan Statute and the fracturing of Spain—Part 2

Paul Mitchell  
18 April 2006

*This is the conclusion of a two-part article explaining the recent moves to greater regional autonomy in Spain. Part 1 was published on April 17.*

In what appeared on the surface to be a wholehearted acceptance of Catalan nationalism by workers, Leon Trotsky emphasised that this phenomenon represented “only the shell of their social rebellion.”

Like Lenin, Trotsky opposed the forcible retention of peoples in one nation and any suppression of their democratic rights, but did not advocate separatism. He defended the right to self-determination, up to and including the formation of separate states, but did not advocate the creation of such entities—which would be a step backwards economically and would consolidate national divisions between workers. Rather he saw this negative defence of self-determination as a means of championing the voluntary and democratic unity of the working class. It was, he wrote, necessary to explain that the “economic unity of the country with an extensive autonomy of national districts” would lead to the greatest advantages for economy and culture.

Following elections in February 1936, a Popular Front coalition government was formed involving the Socialist Party (PSOE), the Communist Party (PCE), and the Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, ERC).

The Popular Front policy had become the programme of the Communist International in 1935. Under the influence of Stalinism, Trotsky’s perspective of Permanent Revolution—that in countries with a belated capitalist development, “the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses”—was abandoned. Rejecting this perspective—which had guided the Bolsheviks in October 1917—the Stalinists instead adopted a two-stage theory of revolution, which justified local Communist parties collaborating with bourgeois forces and politically subordinating the working class to them.

In the Basque region, the Popular Front government approved a Statute of Autonomy that transferred power from the workers of Bilbao to the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, PNV). Within months Franco launched his military coup and the PNV proceeded to hand over the areas they controlled to the fascists without a fight.

In Catalonia, the Popular Front government sought to reverse the situation of dual power that had mushroomed and set about

dissolving the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalonia that had become the main authority in the province. Both the centrist Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), that had broken from Trotskyism under the leadership of Andres Nin, and the anarcho-syndicalist union federation, the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), joined the Catalan Generalitat, betrayed the May 1937 uprising and allowed government forces to occupy the city and hand back to the bourgeoisie the farms and factories seized by the workers and peasants.

Only Trotsky’s supporters called for a united front of the anarchists and the POUM and the formation of soviets in order to carry through the socialist revolution.

The Falangist dictatorship (1939-1975) saw the murder of hundreds of thousands of Franco’s opponents, including the former president of the Catalan Generalitat, Lluís Companys, and the suppression of workers organisations and democratic liberties. Franco annulled the statutes of autonomy and banned virtually all expressions of Catalan and Basque identity.

In 1959, ETA was founded as a split from the moribund PNV and began an armed struggle in 1961, thinking it could put pressure on the Franco government to grant independence. It enjoyed its biggest growth and popularity in the period leading up to Franco’s death and at the end of the fascist government in 1975. During that time ETA’s victims were always members of the government, the hated civil guard and the military. Its most popular action was the blowing up of Franco’s chosen successor, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, in 1973.

In the latter years of Franco’s rule the Spanish economy experienced a degree of agricultural modernisation, increasing industrialisation and the start of mass tourism. Working class opposition to Franco rose once again, expressed most notably in the formation of Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras). During this period the Communist Party was advocating a conciliatory policy towards the fascists of “forgive and forget” and was negotiating behind closed doors a “peaceful transition” from fascism to capitalist democracy.

The 1978 Constitution divided the country into 17 autonomous regions in order to prevent a revolutionary reckoning with fascism and diverting opposition into the dead end of nationalism. The PNV accepted the proposals for an autonomous Basque community and a Basque National Assembly, but ETA and its political wing Herri Batasuna rejected them. ETA considered the Spanish region of Navarre and the French provinces of Labourd,

Soule and Basse to be part of the Basque country along with the officially recognised regions of Alava, Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa.

Successive Spanish governments have continued to use the Basque region as a testing ground for undemocratic measures, aimed at suppressing any domestic political unrest. When the PSOE was first elected in 1982 it backed a murder squad, the Anti-terrorist Groups of Liberation (GAL), that assassinated 23 people, mainly ETA members but including innocent bystanders.

However ETA's support was transformed into widespread hostility due to its indiscriminate killing of innocent people and its lack of any genuinely progressive social programme.

Following his election in 1996, Aznar took advantage of the widespread hostility towards ETA by mounting a clampdown on the organisation. The PP's policies on the regions bore all the hallmarks of the party's Francoist past. Aznar insisted on the inviolability of the centralised Spanish state. Branding the advocacy of greater regional autonomy and separatism as tantamount to treason, the PP used the political threat posed by ETA and their reactionary campaign of terror bombings to justify a general assault on democratic rights across Spain.

Many ETA cells were broken up by the police, its financial network disrupted and the entire leadership of Herri Batasuna tried and imprisoned for showing an ETA video during their electoral campaign. HB's daily paper *Egin* was closed down and its editorial board jailed for "collaboration" with ETA—the first time a newspaper had been banned in Spain since the transition. Nearly a thousand members have been arrested over the last seven years, including their most experienced leaders.

Following the September 11, 2001 attack on New York and the Madrid bombings in March 2004, support for ETA has haemorrhaged. The PP government and its PSOE successor have pushed through draconian legislation under the auspices of the "war on terror" such as the Political Parties Law, under which Batasuna was banned. At a stroke, ten percent of the population of the region was effectively disenfranchised and Batasuna's seven deputies disqualified along with hundreds of local councillors. In November 2005 the largest trial in Spanish history began with the prosecution of 56 people, accused of being the "stomach, the heart and the head of ETA." All these events led last year to former members of ETA calling for the organisation to disband.

After 45 years, it is clear that ETA is no nearer to its goal of a united Basque Country than when it started. All that it has achieved is the strengthening of the social position of the regional petty bourgeoisie and creating enormous confusion in the working class. Years of armed struggle have only served to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the state and provided the means for massive attacks on democratic rights.

The regionalism espoused by the Basque and Catalan nationalists is a recipe for the constant undermining of the social position of the working class. It will produce only fratricidal competition between the various regions of Spain and an ever-lower international benchmark for wages and conditions.

With China becoming the manufacturing centre of the world and India becoming the centre for information technology and services, class relations are being disrupted in all the major capitalist countries. Extreme pressure is being exerted on wages and social

conditions. In Europe, the ruling elite has called for radical reforms in order to remain competitive. Zapatero has signalled that his government's first priority is to comply with the March 2000 Lisbon Strategy in which European Union governments pledged to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010" and seek to increase Spain's competitiveness and carry out labour market reforms.

The same economic processes and technological changes that have hastened global integration have also shattered the old working class and petty bourgeois organisations based on national perspectives and policies.

Liberals and radicals have presented ETA's ceasefire and the agreement on the Catalan statute as a progressive move, and something of a "national reconciliation". The Militante group, for example, welcomes the ceasefire but praises the "Abertzale Left"—ETA's political wing Batasuna—which it hopes will take up the struggle for self-determination by other means.

Such claims not only ignore the important changes produced by globalisation, but disregards the experiences of both the Spanish and international working class with bourgeois nationalism over the last decades. The championing of separatism in the name of self-determination has been a means of subordinating the working class to bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces with entirely negative consequences. It has resulted in the weakening of the unity of the working class and the Balkanisation of countries and regions—shown most brutally in the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia. The carve up was carried out to advance the strategic and economic interests of the imperialist powers and aided by ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and communalist politicians who sought to block Yugoslav workers from conducting a united struggle against the deepening poverty and rising unemployment created by the bureaucracy's own capitalist economic policies. Today the Balkans working class lives in ethnically divided states subject directly or indirectly to imperialist domination in conditions of increasing social misery.

The unity of the working class presupposes political opposition to separatism, but it does not mean identifying with the national capitalist state. On the contrary, all national divisions must be transcended in the struggle for the unity of the Spanish, European and international working class. The crisis of the nation state must find a progressive solution not in the break-up into smaller, and less viable entities based on the reactionary concept of ethnicity, but in its replacement by a more rational and universal form of economic and social organisation that corresponds more directly with the economic realities of globalised production—the United Socialist States of Europe.

*Concluded*



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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