

Former Spanish defence minister admits “pre-coup situation” in 2006

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Former Spanish defence minister José Bono admitted in his recently published autobiography that the Socialist Party (PSOE) government faced a “pre-coup situation” following its announcement of a draft statute for Catalan autonomy in November 2005.

The Catalan statute recognised the region as a “nation” and gave the regional government more powers over taxation, education, health and justice. It had no progressive democratic content. It was an attempt by the Catalan bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to secure more direct control of the richest region of Spain and was accompanied by constant denunciations of the subsidies given to poorer regions out of Catalan taxes.

The statute was bitterly opposed by the opposition Popular Party (PP), the Catholic Church and military leaders, who saw it as further proof of the illegitimacy of the PSOE government that had won the March 2004 general election following the ousting of the PP government of former Prime Minister José Maria Aznar.

In January 2006, during the annual military ceremony in Seville, Lieutenant-General José Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain’s 50,000 ground troops, threatened military intervention if the Statute became law. He declared, “The armed forces have a mission to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain. ... It is our obligation to warn that there could be serious consequences for the armed forces as an institution and for its members if the Catalan statute is approved in its proposed form.”

Fifty retired officers signed a letter to the press declaring Mena’s speech a “faithful reflection of the opinion, concern and feelings of many commanders and officers.”

The PP refused to condemn Mena. Party leader

Mariano Rajoy, now prime minister, justified it as a response to the PSOE’s favourable reception of the statute, saying, “Things like this don’t happen without a reason.”

At the same time Mena gave his speech, Bono was speaking alongside King Juan Carlos, declaring that in the post-Franco transition from fascism to parliamentary rule, the “times of the military rattling its swords have ended.” He sought to downplay Mena’s threat, claiming it was “an act of isolated indiscipline that’s already been corrected.”

A few days later, Bono declared, “No institution has adapted itself so completely to democracy as the armed forces.”

Bono’s autobiography reveals much more was taking place. An alarmed PSOE Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero lamented at the time, “I can’t believe that such a thing is happening to us,” to which Bono replied, “Don’t worry about the military, I think I will fix it.”

Zapatero then pleaded, “Prevent as much as possible a mess in the military and you will have time to rest, but now don’t stop until you dismantle this plot attempt.”

In the tape that Bono recorded every night as a minister, he states that “these salvapatrias [saviours of the country] do not have the guts to revolt, but they do have them for pronunciamientos.”

A pronunciamiento was a common action carried out in Spain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereby a cabal of officers would, by tacitly threatening a coup, voice their opposition to a particular government and force it to resign if they had enough support within the army.

Bono then states that while the “majority of the army is with the Constitution,” there is an “uprising attitude”

and “pre-democratic” sentiment rooted in the top echelons.

In the aftermath of the “pre-coup” of 2006, Mena was arrested and sacked for violating articles of the military code that states that the army has to be neutral in political affairs. However, according to Bono’s autobiography, he had already been warned by Secretary of State Francisco Pardo that Mena had even threatened the monarchy, an institution usually venerated by the armed forces, months before the speech. In a meeting with top army leaders, Mena warned, “If the Catalan statute goes forward, the responsibility will also be the Crown’s, and if the Crown does not act, they will have to get their bags and leave Spain. In that case, we will have to act.”

The other generals present never informed the Ministry of Defence.

In the aftermath, the Central Intelligence Service (CNI) was ordered to carry out surveillance of the army and informed Bono that “some generals are talking of secret meetings and of being quiet until they have to do something.”

Mena was replaced by General Pedro Pitarch, who pleaded with Bono, “Please choose someone else ... it is known, that even though I am a conservative man, I have no doubts over my loyalty to the constitutional government and that annoys some sections” of the military.

Despite his revelations, Bono claims that in 2006, there was never a real threat of a military uprising. Rather he feared only damage to Spain’s image in the world.

This account should serve as a timely warning to workers and youth about the role of the army in times of political crisis.

In 1936, the Popular Front government supported by the Communist Party and the PSOE refused to admit publicly that General Francisco Franco had launched a military uprising and censored workers’ newspapers that reported it. At the same time, they were holding secret talks with the army in order to reach a face-saving compromise. This allowed the forces of counter-revolution to consolidate their hold on the peninsula and ultimately to install a fascist regime.

In 1981, sections of the army attempted a coup during which parliament and the cabinet were held hostage for 18 hours. Then, as in 2006, the PSOE, Communist

Party and the unions called for “order” and “calm” to prevent a mass working class movement from confronting the army as it had done in 1936.

In December 2010, the PSOE government used the army to crush the air-traffic controllers strike, opening the way for its use against the working class by any government.

Today, under conditions of unending austerity, mass unemployment, poverty and wage cuts, an army that reacted to a mere devolution of power with a “pre-coup” and “secret meetings” will again be called on to defend the interests of the ruling class with violence. Last November, the Internet daily Público revealed that Spanish military units are being prepared for use in internal repression, based on the assumption that insurrectionary struggles are inevitable.



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