

The rise of separatist agitation in Europe

Chris Marsden
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Recent months have seen one example after another of gains for parties advocating the creation of new, small states in Spain, Belgium, Italy, Scotland and elsewhere in Europe.

The growth in support for such tendencies has been fuelled by the savage cuts and austerity measures being imposed by central governments on the instructions of the troika—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund—at the behest of the banks and global speculators. But the exploitation of legitimate social grievances does not mean that the political beneficiaries represent the interests of the broad masses who are being exploited.

All of the parties championing separatism speak for bourgeois and upper-middle class layers that have concluded the relative wealth of their regions will allow them a more privileged existence—provided they too seek membership in the European Union and faithfully do the bidding of the banks and corporations in waging attacks on the working class.

The most prominent separatist movements have all emerged within their respective countries' more prosperous regions. All call for an end to the subsidisation of poorer regions through central taxation and advocate local control of valuable assets. None of this is altered by fairly transparent efforts to project a left face in the case of some of the larger nationalist organisations and a plethora of pseudo-left tendencies that trail in their wake.

In Spain, the two most powerful movements are centered in the Basque and Catalan regions. The first is one of Spain's richest regions in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and the second is the richest region overall.

Last month, 1.5 million Catalans marched in Barcelona to call for a separate state under the banner of “a new nation in Europe”. The regional government has dutifully implemented every demand for austerity

made for the past two years, but still finds itself with a record debt of 44 billion euros and a credit rating reduced to junk status.

The leader of the dominant *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union), Artur Mas, is advancing a referendum on independence by calling the distribution of burdens within Spain “unfair and disloyal”. He openly speaks for the more well-off, comparing the “fatigue” in Catalonia with the complaints of Germany, France and other major states that they are subsidising southern Europe's poorer states, such as Greece, Portugal and Spain.

The role played by Berlin and Paris in imposing crushing austerity on these countries is glossed over, because Mas wants entry into the EU. It is proof that an “independent” Catalonia will carry out precisely the same attacks on workers as it has already done as an “autonomous region.”

In Belgium, the same message comes from the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), headed by Bart De Wever, which won decisively in local elections earlier this month by complaining of the Dutch-speaking north subsidising the poorer south of the country. De Wever, who became mayor of Antwerp, has declared, “The Flemish have had enough of being treated like cows only good for their milk.” He described Belgium as “a transfer union” dependent upon “checkbook federalism”. Like his Catalan counterpart, he pursues a pro-EU agenda.

In Italy, the Lega Nord (Northern League) is an openly right-wing formation, opposing subsidies to the less prosperous south under the slogan “Roma ladrona” (Rome Big Thief). But Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti's demands for cuts in regional spending have also sparked protests calling for a Venetian republic. In South Tyrol, separatists are demanding that 90 percent of tax revenue collected in the wealthy province be returned to the region.

The Scottish National Party (SNP), run by Alex Salmond, a former oil adviser to the Royal Bank of Scotland, has secured agreement for an independence referendum in 2014. The SNP has long posed as a defender of limited welfare measures against central government cuts by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and the preceding Labour Party government. But its real agenda is to establish a low corporate tax location for the European market that will serve the interests of the financial elite and its hangers-on.

Edinburgh is the second largest financial centre in the UK after the City of London and the fourth largest in Europe, measured by equity assets. It sustained a growth rate of over 30 percent between 2000 and 2005. It ranks ahead of Qatar, Oslo, Glasgow, Dublin, Abu Dhabi, Brussels, Milan, Madrid and Moscow in the Global Financial Centres Index.

The SNP claims Scotland ranks fifth within the EU in GDP per capita, if account is taken of Scotland's economic share of the UK's national air space, territorial waters and oil and gas reserves in the North Sea continental shelf, which it says should be controlled by Edinburgh. Scotland has been wealthier than the rest of the UK every single year since 1980, it insists.

The various pseudo-left groups seek to dress up these movements as progressive because their "objective role" is to break apart imperialist nations and this will somehow, at some ill-defined future point, open the way to a socialist development. They are carrying out a political fraud, designed to conceal their orientation to the bourgeoisie and a desire to share in the spoils of this new round of "nation-building".

All these movements advance a perspective that is antithetical to the fundamental interests of the working class. The growth of separatist movements throughout Europe is a retrograde development that cuts across the critical struggle to unite the working class in opposition to the social counterrevolution being carried out under the auspices of the European Union.

The perspective of these movements is a recipe for the Balkanisation of Europe and its transformation into a madhouse of competing mini-states. These capitalist enclaves would all implement policies dictated to them by the troika and the banks and corporations, resulting in the ever more horrific immiseration of the broad mass of working people.

Left unchallenged, they will pit workers against one another in a race to the bottom in terms of jobs, wages and conditions. Worse still, as is proved by the experience of Yugoslavia, bourgeois nationalism and separatism fuel fratricidal conflict ending in war.

Trotsky once described the state system of Europe as akin to the cages within an impoverished provincial zoo. It is not the task of the working class to build still smaller cages, but to liberate the continent from all such archaic national divisions and build a harmonious and planned economy, based upon production for need and not profit.

This means waging an irreconcilable struggle against the EU and all its constituent governments—independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie and their petty-bourgeois accomplices—for the creation of workers' governments and the United Socialist States of Europe.

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