

Spain: Arrests of Batasuna leadership by Socialist Party ahead of elections

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With the arrest earlier this month of most of the leadership of the Basque separatist party Batasuna, the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has made a clear pitch for a right-wing vote ahead of next year's election.

The arrests signal a major assault on democratic rights. The PSOE came to power in 2003 amidst a wave of hostility to their predecessors in government, the right-wing Popular Party (PP). Since then they have worked to reassure the PP's supporters and Spanish and international capital by adopting the very policies which they were elected in order to oppose. The PP, which has been critical of Zapatero's handling of Basque separatism, has welcomed these arrests.

Twenty-three members of Batasuna's leadership were arrested at a meeting in Segura, in the Basque region. Seventeen of them have been jailed, along with another two who were detained subsequently and jailed without bail. All 19 have been provisionally charged with membership of an armed group. The arrests were authorised by leading Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon as part of an investigation into allegations that Batasuna, which calls for an independent Basque state, was bankrolling the armed separatist group ETA.

At the same time there were more than 15 house-to-house searches across the region. In San Sebastian the headquarters of two other parties, the Communist Party of the Basque Lands and Basque Nationalist Action, were also searched. Both parties are represented in the regional assembly. The pretext for raiding them appears to have been allegations that they are front organisations for Batasuna. Their ministers walked out of the assembly in protest at the raid.

Garzon, who is well-known for his high-profile role in anti-terror prosecutions, led moves five years ago to proscribe Batasuna for being a front for ETA. Batasuna was banned in 2003. This marked the first time since the end of the dictatorship of General Franco that a party had been banned by the Spanish state. It effectively disenfranchised the 15 percent of the Basque electorate who voted for them.

Throughout the intervening period, Batasuna and other

Basque nationalist parties have continued to seek accommodation from Zapatero for further extensions of their regional autonomy.

Their model is the peace process in Northern Ireland, which sought to end armed conflict in order to secure favourable conditions for inward investment by international corporations. Under the agreements reached with Sinn Féin and the IRA, republicans agreed to accept British rule in return for a place at the table. The arrangements served to keep the working class of the region divided within new state mechanisms based on "community representation" through power-sharing between designated Protestants/Unionist and Catholic/Irish republican parties.

Similarly, the Basque nationalists are seeking greater control over one of Spain's wealthier regions with a view to securing international investment. Any profits to be made would be restricted to a tiny layer of the region's middle class, and could only be achieved on the back of increased exploitation of Basque working people divided from the working class in the rest of Spain. Their ultimate ambition is a new capitalist mini-state.

Last year ETA for the first time declared a "permanent" ceasefire in the hope that they could obtain a place at the negotiating table with Zapatero. This did not happen. Frustrated at their lack of headway, they called off the 15-month ceasefire earlier this year and resumed terror bombings.

The last four months have witnessed a state crackdown on Basque separatists. During the summer Batasuna's leader Arnaldo Otegi was arrested on charges of "glorifying terrorism". Last year he was sentenced for allegedly slandering the king. Virtually the whole of Batasuna's leadership has now been rounded up, including the party's main spokesman since Otegi's arrest, Joseba Permach.

The police stated that the Segura meeting was to pass control of the party from the old guard to a younger leadership. Judicial sources have indicated that the meeting was about deciding a new strategic line for Batasuna following the end of the ETA ceasefire.

The party's remaining spokesmen have denounced the arrests. Pernando Barrena, the most senior party member still at liberty, accused the PSOE of pursuing "revenge" for the "firm line" Batasuna had taken during negotiations last year. Barrena, who was in Pamplona at the time of the raid, denounced the arrests as "kidnappings". He accused the PSOE of attempting to bolster its position before March's election.

Attorney General Candido Conde Pumpido indicated the government's enthusiasm for such actions. Telling a radio station that some of the arrested were accused of co-operating with an armed group, he said that "These activities cannot be tolerated, so if the police find out about them ... it seems prudent that they be ordered to intervene".

The actions of the PSOE foster nationalist sentiments on both sides. Basque nationalists use such actions to promote their regionalist programme, while the PP uses them to justify repression by the "iron state".

Zapatero's government had been heavily criticised by the PP for its attempts to negotiate a settlement in the Basque region. Their predecessors in power, the PP administration of José Maria Aznar, had used the Basque region as a test-bed for anti-democratic measures. Treating any discussion of extended regional power as treason against the Spanish state, the Aznar government had used the "war on terror" as its pretext for clamping down on *any* popular dissent.

The Zapatero government has indicated by this current action that it is determined to move sharply along similar lines. After the Bilbao car-bomb, Zapatero declared, "The democratic state is very strong and prepared for this battle". Threatening to "fight with firmness" any terror, Zapatero told the Senate that the government would "use all means to thwart and pursue those who use violence".

There was an immediate response amongst Basque nationalists, with demonstrations called in protest. A subsequent car-bomb in Bilbao, which injured the bodyguard of a local politician, bore all the hallmarks of an ETA device.

Nationalist politicians have sought to exploit the arrests to further their regionalist agenda. Pernando Barrena, ignoring the wider implications of the attacks on democratic rights, called them "a total declaration of war against Basque independence".

Head of the regional assembly José Juan Ibarretxe, of the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), said the arrests were no help in finding a solution to the problem of the Basque region. He has used the arrests as an opportunity to revive his failed 2005 plan for "free associated" status for the region.

Like Batasuna, the PNV looks to Northern Ireland as its model. In the last week Ibarretxe has been in negotiations

with Zapatero over a proposed referendum on the future autonomy of the Basque region. Ibarretxe described this as the first step towards a "Basque-style Downing Street process". Zapatero has rejected this out of hand, saying that Ibarretxe cannot proceed with a popular consultation which would have no legal force. The PP criticised Zapatero for being "timorous" in these discussions.

Ibarretxe, who also accused the PSOE of trying to look tough for potential voters, said "You could never imagine putting the leaders of Sinn Fein in prison for advancing the peace process and achieving political agreements". He warned that Basques would not understand why Zapatero was negotiating with ETA four months ago, and now will not talk to the democratically-elected president of the region. He has said that he remains confident that an agreement will be reached on the referendum.

His negotiations now are seen as an attempt to win the support of more hardline nationalists. With the resignation last month of PNV President Josu Jon Imaz, who was widely seen as a moderate negotiator with the PSOE, this indicates a renewed drive to promote regional separation.

There is nothing progressive in such a programme, which can have as its end result only the more intensive exploitation of workers divided on regional lines. The response of the Spanish ruling class is to seek a stronger state to suppress any political dissent. Against both of these bankrupt national capitalist perspectives working people across the whole of Spain must fight with their class brother and sisters internationally for an independent socialist and internationalist political perspective against their common exploiters. The only progressive solution to the crisis of the Spanish state lies in the fight to transcend all national and regional divisions by establishing the United Socialist States of Europe.



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