Spain: Basque separatist ETA declares end of armed struggle

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The Basque separatist group Basque Homeland and Freedom (Euskadi ta Askatasuna, ETA) last week declared “the definitive end to its armed activity”.

For 53 years ETA has engaged in a campaign of bombings, shootings, kidnappings and extortions resulting in the death of 829 people and more than 1,000 injured, mostly civilians. The organisation has not yet said how and when it will disband or turn over its arms.

According to reports, ETA’s leadership initially resisted ending its armed struggle unless the government gave political concessions, including the recognition of the right to self-determination for Euskal Herria (an area encompassing the Basque Country and Navarre in Spain and the northern Basque Country in France) and an amnesty for all ETA members, sympathisers and those living in exile. None of these concessions have been forthcoming.

Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero welcomed the ETA's announcement, and stated, "Ours will be a democracy without terrorism but never without memory," referring to the victims and violence. The People' Party leader, Mariano Rajoy, who has been a staunch critic of any negotiations with ETA in the past, called the announcement "good news... It shows how a society knows how to remain united and defend its position because this announcement was made without any concessions."

The Basque Country president, Patxi López, general secretary of the PSOE’s Basque affiliate, the Socialist Party of Euskadi—Euskadiko Ezkerra (PSE-EE), declared, “Reason has replaced non-reason, democracy has won over totalitarianism, and the state of the law has defeated terrorism.”

López said that he will convene a meeting as soon as possible of all the regional parties to discuss its political future and seek “maximum unity” in order to “consolidate the final cycle” of ETA.

Over the past year, dozens of demonstrations have taken place on a weekly basis in the main Basque cities including Bilbao, Vitoria and San Sebastián. They have called for the government to hold talks with ETA, opposed the ban on demonstrations, and urged an end to violence and torture and the return of imprisoned ETA members to jails in the Basque Country.

Behind these demonstrations have been the political parties historically linked with ETA and its banned political wing, Batasuna. Last March, the party Sortu was illegalised for alleged links with Batasuna, even though it had rejected violence in its statutes. Another formation—Bildu—was created, which was initially banned but allowed by the courts to take part in the May 2011 regional elections. It polled 25 percent of the Basque vote, making it the second largest party behind the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV).

Throughout its existence, ETA has sought to pressure the Spanish state into giving independence through the use of terror tactics. The organisation is deeply hostile to the interests of the working class, motivated not by the struggle for its political, social and economic unification and emancipation but for the national interests of the Basque bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. The creation of a new capitalist mini-state to secure international investment would only benefit a tiny layer of the region’s elite and increase the exploitation of Basque working people.

Now, in an attempt to integrate themselves into the state apparatus, ETA, Batasuna and other nationalist and middle class ex-left organisations calling themselves the “Basque Radical Left” are looking to the “success” of the “peace process” involving the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland.

Carried out above the heads of the working class, Irish and British alike, the aim of this agreement was to secure a stable environment so as to package Northern Ireland as a cheap-labour platform to international capital. Today, Sinn Fein has become the main political vehicle for imposing austerity measures alongside the British loyalist Democratic Unionist Party.

ETA is pursuing a similar “peace process”. It appealed in its statement to the Spanish and French governments to adopt measures to resolve the existing “political conflict”.

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After more than half a century of armed struggle, ETA has achieved nothing except confusion within the working class. Its attacks on working people have played directly into the hands of the Spanish ruling elite, who have used terrorism as a pretext to attack democratic rights, strengthen the state apparatus and divide the working class along national lines.

Under the current Law of Parties (Ley de Partidos), the Socialist Party (PSOE) government can ban any party that directly or indirectly condones terrorism or sympathises with a terrorist organisation. Under the Criminal Procedure Law, suspects can be held in solitary confinement for up to five days in all cases and up to 13 days in cases of terrorism and are unable to freely choose a lawyer. Newspapers and radio stations accused of sympathizing with and financing terrorism have also been closed and demonstrations banned. In the late 1980s, the PSOE government under Felipe González created the Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación (GAL)—essentially para-military death squads—to hunt down ETA members, carry out assassinations and torture captives.

Basque nationalism developed at the turn of the nineteenth century in response to the rise of the workers' movement. Emerging predominantly amongst the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, it sought to find support in the peasantry against the predations of big capital and the state bureaucracy. Each time a revolutionary movement developed, these elements have sought to contain it and use it for their own advantage.

The reactionary nature of this nationalism can be seen in the words of Sabino Arana, father of Basque nationalism and founder of the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco) who said of Spanish workers:

"A great number of them seem to be undeniable testimony of Darwin's theory, since rather than men they resemble apes, rather less beastly than gorillas: do not search in their faces for the expression of human intelligence nor of any virtue; their eyes only reveal idiocy and brutishness."

When the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera fell in 1931, ushering in the start of the Spanish Revolution, the PNV declared its objective was "stopping the workers movement and the possibility of a revolution." It demanded of its members "absolute abstention from participation in any class movement, paying attention to orders which, if necessary, shall be given by the authorities."

This was one of the reasons nationalism never became a major influence in the industrial areas in the Basque region.

ETA was founded in 1959 during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, who suppressed Basque culture, banning the ancient and linguistically unique language and destroying books written in it. It enjoyed its biggest growth and popularity in the period leading up to Franco's death and at the end of the fascist government in 1975. During that time, ETA's victims were mostly members of the government, the hated civil guard and the military, including the blowing up of Franco's chosen successor, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, in 1973.

Following Franco's death in 1975 and the "transition to democracy", ETA lost most of its support due to its indiscriminate killings and its lack of any genuinely progressive social programme.

Following its election in 1996, the new PP government led by José María Aznar took advantage of the widespread hostility towards ETA by mounting a clampdown on the organisation to insist on the inviolability of the Spanish state and to justify a general assault on democratic rights across Spain.

Many ETA cells were broken up by the police, its financial network disrupted and the entire Batasuna leadership tried and imprisoned for showing an ETA video during their electoral campaign. Batasuna's daily paper *Egin* was closed down and its editorial board jailed for "collaboration" with ETA—the first time a newspaper had been banned in Spain since the transition. Nearly a thousand members have been arrested over the last seven years, including the organisation's most experienced leaders.

After 53 years, ETA is no closer to its stated goal. The solution to the Basque conflict and all national divisions is the struggle for the unity of the Spanish, European and international working class. The progressive alternative to the Spanish capitalist state is not carving it up into less economically viable entities based on reactionary nationalist and ethnic regionalism, but a social organization that corresponds to the globalization of production: the United Socialist States of Europe.

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