Spain's opportunist United Left forms "broad front"

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Since its formation in 1986, the United Left (IU), a coalition led by the Communist Party (PCE), regionalist groups and the Greens, has based itself on the idea that the ruling Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) can be pressured to the left.

Meanwhile, the PSOE has marched steadily to the right. After the global financial collapse erupted in 2008, José Luis Zapatero's PSOE government, with the assistance of the trade unions, began imposing massive spending cuts, cutting wages and pensions and attacking working conditions. The PSOE has committed itself, should it win upcoming elections, to doing whatever the European Union and International Monetary Fund demand.

Zapatero's actions have discredited the PSOE in the eyes of broad masses of workers and youth, and the party suffered its worst defeat in its history in local and regional elections in May. At the same time, many people have rightly come to view the IU as a servile and unprincipled junior partner of the PSOE and an integral part of the political establishment. The IU's national parliamentary group has shrunk from 21 seats in 1996 to only 2 today, and it lost Cordoba, the only city under its control, in May.

The IU's decline takes place under conditions of growing militancy and resistance. Last year, a general strike brought the country to a standstill. This year, the *indignados* (angry ones), also known as the March 15 movement, erupted outside of the control of the political parties and trade unions, bringing hundreds of thousands onto the streets across the country.

This has prompted the IU to make a feint to the left in an attempt to restore its political standing. After the May election, former IU Coordinator and current Congress spokesman Gaspar Llamazares laid the blame on the IU federation (national organisation) for its failure to "capitalise" on the discrediting of the PSOE and to establish the coalition as a "real alternative force". He called for the federation to accept a "political convergence with other forces" and discussions to take place from the "bottom up"—i.e., at the regional and local levels—on creating a "broad front."

The federation has since agreed to Llamazares's demands, with current IU coordinator Cayo Lara issuing an "Open Call to Society" for a "convergence against neoliberal policies." He insisted that the federation, rather than the regions, should undertake the "dialogue" with other forces and that nobody should attempt to "violate its sovereignty." Lara put himself forward as the prime ministerial candidate of the "broad front."

Talks are in progress on a unified candidacy in the November elections with a number of parties including the Catalan Greens (ICV), Equo, the Anti-Capitalist Left (IA) and a number of non-party organisations and individuals.

The ICV was until recently a coalition partner of the IU in Catalonia, but then announced it would stand separately in November's elections. Equo was formed by former director of Greenpeace Juan López de Uralde and others including former IU deputy in the Madrid regional assembly Montiel Reyes Mesa. A recent recruit has been former IU leading light Ines Sabanés, an IU founding member, Congress deputy and spokesperson in the Madrid assembly.

The IA is affiliated with the United Secretariat, which split from the Fourth International in 1953 and abandoned the struggle to build independent revolutionary parties in favour of acting as a left apologist for the existing mass reformist and Stalinist parties such as the IU. While it broke organisationally from the IU in July 2008 in order to distance itself politically from the social democrats, its essential political aim has remained the same.

In general, these parties and individuals have hailed the IU's call as "good news", providing a cover for its attempt to dress itself in new clothes.

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The perspective and programme they and the IU promote are in any case virtually identical. They oppose a socialist perspective by advancing limited proposals to curb corruption, to encourage "environmental sustainability", reform financial institutions and the European Union, and vague prescriptions for "participatory democracy" and a return to the "ideals of solidarity and the social democratic left."

Such transparent platitudes are only a cover for their continued support for the social democrats and the trade union bureaucracy—and their desire to secure political influence and enrich themselves and the privileged petty bourgeois stratum on which they are based.

It is for this last reason alone that they have expressed reservations about the IU seeking to dominate the "broad front".

"The IU has to move because the left is moving," declared ICV spokesperson Laia Ortiz. "But it should go without preconceptions and without conditions and with all the bounty of the world. The dialogue should be horizontal."

Llamazares has asked the federation to respond to these criticisms and not jeopardise the "credibility" of the "broad front" project. He has announced that his Open Left minority faction in the IU would be transforming itself into the Open Left Party (but remain in the coalition) to act as a "counterweight" to the federation and the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE), which controls it. Llamazares still remains a PCE member, but his forming a new party must mean a split in the PCE is in the offing.

The false claims of a leftward shift by the IU are further exposed by its readiness to make deals with any party, including the right-wing Popular Party (PP), that provides an opportunity to defend regional interests and secure them power and positions.

In Extremadura, a sparsely populated, mainly agricultural region in the southwest of Spain, the PSOE lost 8 seats and its overall majority in the May elections, returning only 30 deputies, 2 less than the PP's 32. The IU-Commitment to Extremadura coalition held the balance of power, having won 3 seats—its first electoral success in the region.

After the election, the three new IU deputies ignored pleas from the federation to sell their seats to the PSOE, as has been the tradition, and abstained in the vote for regional premier—effectively handing power to the PP. In his inaugural speech on July 6, to a standing ovation from PP deputies, the new Extremadura PP Premier José Antonio Monagas declared, "I should like to welcome again the United Left to this Congress. It returns to this House with three members to whom I speak with an outstretched hand and whom I congratulate for the years of hard work outside of this House that today are rewarded."

Monagas repeatedly proclaimed that there was "no ideology, only ideas" and they have "no colour." He promised to consider 12 demands put forward by the IU.

The PP has since approved a plan to cut the number of regional departments from 40 to 28, which will lead to substantial cuts in jobs and services. One of the 28 new departmental managing directors is Candelaria Carrera as head of business and entrepreneurial activity—a prominent IU supporter, president of the Independent Workers Association and promoted as an "activist of the social movement".

The three IU deputies have been given places on fully 15 regional parliamentary committees including Economy, Finance, Agriculture, Education and Health.

In Alava, Ezker Batua (EB, the IU section in the Basque Country) handed control of the Provincial Council to the PP to the detriment of the nationalists who complained of the EB's demands for money and jobs. About 40 local councils have also gone to the PP thanks to the IU's abstentions or outright support.

Back in July 2010, the IU held a "refoundation" conference at which it called for the formation of a "political formation of a new type." "The central objective of the IU refoundation," the IU wrote at the time, was "to convert ourselves into an organisation with useful and viable proposals for social transformation."

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time that "Though it seeks to confuse the population with a politically androgynous 'anti-capitalist' label," any new political formation arising from the IU "will prove bitterly hostile to the working class."

This warning has been borne out. The IU has reached out to other rightward-lurching petty-bourgeois parties only in order to oppose the necessary creation of a socialist party of the Spanish working class and to prevent a political mobilisation against the parties of big business.

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