

# Spain: ETA ceasefire collapses as Zapatero government seeks unity with Popular Party

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On June 6, the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) formally announced the end of its “permanent ceasefire” in Spain. The ceasefire had been announced on March 24, 2006, halting ETA’s 38-year military campaign of bombings and shootings that resulted in the deaths of 800 people.

ETA said that it would resume its campaign “on all fronts to defend the Basque homeland” and establish Euskal Herria (Land of the Basques people)—a region on both sides of the Pyrenees comprising four northern Spanish provinces and three provinces in southwest France.

The group justified its decision to end the ceasefire by saying the “minimum democratic conditions” for negotiating peace with the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government “do not exist.” It blamed the PSOE for failing to make any concessions during the cease-fire and continuing with “arrests, torture and every type of persecution.”

It also criticised the Supreme Court for banning half the candidates belonging to the ANV party (Acción Nacionalista Vasca—Basque National Action) in regional and local elections on May 27. The court claimed the party was linked to ETA’s outlawed political wing, Batasuna. Despite the ban, the ANV are set to control 30 municipalities. The Basque nationalist coalition Nafarroa Bai also increased its support in the neighbouring region of Navarre.

Police spokesmen said ETA had used the ceasefire to regroup and rearm and that it is capable of an “imminent” attack. Civil Guards on June 21 claimed to have discovered an abandoned car in southern Spain, which contained more than 100 kilograms of explosive material and a bomb-making manual in the Basque language. On June 30, the airport on the Spanish Mediterranean holiday island of Ibiza was evacuated after the Basque daily *Gara*, the usual channel for claims by ETA, said it had received a call warning of an “explosive device” at the airport. This turned out to be a false alarm.

Politicians and public figures have had their protection increased after it had been relaxed during the cease-fire. Some 70 councillors from other parties in 31 Basque towns have failed to take up their council seats, claiming intimidation by ETA supporters.

Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero had welcomed ETA’s ceasefire when it was announced last year, and government officials are said to have talked with the group in Norway in November. However, following a bomb at a multi-storey car park at Barajas airport in Madrid in December, which killed two Ecuadorean workers, Zapatero “ordered the suspension of all initiatives to develop dialogue” and called for the establishment of a “great democratic national consensus...to confront together the challenge of terrorism.”

After the collapse of the ceasefire, Deputy Prime Minister María Teresa Fernández de la Vega said that the government would now be strengthening the police and judiciary, repeating Zapatero’s call for a “union of the democratic parties in the fight against ETA.”

The main spokesman of ETA’s political wing Batasuna, Arnaldo Otegi, and ETA gunman and hunger-striker José Ignacio de Juana Chaos, whose

imprisonment had been suspended during the negotiations, have been returned to jail. Otegi was accused of glorifying terrorism for his “very active participation” in a memorial ceremony in 2003 for a former ETA leader killed 25 years earlier. De Juana, who had served his sentence for killing 25 people in a number of ETA attacks, was jailed after recovering from a hunger strike against a new conviction over newspaper articles he wrote that were deemed to be terrorist threats.

Zapatero’s moves against ETA are spearheading an attempted rapprochement with the right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP). The PP has been waging an aggressive political campaign to destabilise the PSOE government, which defeated it in elections in May 2004. The PSOE’s victory followed the Madrid train bombings, carried out by Islamic extremists, but which the government of Jose Maria Aznar had attempted to blame on ETA. The government’s lies became the focus for the mass popular opposition to Aznar’s alliance with the Bush administration and Spain’s participation in the war against Iraq.

Ever since, the PP has portrayed the PSOE’s victory as a virtual coup and continued to insist that its claims of ETA involvement in the Madrid atrocities were justified. It has constantly denounced all efforts to reach a negotiated settlement with ETA, saying they amount to appeasing terrorists and threatening the political and territorial integrity of Spain by giving succour to Basque and other separatist movements.

Last November, the PP’s Ángel Acebes demanded that the PSOE “take up again the strategy to bring down ETA through police action,” end its meetings with ETA, ban any pro-ETA demonstrations or meetings, and prohibit Batasuna or any front organization from standing in the 2007 municipal elections. He also called on the PSOE to “publicly disclaim the international view of what is a nonexistent conflict between Spain and the Basque Country...and never again consult international authorities on how to tackle it.”

Zapatero has acceded to almost all of the PP’s demands. On June 11 of this year, PP leader Mariano Rajoy finally agreed to meet Zapatero. He demanded the prime minister “rectify” his counter-terrorism policy and ban the ANV. He called for a return to the Anti-Terrorism Pact agreed by the PP and PSOE in 2000 following the collapse of ETA’s previous ceasefire. He also called for Zapatero to answer claims that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Bernadino León, held meetings with ETA in May in Geneva shortly before the elections.

Zapatero also met with the Basque president, Juan José Ibarretxe, who said his Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV—Basque Nationalist Party), which has dominated every administration in the Basque region, would support the prime minister, but only in return for measures that would go some way to satisfying ETA and its supporters and allow them to be drawn into official politics. Ibarretxe called for the ANV to remain a legal party and said that Zapatero’s “honest attempt” at negotiation had to be tried “a thousand and one times.”

The PNV, other regional nationalists and the Izquierda Unida (IU—United Left), a coalition made up of the Communist Party, dissidents

from the PSOE, various nationalists, independents, Greens and radicals, have all demanded they be part of a new “inclusive” anti-terror pact.

Opposition to renewed state repression against ETA and Batasuna does not mean lending political support to their separatist programme. The perspective of national separatism, pursued by ETA for decades, accepts capitalist exploitation and inequality and is fundamentally opposed to the independent mobilisation of the working class. Rather than educating the working class and developing its consciousness and fighting capacity, its bombs and assassinations have only served as an excuse for strengthening the repressive apparatus of the state and have provided the means for draconian attacks on democratic rights.

ETA’s ceasefire was bought about by widespread hostility to its self-seeking regional policies and the manifest failure of its armed struggle strategy, which saw indiscriminate attacks on workers and tourists. Its support haemorrhaged after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the Madrid bombings in 2004. Through the “peace process,” ETA hoped the way would be cleared for a combined front of Basque nationalist parties to take power in Spain’s regional Basque parliament, thus securing positions and privileges for the petty bourgeois social layer it represents.

A section of Batasuna lined up behind the plan put forward by Juan José Ibarretxe for a “self-governing” Basque region in “free association” with Spain, which would allow the region to control every aspect of financial and political life without having to defer to central government—directly negotiating with international bodies such as the European Union and curtailing any obligation to subsidise Spain’s poorer regions through centralised taxation. This would establish a niche for the Basque bourgeoisie within the global marketplace and the ability to offer the Basque working class as a cheap labour force to the European bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations.

On the other hand, Zapatero saw the peace process as a way to preserve the general interests of the Spanish bourgeoisie and prevent the further growth of separatist sentiment throughout Spain, even if it meant making unavoidable concessions. He had learnt from Britain’s Labour government how the Northern Ireland peace process had been used to bring the IRA and Sinn Fein into a devolved executive, in order to better police the Catholic population and ensure the stability required by global investors. As Enrique Portocarrero, director of the Basque Business Circle in Bilbao, said earlier this year, “It’s difficult when you turn up to meet foreign investors with bodyguards...It doesn’t help your case.”

However, there were serious limitations on how far Zapatero could go in seeking to appease the separatists without antagonising the powerful sections of the national bourgeoisie represented by the PP. Rajoy has insisted on the inviolability of the centralised Spanish state. Branding the advocates of greater regional autonomy as traitors, the PP has used the ETA issue to mobilise far-right forces such as the Victims of Terrorism Association (AVT) and elements within the military and judiciary against the PSOE government.

The PP and the AVT refused to participate in peace demonstrations and organised their own, which one PP Congress deputy admitted to the daily *El País* in January “are serving as an axis around which the old-time extreme right is organising; and that some of us, deputies for the PP, who attended the recent demonstrations in the Puerta del Sol, found ourselves immersed in groups that were clearly from the extreme right, people who were monopolising the whole event.”

What we see in Spain today is the unravelling of the 1978 constitution—the result of the so-called peaceful transition from 36 years of fascism to parliamentary democracy following Franco’s death in 1975. Under the direction of the Communist Party, the major parties, the separatist parties and the trade unions united in order to suppress the anger of Spanish workers after Franco’s death. They imposed a constitution that provided both an amnesty for the fascists and preserved bourgeois rule.

The constitution sought to accommodate the various regional interests

that were suppressed by the Franco regime within a “Nation of 17 Autonomous Regions,” in which every kind of nationalist sentiment has been encouraged in order to divide the working class and divert attention from the social and political problems shared by all.

Over the last decade, Spain has seen one of highest economic growths of any country in Europe, but workers have seen few of the benefits. The latest OECD report shows real wages have declined by four percent over the same period, while the salaries of executives at Spain’s top 35 companies grew by 31 percent in 2006 alone.

The country has consistently had one of the highest unemployment rates in the European Union, along with severe regional disparities. In 2005, the Southern Spanish region of Extremadura had 16 percent unemployment, whilst Navarre had 5 percent.

Spain’s economic growth was boosted by European Union grants, but with the accession of the Eastern European states into the EU in 2004, these have been slashed. The construction boom, which lay at the basis of the economic growth, is grinding to a halt.

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. Europe’s ruling elite is pushing for radical economic restructuring in order to remain competitive. At the same time, workers are breaking from social democracy and looking for alternatives. The PSOE suffered its worst ever result in Madrid in May, receiving just 30 percent compared to the 55 percent gained by PP.

The solution to the Basque conflict and all national divisions is 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 perspective of nationalism and ethnic regionalism, 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.



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