

# The dead-end of Catalan independence

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1 November 2012

*This is the first of a two-part article.*

In 2006, Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, the former president of the largest separatist party in Catalonia, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia—ERC), declared, “What ERC wants for Catalonia is not a new regional statute, but a state... We know that with 16 percent of the vote we do not have the majority, so we should support a gradual approach.”

In the six years since then, support for independence has risen rapidly. In 2010, almost 24 percent of Catalans were for independence. A recent poll suggests that 51 percent would now vote in favour of separation from Spain in a referendum.

On September 11, a demonstration organised by the Catalan National Assembly attracted 1.5 million people—a quarter of the population—under the slogan, “Catalonia, new state of Europe.” Since then, the Catalan regional government, or Generalitat, headed by the right-wing nationalist Catalan Convergence and Unity Party (Convergència i Unió—CiU), has announced snap elections on November 25, following the rejection by the national Popular Party (PP) government of a fiscal pact giving the region more control over taxation.

The regional government passed a resolution to hold a referendum on self-determination, most likely in 2014. Regional President Artur Mas declared, “If the Spanish government authorises (the referendum), more the better... If the Spanish government turns its back on us and doesn’t authorise a referendum or another type of vote, well, we will do it anyway.”

Workers and young people should reject all claims that their interests are served by such calls for Catalan independence, which have gained momentum with the breakdown of world capitalism following the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008. Around the world, the bourgeoisie has responded with a unified policy of social counterrevolution against the working class. All parties and flanks of the political establishments in all countries, Catalonia included, pursue the same anti-working class policies.

Spain has experienced a dramatic rise in unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The PP government and its Socialist Party (PSOE) predecessor have imposed one draconian austerity package after another, introducing cuts in health care, education and social services, raising taxes and passing anti-labour laws. The indebted regional governments have followed suit, with Catalonia imposing three austerity packages of its own totalling over 5 billion euros.

The Catalan ruling elite claim that the cuts would not have been necessary if Catalonia, by far the wealthiest of Spain’s 17 autonomous regions, accounting for some 20 percent of the national gross domestic product, did not have to subsidise the rest of Spain. It is pursuing the creation of a new capitalist mini-state in

order to jettison the poorer regions in its own interests, not those of workers. It will seek to obtain a greater share in the exploitation of the working class by the transnational corporations by cutting taxes on business and slashing social spending.

The working class has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to fight back and shown its desire to unify its ranks against a common enemy, not only in Spain, but throughout Europe. Such unity of action is the essential precondition for any effective opposition to big business and its parties. This requires political opposition to separatism just as surely as it does any identification with the national capitalist state.

The crisis of the nation state must find a progressive solution—not in the break-up of existing states into smaller and even less viable entities based on concepts of ethnicity, culture, religion or race, but in the replacement of the national state by a more rational and universal form of economic and social organisation corresponding more directly to the economic realities of globalised production.

There has never been a more pressing need or stronger argument for the unity of the working class and the adoption of a perspective based on the revolutionary overthrow of Spanish capitalism and the European Union and the building of the United Socialist States of Europe.

Catalan separatism has gained wider popular acceptance by default, as a result of the betrayal by the trade unions and nominally “left” parties of the repeated attempts by the working class to oppose austerity. The trade unions have staged token protests while agreeing to labour “reforms” with the government and employers. They condemned action by air traffic controllers in defence of wages and working conditions and stood by when the PSOE government placed them under military control. They isolated numerous strikes by workers in the public sector and drove the movement by Asturian miners into a dead-end. In Catalonia, the unions supported calls for the fiscal pact and backed the September 11 demonstration.

In the absence of a revolutionary socialist alternative and leadership, the suppression of the class struggle, setbacks, disappointments and frustrations have created the conditions for all sorts of reactionary alternatives to gain a hearing. Their essential function is to split the working class and block its revolutionary mobilisation.

The M-15 movement (indignados) was dominated by calls for “no politics” and collapsed as a result. Some of its leaders are beginning to make successful careers for themselves in bourgeois politics, having just taken part in a “very positive” meeting with MPs in Germany.

A similar desire for social and financial advancement is the

driving force for the plethora of petty-bourgeois Catalan “independentist” groups that attempt to dress up separatism in progressive clothing. Their cry is “independence and socialism” (with increasing emphasis on independence) in the “Catalan countries”. These include the regions of Valencia, the Balearic Islands and the west of Aragon, Pyrénées-Orientales in the South of France and Andorra. The right to “national self-determination” is evoked as some sort of timeless Marxist principle, without any consideration of the changes in world economy or the experience with the national liberation movements in the twentieth century.

It is true that Lenin adopted the slogan of self-determination in the programme of the Bolsheviks, insisting that it meant—and meant only—the right to separate and form an independent state. However, this demand was always seen as a means of emphasising Bolshevik opposition to the actions of the Russian government, which sought to force “captive nations” to remain in the Tsarist Empire through military force. The demand was aimed at overcoming the mutual animosities of workers from different nations and the influence of petty-bourgeois nationalists.

Lenin rejected the programme of the Austrian Social Democrat Otto Bauer and his conceptions of cultural-national autonomy, which included separate schools and even separate social democratic parties for different ethnic and religious groups. Lenin was striving to overcome barriers to a unified struggle against the bourgeoisie, not seeking to erect them, as are the fake-left groups.

In Spain, Catalan and Basque nationalism were always predominantly movements of the intelligentsia, having emerged at the turn of the 20th century. They sought support in the peasantry against the domination of big capital and the state bureaucracy. Each time a revolutionary movement developed, these elements tried to contain and use it for their own advantage.

When the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera fell in 1931, ushering in the Spanish Revolution, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) openly declared that 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.”

In Catalonia, a referendum for a Statute of Catalan Autonomy in 1931 attracted the support of 99 percent of voters. Nevertheless, Leon Trotsky emphasised that what appeared on the surface to be a wholehearted acceptance of Catalan nationalism by workers represented “only the shell of their social rebellion.”

Trotsky also defended the right to self-determination, including the formation of separate states, but said it was not the role of Marxists to advocate their creation. The opposite was the case. Marxists had to explain that the greatest advantages for economy and culture would result from the “economic unity of the country with an extensive autonomy of national districts.”

In his perspective of Permanent Revolution, Trotsky insisted that in countries with a belated capitalist development, “the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses.”

Under the influence of Stalinism and its theory of “socialism in

one country,” this perspective—which had guided the Bolsheviks in October 1917—was rejected. The Stalinists instead adopted a “two-stage theory” that justified local Communist parties collaborating with bourgeois forces and politically subordinating the working class to them. This found its expression in the Popular Front policy, which had become the programme of the Communist International in 1935, and the Popular Front coalition government in Spain involving the PSOE, the ERC and the Communist Party (PCE), formed the following year.

In Catalonia, the Popular Front government sought to reverse the situation of dual power that had developed following the coup launched by General Francisco Franco and set about dissolving the Central Committee of Antifascist Militias of Catalonia, which had become the main authority in the province. Both the centrist Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), under the leadership of Andres Nin, and the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (CNT), joined the Generalitat, betrayed the May 1937 workers’ uprising, and allowed government forces to occupy Barcelona and hand back to the bourgeoisie the occupied farms and factories. Only Trotsky’s supporters called for a united front of the anarchists and the POUM and the formation of soviets in order to carry through the socialist revolution.

During the Falangist dictatorship (1939-1975), Franco annulled the statutes of autonomy and banned virtually all expressions of Catalan and Basque identity. These actions led to the formation of the Basque Homeland and Freedom Party (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—ETA) in 1959, a split-off from the moribund PNV. Later that decade, the ETA began a campaign of assassinations of police and military figures, seeking thereby to pressure Franco to grant independence.

In the final years of the Franco regime, the PCE was advocating a conciliatory policy towards the fascists of “forgive and forget” and negotiating behind closed doors a “peaceful transition” from fascism to capitalist democracy.

As a result of such collusion and the suppression of revolutionary sentiments in the working class, the post-Franco 1978 Constitution created a semi-federal state structure, dividing the country into 17 regional autonomies. This served to prevent a reckoning with fascism by building a social base for the new regime within layers of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie in the regions. The dominant Catalan parties, including the PCE, the PSOE and the CiU, accepted the proposals for autonomy.

*To be continued*



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