Spain: Basque separatist party moves to renounce armed struggle

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Leaders of the banned group Batasuna—the political wing of the Basque armed separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) in Spain—have announced the formation of a new party, "Sortu" (Birth), to contest elections in May.

At a press conference to announce its formation, long-standing Batasuna leader Rufi Etxeberria said Batasuna's aim is to create "a separatist party which aims, using exclusively political and democratic means, to create a Basque state within the framework of the European Union." It also seeks to contribute to the "political and social alliances that place sovereignty and separatism at the heart of Basque society."

Batasuna's stated purpose in founding Sortu is to abandon "armed struggle" and integrate itself directly into the political and financial machinery of European capitalism.

The statutes of the new party declare that Sortu will contribute to "the definitive and total disappearance of any type of violence, in particular, that of the ETA organization," and that it is "committed to exclusively political and democratic means." Sortu's statutes indicate that this is a permanent change in orientation. It specifies that this decision will "not be subject to tactical variables nor conjunctural factors."

The party, which has yet to be officially recognized under Spain's Parties Law (Ley de Partidos), was supported by other Basque separatist parties, organisations and trade unions belonging to the "nationalist left" (Izquierda Abertzale). In order to prevent objections to recognition—which has often been withheld in past attempts to create new parties—Sortu has appointed as its general secretary Etxebarria Akaiturri, a geologist who has never stood in an electoral list before.

Batasuna was illegalized by José María Aznar's PP government using the Parties Law, which allows for the banning of any party that directly or indirectly condones terrorism or sympathizes with a terrorist organization. Since this law was passed in 2002, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack in the United States and the "war on terror" proclaimed by Washington, 12 parties have been banned. Batasuna's leader, Arnaldo Otegi, is currently in jail accused of "glorification of terrorism".

Last September, ETA announced its decision "not to carry out offensive armed actions" in a video message sent to the BBC. José Luis Zapatero's PSOE government, the PP and the majority of the other parties in Congress dismissed the announcement as a tactical move, stating that ETA had broken such ceasefires before.

Since the ceasefire, however, large weekly demonstrations have occurred in the main Basque cities including Bilbao, Vitoria and San Sebastián calling for dialogue with ETA, against the ban on demonstrations and for an end to violence and torture. Captured ETA members are often tortured. In the latest case, in December 2010, four civil guards were jailed for torturing two ETA members.

The response of Spain's ruling Socialist Party (PSOE) to the founding of Sortu was critical, and that of the opposition Popular Party (PP) openly hostile.

Spain's deputy Prime Minister Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba declared that Batasuna has "minimal" credibility. He added that this "is the first time in many years" that it "has explicitly rejected violence … we have a long way to go and in the meantime I do not want anyone to forget that ETA has yet to declare a definitive end to violence."

Ana Mato, vice secretary of the PP, said that it "would be intolerable if the government lets the

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terrorists be in the elections" and added, "I don't think that the socialist government is so unwary, so naïve or so treacherous to permit this."

Iñigo Urkullu, president of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), declared that "the PP and PSOE are not capable of letting go of their prey [ETA], which has given them so many electoral gains".

The PP and PSOE are wary of Sortu, as it might upset the unstable coalition through which they rule the Basque country—a minority PSOE government, supported by the PP—after 30 years of PNV (Basque Nationalist Party) rule. The PNV has also benefited electorally from the suppression of Batasuna, which regularly polled 10 percent in elections and held the balance of power in the Basque Congress before being illegalised.

Since its foundation in 1981, Batasuna has been the political wing of ETA, which was formed in the late 1950s under the fascist Franco regime, on the basis of an armed struggle for a separate Basque state.

The national-separatist perspective of ETA and Batasuna was always fundamentally opposed to a Marxist strategy for the international mobilization of the working class against capitalism. While at times using socialistic rhetoric, Batasuna and its counterparts never attempted to solidarise themselves with workers' struggles outside the Basque region.

Their use of tactics of individual terrorism—which led to 820 assassinations, hundreds of injuries, dozens of kidnappings, extortions and robberies—allowed the state to justify its repressive apparatus. It thus helped provide a smokescreen for attacks on democratic rights, bolster Spanish chauvinism, and divide the working class along national lines. Successive governments have banned newspapers, demonstrations and radio stations. Most notoriously, the PSOE government of Felipe González created a state assassination squad, the Anti-terrorist Groups of Liberation (GAL).

Batasuna's call for a "democratic" integration into European capitalism—amid the most serious capitalist crisis since the 1930s—is an acknowledgment of the fundamentally anti-working class character of its politics.

Today's desperate social crisis lays the basis for uniting workers in Spain and internationally against capitalism—with unemployment in Spain standing at 20 percent, youth unemployment rising to 43 percent, and social rights and living standards under attack by Zapatero. Nonetheless, the petty-bourgeois Basque nationalists advocate building a new capitalist state in the Basque country, in collaboration with the European ruling class.

In its attempts to integrate itself into the state apparatus, Batasuna openly looks to the "success" of the IRA and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. There, the "peace process" was carried out above the heads of the working class, Irish and British alike, by Washington, London and Dublin, to create a cheap-labour platform and encourage investment by international capital, after three decades of military conflict.

The International Contact Group of UN Ambassadors, led by the South African lawyer Brian Currin who took part in the Irish peace process in 1998, is involved in the Basque country. The Sortu press conference was attended by Sinn Fein leader Alex Maskey.

For years, the Basque nationalists have sought to create a new capitalist mini-state, in order to secure international investment. The profit generated would be restricted to a tiny layer of the region's elite and could only be achieved on the back of increased exploitation of Basque working people. This is also the record of Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland—where it became the main political vehicle for imposing austerity measures, together with the British loyalist Democratic Unionist Party.

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