

Spanish Communist Party seeks to re-found United Left

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The Spanish Communist Party (PCE) is seeking to re-found the United Left (Izquierda Unida), the political coalition that it set up in 1986. The manoeuvre reflects the rapid decline and lurch to the right of the PCE/IU.

IU coordinator and leading PCE member Cayo Lara declared that the re-founding congress will be the “reconstruction of the alternative and transformative left,” adding that the coalition is the only “political force able to make a broad and open appeal to all segments of the left.”

The ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) led by José Luis Zapatero has become widely discredited after six years in power. It has defended the interests of Spain’s ruling elite at the expense of the working population, pandered to the right-wing Popular Party (PP) and sought to block the working class from defending its economic and political interests. Those workers who voted for the PSOE in 2004, after eight years of the PP’s pro-business and pro-war policies, feel betrayed by its continuing attacks on living standards and democratic rights.

A key requirement of the ruling elite is the formation of a mechanism with which to prevent social opposition from developing into a political movement that might threaten the fundamental interests of big business. Once again, the PCE is being called on to fulfil this role.

The IU was thrown into crisis in early 2008 on the eve of the general election, which threatened the downfall of the PSOE government. A faction led by IU coordinator Gaspar Llamazares, backed by the PCE, attempted to oust the “critics” from the organisation as it sought to get closer to the PSOE. This had reached the point of offering to take up ministerial positions in a new government.

Both factions had the same essential political orientation, differing only on tactics. The main concern of the “critics” was that the IU had become so closely associated with the PSOE government that it would be unable to maintain support amongst more left-leaning workers.

In the event, the IU lost most of its own seats, ending up with just two deputies—down from 21 in 1996—and the PSOE sought the support of the Basque and Catalan nationalist

parties instead. Subsequently, Llamazares resigned his post as coordinator and major figures like Inés Sabanés and Rosa Aguilar deserted the coalition. The PCE put Lara forward as its candidate to replace Llamazares. He was appointed as coordinator in December 2009 by the Federal Political Council with 65 percent support. Straight away, Lara declared that there is “great fear to appear anti-PSOE” within the coalition, adding that “we must refine our tactics” and avoid “bad misinterpretations.”

In order to prepare for the re-founding of the IU, the PCE held its own congress in November 2009. A motion to leave the IU, effectively leading to its collapse, received the support of only 13 percent of the delegates.

Francisco Frutos was replaced as general secretary by José Luis Centella, the only candidate standing, with 85 percent of the votes. Centella comes from the PCE Andalusian section, which has historically been more conciliatory towards the non-PCE parties within the coalition.

In his farewell report, Frutos admitted the scale of the crisis within the IU when he said that the organisation had nearly collapsed, but claimed “the relationship between the IU and CP (Communist Party) has improved immensely since the IU Conference in 2008, because there is mutual respect.”

“We, the founders of IU, are not going to allow it to go up the creek. And it nearly happened. IU was on the point of disappearing as a political reference after the last general elections,” he added.

Frutos warned, “The worst crisis of capitalism can end up with a new defeat and reverse for the workers movement and the left as a whole...the social, syndicalist, political and intellectual response of the left is practically non-existent in Europe.”

Centella concurred saying, “There isn’t much room for the left. The problem is that IU has not looked for its space, has not known how to define it, it has not had the will. Now it is beginning to do it.”

When asked if he thought the process of IU re-foundation would reduce the PCE’s domination of the coalition,

Centella answered, “We will confront the re-foundation with all our loyalty. We want to be part of IU, not the hegemonic part or the one which is sitting in a corner. We want to converge with other forces. We will be less hegemonic, but there will be more people.”

“What is new is that the concept of revolution today is not that of the last century. Today the fundamental question is a participating democracy, not to take the power,” Centella declared.

Centella’s avowal of reformism is in line with the PCE’s Keynesian policies of “a public banking system; for the strategic sectors of the economy to be in public hands, beginning with energy; a clearly progressive fiscal system and mechanisms for democratic control.”

During the PSOE government of Felipe González that came to power in 1982, disillusionment quickly set in. Popular discontent erupted leading to a general strike over González’s decision to join NATO, the closure of steel plants and shipyards and soaring unemployment which reached 24 percent. It was during this crisis, in 1986, that the PCE created the IU as a coalition of PSOE dissidents, liberals, left nationalists, radicals and Greens in order to divert the mounting rebellion into a movement to pressurise the PSOE to implement a more left-reformist policy.

A consequence of this policy was the election in 1996 of the PP, a party with clear links to Franco’s fascist National Movement. Its leaders had held high positions within the regime, including Manuel Fraga, a former Minister of Tourism, and the new PP Prime Minister José María Aznar, who had belonged to the Falangist Youth.

The fact that the PSOE lost 11 percent of its votes, while the IU obtained its best ever results, gaining 10.5 percent, indicated that workers were looking to the IU for a political alternative to the pro-business policies, privatisation and social attacks of the PSOE government. But support for the IU subsequently nose-dived, despite the extremely rightwing character of the Aznar government. This was because its policies were virtually indistinguishable from those of the PSOE. After the catastrophic vote in 2008, even Frutos was forced to note that “the people prefer to vote for the original [the PSOE], not the copy [the IU].”

Today, Spain is experiencing a social catastrophe. Unemployment stands at 20.5 percent, and among those aged 16-25 it is 40 percent. The last publication from the Centre of Sociological Studies shows that around 70 percent of workers see the economic situation as bad or very bad. According to *Le Figaro*, 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, earning less than 7,753 euro annually for a single person and less than 11,630 euro for a couple. The PSOE is preparing cuts in social spending and a reform

of labour legislation, as demanded by big business.

Last October, the PSOE was able to pass the annual national budget. The IU had been “offering their hand up to the last minute” in an attempt to convince the government to implement an alternative budget. Instead the government rejected its “offer” and looked to the Basque Nationalist Party and Canaries Coalition for support. The IU’s main objective has been to pressure the government to modify its fiscal policy, especially the increase in the VAT sales tax. It has removed from its programme the nationalisation of companies privatised under the González governments, the abolition of companies based on temporary work and the withdrawal of Spain from NATO.

The IU has not even tried to mobilise its supporters against the government’s many attacks, including raising taxes on the middle and working classes and cutting the 400 euro handout it promised every taxpayer in its election manifesto. Minister of Labour Celestino Corbacho recently declared that he is proposing to raise the retirement age to 67.

The IU has also covered for Spain’s largest trade union, the CC.OO that was founded by the PCE, which has strangled every initiative or independent action by the working class. Lara declared, “We wanted to strike, but it is a question that must be decided by the unions, and the major trade unions have said that the conditions do not exist [to strike].” Delegates at the PCE congress refused to change any policies relating to the CC.OO with one saying, “We will not put [CC.OO] on an equal basis with the others.... CC.OO remains the reference trade union of the PCE. ”



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