

Demonstration of two million organised by Catalan National Assembly

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Nearly two million Catalans, dressed in lines of red and yellow took part in a demonstration in central Barcelona on September 11, the Spanish region's national day. They formed a big V symbolizing "Vote" in an attempt to put pressure on the regional Convergence and Union (Convèrgencia i Unió—CiU) government to go ahead with a referendum on independence from Spain promised for November 9.

The demonstration was organised by the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and took place a week before Scotland's independence referendum, which, if successful, the Catalan separatists explain, will set a precedent in the European Union and bolster their own claims.

The central Popular Party (PP) government insists that it will not allow the Catalan vote to go ahead, declaring that the country's constitution does not allow regional self-determination. It has referred the matter to the Constitutional Court, which is expected to rule on the referendum soon and declare it illegal.

Catalan first minister and CiU leader, Artur Mas, told reporters, "If the Catalan population wants to vote on its future, it's practically impossible to stop that forever," adding, "I think it's absurd to pretend that could be so and I think the Spanish government will have to realize that."

Mas insists the referendum involves a "non-legally binding vote" and is allowed under Catalan law. However, he made it clear that if the Constitutional Court rules against the referendum he may call it off and seek other avenues, one of which is to bring forward regional elections and make them a plebiscite on separation. A new government could then make a unilateral declaration of independence.

Mas said that he would agree to a "third option" involving a more federalist structure with greater

powers and a new economic relationship, provided the Catalan people voted on it.

Mas is acutely aware that holding an illegal referendum could split his party, which only declared for independence three years ago after decades of pursuing a policy of greater autonomy within Spain. There could also be a lower turnout for an illegal referendum and a reduced yes vote in a situation where the numbers for and against independence are at present evenly balanced. According to the latest Metroscopia poll, 43 percent of Catalans are for independence and 42 percent against, with the remainder being undecided. If more powers were given to Catalonia, the support for independence would fall to 23 percent.

Another problem for Mas is the attitude of the strongly pro-independence Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC—the Catalan Republican Left) whose support he needs to remain in power. ERC leader Oriol Junqueras is demanding the vote go ahead or the political alliance with the CiU will collapse. Junqueras insisted, "There is one fundamental demand in Catalonia, and that is to vote."

The ERC is also likely to emerge as the biggest party in the Catalan parliament in fresh elections. One reason is the corruption scandal around CiU national "hero" Jordi Pujol, who served as Catalan president for 23 years. Pujol is due to appear before the Catalan parliament on September 22 to explain his involvement in tax fraud, stashing away millions in secret bank accounts in neighbouring Andorra.

Money is at the heart of the moves by sections of the Catalan ruling elite to split from Spain. Catalonia only has 16 percent of Spain's population but almost a quarter of the economy. It is home to many of Spain's largest corporations, leading banks and top research institutions. ERC deputy Alfred Bosch recently

declared, “We think that we could administer our own resources. We could do it better with much more proximity to the people and also we would have a better chance of meeting our needs.”

The ANC complains that Catalonia is confronting a deep economic crisis, while it has “to contribute around 8 percent of its annual GDP, well above any solidarity obligations, to sustain an inefficient Spanish state.”

“Only by becoming an independent country can we hope to overcome this kind of fiscal discrimination,” it adds.

Despite its conflict with the PP government in Madrid over the control of resources, the Catalan government is in total agreement that the working class must pay for the economic crisis. It has imposed unprecedented cuts in education, health care and public-sector wages in addition to other social cuts. In the central parliament, CiU has repeatedly voted for the PP’s cuts, labour reforms and tax increases. The ERC has propped up CiU throughout this period.

This makes clear that neither side of this so-called debate represents the interests of the working class. It involves a struggle between competing layers of the ruling elite over how best to gain access to global markets and step up exploitation.

The growth of Catalan nationalist sentiment is the result of the betrayals by the trade unions of repeated attempts by the working class to oppose austerity. They have diverted opposition into token protests and ineffective one-day general strikes before agreeing to wage cuts and labour and pension counter-reforms. In the absence of a revolutionary socialist alternative and leadership, opposition has been channelled behind a separatist agenda whose function is to split the working class.

Among the most aggressive promoters of separatism are the pseudo-left parties. They work deliberately to tie the working class to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces by claiming that national separatism will provide a new basis for socialism by breaking the foundations of the Spanish state.

The opposition of genuine socialism to Catalan nationalism does not imply any diminution of its complete opposition to the Spanish capitalist state and the “unity of the Spanish nation.” Marxists seek to unite the working class throughout Spain and throughout the world, irrespective of skin colour,

language, nationality or creed, in the struggle to overthrow capitalism and the nation state system.

The demand for a Catalan referendum has also triggered similar calls in the Basque country, traditionally the centre of separatist tensions in Spain. Earlier this year, the Basque parliament passed a resolution declaring self-determination, and in June, 100,000 people formed a 123 kilometre-long human chain demanding a referendum.



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