

Spain: United Left splits as it lurches further right

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The United Left (Izquierda Unida—IU) coalition is splitting apart, with warring factions of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) competing for supremacy.

The infighting has been accompanied by public insults, expulsions, walk-outs, court cases and splits in the coalition's local organisations. A full-blown national split is predicted soon between the two factions, the largest led by the present coordinator of the IU, Gaspar Llamazares, and the other led by the so-called "critics," including many long-serving Stalinist hacks such as former IU coordinator Julio Anguita. Although most of the leaders of both factions are longstanding PCE members, Llamazares's supporters denounce the "critics" as "Communists" or "The Communist Party."

The bitter struggle within the IU is a political response to the problems facing the Spanish political establishment. At a time of growing economic crisis and the discrediting of the old bureaucratic reformist and Stalinist parties, a key requirement of the ruling elite is the formation of a mechanism with which to prevent growing social opposition from developing into a political movement that might threaten the fundamental interests of big business. Once again, the PCE is being called upon to fulfill this role by heading off a leftward movement amongst Spanish workers and the middle class and diverting it back behind the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government.

Since it came to power, the PSOE led by José Luis Zapatero has defended the interests of Spain's ruling elites at the expense of the working population. It has pandered to the right-wing Popular Party (PP) and has sought to block any movement by the Spanish working class to defend its economic and political interests.

The PSOE was brought to power in 2004 by a popular revolt against the PP's neo-liberal economic and social policies and its support for the invasion of Iraq. Since then, the PSOE has pursued a pro-business economic policy, while the living standards of Spanish workers have deteriorated dramatically. The worldwide credit crunch has led to a major fall in house prices, while Spain's indebtedness has grown. The PSOE's response to repeated provocations by the PP, the Catholic Church and the military on the issues of regional autonomy, negotiations with the Basque separatist ETA, secularism, abortion and measures to acknowledge the crimes of the Franco dictatorship has been conciliatory.

The party remains slightly ahead in opinion polls for the March 9 election thanks to the entrenched hostility of working people towards the PP, and it is expected to win. But there is the real possibility that it may not be able to form a majority government. Even if it gains a second term in office, moreover, it faces severe difficulties. It must impose the growing crisis facing Spanish capital onto the backs of a politically restive and combative working class.

Writing in the March 2 *Financial Times*, Wolfgang Münchau stated that "the winner will spend the next four years cleaning up an economic mess of a scale not witnessed in Spain in modern times.

"The twin engines of the coming Spanish economic crisis are a collapsing housing market and a current account deficit, now at 10 percent

of gross domestic product. The two are related, of course, as the property bubble has been a driving force behind a credit-financed spending boom."

He continues, "Between 1995 and last year, Spanish house prices tripled in nominal terms, and doubled in real terms.... I would expect real Spanish house prices to fall by almost as much as they have risen over the past 10 years...."

"The economic impact of this downturn in the housing cycle is going to be worse for Spain than for other countries. A truly staggering statistic about Spain is the fact that construction investment constitutes 18 percent of the Spanish gross domestic product, according to the European Union's Ameco database. In France and Germany, that proportion is about 10 percent."

Münchau predicts "a half-decade of zero growth—perhaps longer, perhaps worse, perhaps both."

Both factions within the IU are responding to the immediate electoral difficulties facing the Socialist Party as well as to the mounting threat that Spain's economic problems will trigger an eruption of social and political struggles.

The main thrust of statements by the Llamazares faction centres on integrating into a future PSOE government and accepting ministerial portfolios should Zapatero win the election with a reduced majority and be forced to form a coalition government. After a recent meeting with Zapatero, Llamazares declared, "Let's not set ourselves any limits. We don't have any stigmas that prevent us from participating in the government. It will depend on pragmatic agreements."

In their pursuit of electoral seats and a government role, Llamazares and his supporters are shedding any pretence of representing a left-wing independent alternative to the PSOE.

This is why Llamazares has acted with such ruthlessness against factional opponents within his party. According to Spanish newspaper reports, a political bloodbath took place at a meeting of the IU executive on December 18. A resolution of the IU presidency led by Llamazares was passed, expelling the three most prominent PCE members, all of whom had helped create the IU in 1986. Those ousted were Felipe Alcaraz (president of the PCE in Andalucía for the last 21 years and president of the national organisation since 2005), Euro-MP Willy Meyer and Manuel Monereo, a PCE political committee member and one of the party's main ideologues.

The meeting also passed other resolutions directed at the "critics." One called for revision of the membership lists, particularly in Andalucía, in preparation for the 2008 IU Conference. This will be held after the March 9 election, and commentators say the split will be finalised there. Another resolution ordered the IU in Valencia to hold new primaries to select another general election candidate. This would give Llamazares's faction time to mobilise its supporters. The Valencia organisation has now split, giving rise to bitter arguments over which faction keeps the "IU" name. Two candidates are standing in the election under its banner.

Following this political bloodbath, the "critics" and their supporters

condemned Llamazares for embarking on a war, saying it will destroy the IU. Alcaraz declared, “Llamazares has placed a bomb at the heart of the United Left.” They warn that Llamazares’ open capitulation to Zapatero will expose the IU’s claim to be a political alternative to the establishment parties.

The IU executive stated that its actions were necessary to “improve the IU’s capacity for collective leadership and to ensure a coherent political line.” Llamazares said the vote gave him the authority to re-found the IU and open it up to the “new emerging sectors (of society): ecologists, pacifists, feminists....”

“We are inviting other forces on the alternative left and the nationalist left to collaborate in the elaboration of our programme,” he added.

The bitter struggle to break the IU from its past associations with the Communist Party and orient to other tendencies is supported by other leading PCE members. Concha Caballero, spokesperson for the IU in the Andalusia autonomous parliament, has joined the Llamazares faction, declaring that IU had “gone backwards” since the PCE “took control of it.”

“[The purpose of the] United Left,” she said, “is to unite a lot of people who place themselves to the left of the PSOE, that was its fundamental principle, plurality was inherent. The Communist Party has acted against those founding principles of the IU and against many others, creating little pressure groups, without allowing the IU to breathe.”

Caballero has only recently been expelled from the PCE she now denounces (for alleged arrears in membership dues) after nearly 30 years as an activist. Caballero and Llamazares’s faction is looking to build a broader coalition that is even less identified with “socialism.”

Another former PCE member has been more explicit. Isaura Navarro, a lawyer and member of Greenpeace, who represents the PCE-led trade union Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras, CC.OO) and held one of the IU’s seats in parliament, quit the PCE to form a new electoral coalition in Valencia, Bloc-Iniciativa-Verds.

She described the Valencia IU as the “monocolor” of the PCE—i.e., no longer pluralist. Whereas she had joined “a project where there was room for people who were not in the Communist Party,” now “This is no longer that project.” The PCE wants to “impose its communist version” on the IU, and “I am no communist.”

Both PCE factions have the same essential political orientation, but differ sharply on tactics. The present-day “critics” in fact created the IU to bloc a leftward movement in the working class and also groomed Llamazares for leadership. Their main concern is that the IU is being so uncritically associated with the government that it will no longer be able to maintain the support amongst more left-leaning workers that has made it such a useful apologist for the PSOE historically. These concerns surfaced back in 2005 when 70 members of “Corriente Roja” (Red Current) resigned from the PCE. They wrote that it was necessary to abandon IU because, “In a situation like the present, in which the membership is witnessing how the IU is sinking and...dragging the CP down with it, debates could open up that are difficult to control.”

Izquierda Unida was founded by the PCE in 1986, some 10 years after the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco in November 1975 and the so-called “peaceful transition” to democracy (1975-1978). During the transition, the PSOE and PCE worked to preserve capitalism in Spain and limit opposition to the Franco dictatorship to the demand for a democratic constitution. They thwarted widespread expectations of real change as well as the demand for bringing to justice those who had participated in the Falangist regime. The collaboration between the PSOE and PCE reached its height when all the major parties signed the 1978 Moncloa Pact paving the way for a new constitution.

The PSOE came to power in 1982 under the leadership of Felipe Gonzalez after several years of tumultuous struggles. However, disillusionment quickly set in. Rebellions broke out over Gonzalez’s

decision to join NATO, while industrial action against the closing of uneconomic steel plants and shipyards built up to a general strike against the growing social crisis, which saw unemployment reaching 24 percent.

In the midst of this crisis, the PCE created the IU as a coalition of PSOE dissidents, liberals, left nationalists, radicals and Greens. It diverted the mounting rebellion into a movement to push the PSOE to implement a more left-reformist policy.

The fact that today the IU project has collapsed is an indication of a vastly changed political situation in which the formation of a genuine socialist party is not only necessary, but possible.

The break-up of the PCE and its appendage, the IU, is not simply a Spanish phenomenon. Elsewhere, similar projects formed by combinations of Stalinists and middle class radicals are undergoing the same lurch to the right. In Italy, Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*—RC), was formed under the leadership of a wing of the former Italian Communist Party, and was for many years hailed as a model for a refurbished left. The RC played a key role in supporting the formation of the coalition government headed by Romani Prodi, which replaced the right-wing alliance led by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi in May 2006. The party sacrificed everything to secure the existence of the government: pensions, social welfare assistance, health care, job security and democratic rights.

Less than two years after coming to power, Prodi’s government, an alliance of no fewer than nine separate parties, including RC and the Left Democrats (which also emerged from the Italian Communist Party), has collapsed, with new elections called for mid-April. Both parties remained loyal to Prodi as popular opposition to his government intensified. Long-time RC leader Fausto Bertinotti acted as a vital prop for the Prodi government in his function as president of the Chamber of Deputies.

Prodi’s popularity plummeted after he ensured the expansion of a US military base in northern Italy and the participation of Italian troops in Afghanistan and Lebanon. These measures were taken in the teeth of massive opposition by a population that is also now beginning to feel the consequences of Prodi’s harsh budgetary policy. RC, which had formerly opposed an Italian military presence in Afghanistan, voted with the government on this. The IU would not act any differently if it achieved its ambition of joining the government.

RC is now seeking to establish a new alliance with the name “La Sinistra Arcobaleno” (the Left Rainbow), which follows almost exactly the template advocated by Llamazares in Spain.

At a time when vast layers in the working class are finally abandoning social democracy, the Stalinists and their radical allies have seized on what they see as openings to make new alliances with “big names” among the social democratic and trade union lefts and in this way integrate themselves more directly into the structures of official politics.

Nothing progressive, let alone left-wing, can come out of any such new formations. The net result of every one of the recent regroupment projects has been a disaster. The split in the IU proves once again that the working class cannot rely on any representative of the labour bureaucracies or their apologists to provide an alternative leadership. There is no substitute for the building of a new and genuinely socialist party through an irreconcilable struggle against these forces.



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