

# Spain: Socialist Party capitulates to right wing anti-abortionists

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At a December 28 press conference, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero finally ruled out including in the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) manifesto for next March's general election the decriminalisation and extension of abortion rights beyond the 1985 criteria established after the fall of General Francisco Franco's dictatorship.

During December Zapatero had urged a period of "reflection", which it was anticipated would lead to some form of extension of abortion rights. Instead, Zapatero caved in to a campaign by the Vatican and anti-abortionist groups.

He argued that his initial proposal was misunderstood, saying, "There are no plans to modify the law in this area."

Abortion, a basic democratic right for women, is under sustained attack by Catholic and right-wing groups. Workers at private clinics face violent attacks by anti-abortionist groups, who model their campaigns on their American counterparts.

The 1985 criteria were themselves a compromise by the then PSOE government of Felipe Gonzalez with political representatives of the former Franco dictatorship. The law only allows abortion in three highly specific instances.

\* When the woman has been raped and has reported it to the police then an abortion is allowed during the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy.

\* If serious physical abnormalities have been detected in the fetus up to 22 weeks.

\* If the pregnant woman faces serious risks to her health or negative psychological problems. In such circumstances there is no time restriction.

Abortion is not allowed on request. The law categorically rules out abortion on the grounds of economic hardship.

An array of Catholic groups from the Vatican to the E-Christians, HazteOir.org, Institute for Family Policy and Foundation Vida, are demanding that the total ban imposed by Franco is restored.

Zapatero's announcement came after the Popular Party and the PSOE joined forces in parliament to crush a motion (by 277 votes to 21) moved by followers of the United Left (IU), controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party, to broaden access to abortion and for the procedure to be provided by the public health service instead of expensive private clinics. A PSOE spokesperson declared they agreed with the spirit of the motion, but preferred "a calm change based on consensus and dialogue," adding, "We just don't think that this is the right time or manner of dealing with such a serious issue."

When the PSOE was elected in March 2004, it had promised to remove many of the restrictions on abortion. The latest policy change by the PSOE was precipitated by a series of police raids on abortion clinics in Barcelona, sparked by information passed on to police by anti-abortion groups. The raids resulted on November 26 in a judge ordering the closure of four abortion centres operated by Dr. Carlos Morin. The clinics under investigation—Ginemedex, Barnamedic, EMECE and TCB—advertised throughout Europe.

According to one report, the initial complaint was filed by E-Christians in Barcelona who in turn based their material on a Danish documentary investigation that secretly filmed a pregnant journalist who asked if, being 30 weeks pregnant, one of the clinic's doctors would carry out an abortion on her.

The police raids were followed by an immediate escalation in the public campaign of anti-abortion groups and the right-wing press. HazteOir.org organized a demonstration outside the Ministry of

Health in Madrid demanding more police raids and “investigations into abortion establishments and, once demonstrated how they do not follow the law on abortion, that they be closed.”

Lurid headlines appeared in the press—“abortion mills”, “death factories” and even accusations that parts of the fetus ending up in certain products—none of which have been substantiated. The *ABC* newspaper (a supporter of Franco’s fascist dictatorship) described what the police had found as “a set of horrors more usually associated with Nazi extermination camps”. The operation, it said, “has uncovered an entire homicide industry that should shame any developed society.”

Another right-wing newspaper, *La Razon*, boasted that the actions of Catholic anti-abortion groups had “resulted in bringing abortion back to the forefront.” *La Razon* also mentioned the Institute for Family Policy, “another Christian-based platform that has redoubled its efforts in favor of life since the court order to close the four abortion centres in Barcelona. Its president, Eduardo Hertfelder, sent a letter Monday to the Minister of Health ‘demanding immediate publication of the data on deaths by abortion in 2006.’”

Bishops had encouraged these organizations by publishing a denunciation of abortion earlier in the year. This was followed by a mass rally called by the Bishops Episcopal Conference in defense of the traditional family on December 31 in Madrid. Fifty bishops, cardinals and religious leaders participated. Buses came from all over Spain and Portugal. Tens of thousands cheered as Pope Benedict appeared on huge screens via a live satellite link to praise the demonstration.

Speakers denounced the PSOE government’s social policies, presenting themselves as the victim of “materialist forces”. According to one report on 2 January in *El Pais*, “the archbishop of Madrid, Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela, argued that the government’s policies related to the family are a ‘step back for human rights.’ ‘Whoever harms the family as an institution, even if they do so unconsciously, makes national and international peace more fragile,’ Rouco Varela declared.”

Kiko Arguello, a senior figure in the Neo-cathecumenal Way—a global evangelical movement—said to the crowds, “These atheistic,

irreligious governments want to make us believe that our life has no meaning and that isn’t true”.

This is the latest Vatican-sponsored political rally against the policies pursued by the PSOE government and comes just two months before the general elections. Minister of Justice Mariano Fernández Bermejo said of the rally that “national-Catholicism has now begun to campaign” in support of the Popular Party “from the hand of the church hierarchy, and the most reactionary Right”. He condemned the use of a liturgy in favor of “messages that coincide with the well-known proposals defended by the Popular Party”.

It is in full knowledge of the nature and political intent of the anti-abortion campaign that the PSOE has beat its latest retreat.

Popular sentiment is opposed to the political intervention of the Church, which has witnessed a virtual collapse in its influence amongst the youth. Maria, speaking in *El Pais*, summed up popular hostility to the church on this question, declaring, “That’s enough, we look like the US and its antiabortionist groups, those who don’t want to abort don’t have to. Don’t try to manipulate the rest of the people, continue going to church or wherever you like but stop trying to impose your criteria. At this pace the next thing will be the defense of creationism in schools. And all this three months before the elections. It stinks.”

Another reader added, “It is still incredible that after more than thirty years of democracy, we still have to put up with part of the repressive and ideological blot that the church carries on.”

Zapatero’s decision to hold back from extending abortion rights from his party’s manifesto is only his government’s latest attempt to appease the far-right. In the same spirit, José Bono Martínez, who quit as Minister of Defence in April last year, has been brought out of retirement to lead the PSOE’s election campaign. He is a self-proclaimed devout Catholic, and has urged an embrace of nationalist Catholic traditions.



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