

Mass evictions continue in Spain

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Last Thursday, the Popular Party (PP) used its majority in Spain's Congress to pass a Law on Measures to Protect Debtors, Debt Restructuring and Social Renting.

The law was prompted by an anti-evictions petition launched by the Mortgage Victims Platform (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, PAH), which received 1.5 million signatures. The three main demands of the petition, known as the Legislative Initiative for Decent Housing (*Iniciativa Legislativa Popular*, ILP) were a backdated halt to evictions, the creation of a pool of social housing for those who are made homeless, and a new law to allow those who have had their homes foreclosed to write off their debts by handing the property over to the bank. Under Spanish law, a mortgage holder can be made to pay off a remaining loan if the value of the property does not cover the debt.

The PAH claimed the PP government could be pressured to update Spain's eviction laws because they were incompatible with a democratic society and European law even though they were fully aware that only one of the 66 ILPs presented to Congress since 1977 has ever made its way onto the statute books.

None of the ILP demands were included in the PP's new law. It is so narrow that only a very small proportion of those facing eviction will be covered, and it won't apply to existing eviction orders. Regional and local authorities have been given powers to provide low-rent housing to evicted families, but only a fraction of those affected will be covered. Most regions are highly indebted and subject to deficit targets so will not provide the accommodation or, if they do, cut expenditure on other services. In Madrid, where there were nearly 15,000 evictions last year, only 1,000 apartments are being made available.

The PAH website complained, "Although the PP ignores the collected signatures and aims to bury the

ILP on Thursday in Congress we do not give up because there are lives at stake. We will continue to fight to prevent social exclusion for life for thousands of families. Yes we can!"

PAH spokeswoman and co-founder, Ada Colau, declared, "The PP's proposal as it stands is one of economic, social and legal chaos."

Evictions have become a major political issue in Spain, with huge sympathy for those caught in the mortgage trap at the same time as the banks have been bailed out with tens of billions of euros on low interest. Sympathy grew further following shocking incidents of people committing suicide as the bailiffs came to throw them out of their homes. According to the country's top legal body, the General Council of Judicial Power, there have been 415,000 eviction orders since 2008, and some 60 percent have been carried out.

Under Spanish law, if an ILP has sufficient signatures, the government has to consider legislation. In mid-February, the PP government voted in favour of a debate—a manoeuvre clearly intended to neuter the demands. The PAH and many left groups celebrated the PP's move, saying it vindicated the use of pressure politics as an instrument to fight for the interests of the people and to rectify social wrongs.

To keep up the pressure, the PAH established a direct-action campaign of noisy but peaceful public denunciations or "unmaskings" (*escraches*) of individual politicians outside their homes under the slogan "Yes we can.... But they don't want to."

The PP was unmoved, saying the ILP demands undermined the fundamental concept of private property and would worsen the finances of the country's hugely indebted banks. When the PP presented its watered-down proposals, the PAH responded by stepping up the campaign of *escraches*. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy accused them of "acts of intimidation," and PP general secretary María Dolores

de Cospedal called them “pure Nazism.” Police were ordered to erect barriers around politicians’ homes and prevent protests coming closer than 300 metres. After the *escrache* in front of the home of Vice President Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, three protesters were fined €1,500 each and 15 others were fined €200 to €250.

Now that the ILP has failed, the PAH is busily sowing illusions in other pillars of the establishment. Following a European Court of Justice judgement criticising the current speedy eviction practice in Spain as a violation of European Union (EU) consumer protection laws and involving “possible unfair terms in mortgage agreements,” Colau declared, “We are very satisfied.... This is a big step forward for what we have been campaigning for, over four very hard years.... The Spanish exception is over.”

The PP government merely promised it would “correct” its new law to comply with the ruling.

Colau has also shared platforms with the leaders of the Communist Party-led CCOO and the PSOE-aligned UGT union federations, at the same time as they sit in tripartite talks with the government and employers and sign labour reforms giving away workers’ wages and conditions. The PAH has also applauded the PSOE-IU (United Left) coalition regional government of Andalucía, which passed a decree last week declaring it would block evictions.

Properties where the most impoverished families are about to be evicted will be “expropriated” for up to three years provided they meet certain criteria—i.e., a very low income. Families will still have to pay some rent to the regional government, and the property owners will be compensated. In effect, the measure is a lifeline to landlords who face the aggravation of eviction proceedings and loss of rent. The unemployment rate in Andalucía stands at 35.9 percent, way above the national average of 26 percent, and the PSOE-IU coalition has imposed drastic cuts since it assumed power.

The anti-eviction campaign struck a chord with workers and youth. Polls suggest that 80 percent of the population supported the ILP, and a similar percentage is behind the *escraches*. This sentiment expresses the anger and frustration within the Spanish population suffering austerity measures and social cuts. It has also expressed itself in the demonstrations against the

betrayals of the trade unions and the invasion of town hall meetings by defrauded small savers.

But the failure of the petition is proof of the bankruptcy of the perspective of pressure politics pursued by organisations like the PAH, which became the next port of call for many of the leaders of the Indignados (15M) and Democracia Real YA! The no-politics perspective they imposed on these movements was responsible for their collapse, and they perpetrated a similar exercise on the budding anti-evictions movement. Colau, a veteran of the G8 protest movement, insisted the PAH was as “an independent, apolitical and plural” organisation.

The petition is also proof of the bankruptcy of the Pabloite Anti-Capitalist Left *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, IA), which praised the ILP for having “built democracy and opened the way for the conquest of rights by the working class.”



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