

The calling of early elections in Spain

Peter Schwarz
3 August 2011

Under growing pressure from the financial markets, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Louis Zapatero has announced early elections for November 20, four months before the March 2012 deadline. In all likelihood, the conservative Peoples Party (PP) will win the election and return to power after seven years in opposition. Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) already suffered heavy losses in local elections in May and is behind in the polls.

The PP emerged from the fascist Franco dictatorship, which came to power with the support of Hitler and Mussolini in 1939 after three years of civil war, collapsing only in 1975 with Franco's death. The PP refuses up to this day to condemn the Franco dictatorship and its crimes.

By calling early elections whose likely outcome will be its removal and handover of government power to the right-wing PP, the PSOE is following a pattern that has been well established in Europe.

Social democrats win power by exploiting popular opposition to the conservative right wing. They then pursue a policy that is no different from that of their predecessor. Like the conservatives, they function unabashedly as instruments of finance capital. Based on their close connections to the trade union bureaucracy and the support of a plethora of pseudo-left groups, they organize attacks on the working class that would likely trigger more fierce resistance if they came at the hands of the conservatives.

Finally, after they have completely discredited themselves, they perform a final service for the financial elite by creating the most favourable conditions for a conservative election victory through the premature dissolution of parliament.

In Germany, the Schröder government, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, froze wages, cut unemployment benefits, created a vast low-wage sector and, for the first time since 1945, sent German soldiers to fight in foreign wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. In 2005, it suddenly brought about early elections and handed over power to Angela Merkel and the Christian Democrats.

In Italy, the centre-left coalition of Romano Prodi restructured the budget through massive cuts in social spending, defying widespread popular opposition. It forced through the expansion of US military bases. In 2008, just

two years after it had triumphed over Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing alliance, it facilitated Berlusconi's return to power.

In Portugal, the social democratic prime minister, Jose Socrates, implemented a devastating austerity programme on behalf of international finance capital before he resigned in March, making way for the conservative Pedro Coelho.

In Greece, Prime Minister George Papandreou of the social democratic PASOK party, is likewise heading for an early exit.

US President Barack Obama has followed a similar course. Since hostility to George Bush and the Republicans propelled him into the White House in 2008, he has escalated the war in Afghanistan, started a new war in Libya, and imposed trillions of dollars in cuts at the expense of workers, retirees and the poor, exposing himself as an unconditional agent of Wall Street.

Events in Spain have followed the same pattern. The PSOE won the 2004 election due to widespread opposition to Spain's involvement in the Iraq War. It was able to retain its parliamentary majority in 2008 due to a favourable economic situation. However, when the boom in the construction sector collapsed due to the international financial crisis, the Zapatero government responded with vicious attacks on the working class.

It cut child benefits, slashed salaries in the public sector, lowered pensions and raised the retirement age. Last year, when air traffic controllers went on strike against massive wage cuts, Zapatero, for the first time since Franco, deployed the army against strikers and threatened them with lengthy prison sentences. The PSOE was supported by the unions, which had collaborated in the social cuts by limiting opposition to impotent protests.

The Zapatero government also continued the foreign policy of its conservative predecessor. While it withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq, it increased the size of its force in Afghanistan and participated in the imperialist war against Libya.

The social consequences of these policies are disastrous. The official unemployment rate stands at 21.3 percent in Spain. One in two young people under 25 is jobless.

In the end, the decision that Zapatero must go was made by the financial elite he has faithfully served for seven years. He has served his purpose.

After ten million workers participated in a general strike last autumn, thousands of young people demonstrated against the government, and the social democrats lost the spring municipal elections, the financial elite and its media mouthpieces came to the conclusion that Zapatero no longer had the strength to impose further attacks.

Despite the government's drastic cost-cutting measures, the financial markets have increased the pressure on Spain. Interest rates on government bonds rose above six percent. Last Friday, shortly before Zapatero announced the early election, the rating agency Moody's threatened to downgrade the country's creditworthiness.

Last week, *El Pais*, for decades the most important newspaper backing the PSOE, announced it would no longer be supporting Zapatero. "A cycle comes to an end. If Se?or Zapatero wants to do his country one last service, he should resign as soon as possible," ran the editorial of the newspaper, where the wealthy American investor Nicolas Berggruen last year became a majority shareholder.

The head of the second largest Spanish bank, BBVA, also called for Zapatero's resignation. "Spain needs a strong, effective government," declared Francisco Gonzalez. "We have to separate ourselves from the league that does not interest us, from the Greeks, Portuguese and Irish, and join countries like France, Holland and Germany."

Leading circles within the PSOE are also distancing themselves from their head of government. The former interior minister, Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba, who will head the PSOE slate instead of Zapatero, resigned from his post in July.

The complete subordination of all parties, including the traditional "left," to the dictates of finance capital has politically disenfranchised the working class. The coming election in Spain is a farce without any democratic content. It has been called on short notice in order to blindside the electorate.

Voters can choose between different candidates, but the policies of the future government have already been determined. Austerity and cuts in social services will continue, regardless of whether the PP wins the election or the PSOE, contrary to expectations, manages a comeback.

This is an international phenomenon, not a Spanish one. Elections are held and governments changed at the behest of the financial elite, always with the aim of enforcing a brutal, unpopular policy as effectively as possible.

Zapatero is the last social democratic prime minister in a major EU country. Apart from Spain, social democrats are in power only in Austria, Slovenia and Greece. This does not

mean, however, that they will not be needed again.

In Italy, much of the financial elite is pleading for a return of the centre-left parties to government because the Berlusconi regime is too internally divided to implement harsh cost-cutting measures. A new centre-left-government would attack the working class even more aggressively than did the Prodi government. The bourgeois "left" has long since abandoned any pretence of social reforms and hardly differs from its conservative opponents.

While governments may change at the behest of the financial elite, discrediting the entire political system, in the background preparations are underway for more authoritarian regimes to suppress the resistance of the working class. In this regard, the unbroken links of Spain's PP to the fascist Franco regime should stand as a warning.

What is required to counter the austerity demands of the financial oligarchy and defend the democratic rights and social gains of the working class is a break with the social democrats and the trade unions and the establishment of new democratic organizations of struggle and a revolutionary socialist leadership of the working class.

This entails a relentless struggle against the political currents that have emerged from the Stalinist parties and the petty-bourgeois ex-left, such as the Spanish Izquierda Unida, the German Left Party and the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France. They defend the unions, which collaborate with the governments in imposing the cuts. Despite occasional criticisms, they present the social democrats as a "lesser evil" that should be supported in elections and seek to block any independent political development of the working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International is today the only organisation that represents the interests of the working class. It has fought for decades against illusions in the European social democrats and the Democrats in the US and opposed the pseudo-left forces that support these reactionary bourgeois parties. It alone is building revolutionary parties of the working class—the Socialist Equality parties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact