

Podemos recruits former chief of Armed Forces to run in Spanish election

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The Podemos (“We can”) party has recruited former Air Force General and Chief of the Defence Staff Julio Rodríguez Fernández to run in Spain’s general elections on December 20. He will be second on Podemos’ electoral list for Zaragoza province.

Yesterday, Spain’s conservative Popular Party (PP) government sacked Rodríguez, who was in the reserves at the time of the announcement, for violating “the duty of neutrality” and citing “lack of trust”. Rodríguez had already requested retirement last week.

In a press conference last Wednesday, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias took the unusual move in Spanish politics of publicly presenting Rodríguez as a shadow defense minister, that is, a defence minister-in-waiting. If Rodríguez became defense minister in a Podemos government, he would be the first officer to lead the ministry since General Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado, during the transition from the fascist Franco regime to parliamentary democracy in the 1970s.

At the press conference, Rodríguez said Podemos would respect its obligations, adding that he defended “strengthening the strategic position of Spain and Europe in the Atlantic Alliance.”

Podemos’ decision to offer itself up as a political platform for NATO and the Spanish army to play a public role in political life is a warning as to its utterly reactionary role. Its nomination of Rodríguez is an unambiguous endorsement of imperialist wars that have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Under Rodríguez’s leadership, the Spanish army participated in US-led neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

Rodríguez also played a major role in the 2011 NATO war on Libya. The US and its European allies, including Spain, funnelled arms and weaponry to Islamist militias fighting Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime, which they also targeted with a mass bombing campaign. The result

was over 30,000 deaths, a country in ruins and an ongoing civil war between the competing Islamist factions that NATO had supported.

Rodríguez’ nomination is also a signal that Podemos consciously repudiates its earlier appeals to anti-war and anti-austerity sentiment, which were hypocritical and consciously false.

Whilst General Rodríguez was overseeing four F-18 fighters, one Boeing 707 refuelling plane, a frigate, a submarine and one surveillance plane in Libya, then-unknown academics Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón were criticizing “humanitarian” intervention and “those supposedly on the left” who voted for it.

The days in which Iglesias and Errejón tried to exploit anti-war sentiment and railed against the Spanish army’s bloody history in their local TV programme *La Tuerka* are long gone, however.

Three years after the Libya war, they founded Podemos along with a group of former Stalinists, academics and the Pabloite *Izquierda Anticapitalista* (Anticapitalist Left). The latter had supported the NATO intervention, calling for an “unconditional supply of weapons to the [Libyan] rebels.”

In Catalonia, Podemos is now in coalition with the Greens (ICV), who denounced opposition to the Libyan war as “infantile anti-Americanism.”

Iglesias’ alignment on the general staff is a political indictment of all the bankrupt middle class organizations who helped create this reactionary, anti-Marxist populist party.

Podemos was in particular closed aligned with the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) party in Greece. Since the Syriza government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras came to power this year promising to end austerity, and then implemented new savage austerity against the workers in Greece, there can be no question that Iglesias would carry out similar right-wing policies in

Spain. Its populist rhetoric was merely a political cover for utterly anti-working class politics.

Broad sections of the bourgeoisie even admit more or less openly that this is the role Podemos is being groomed to play and discuss how to turn this to their advantage.

In one comment in the daily *El País*, Xavier Vidal-Folch gave the following reason for supporting Podemos in their decision to recruit Rodríguez: “They do not need to actually enter into government to understand harsh reality, unlike Alexis Tsipras, whose fall from his horse came late and severely bruised the Greek citizenry.”

That is, by aligning its policies earlier and more openly upon the ruling class, Podemos is demoralizing its voters and damping down their expectations. From the standpoint of the ruling class, this is positive, since it might somewhat decrease popular anger that will erupt after Podemos takes power and carries out right-wing policies, like Syriza did.

Pointing to the “populist strongman politics” of Podemos, Vidal-Folch criticizes, however, Iglesias’ statement that Rodríguez is “our” minister of defence. The “presence of civilians in charge has been an—excellent—sign of the permanent subjection of the military to democratic power”, he writes, warning against allowing officers to control the military: “Beware dangerous, inefficient, parasitic corporatisms.”

While he supports Podemos’ right-wing line, Vidal-Folch is concerned that the nomination of Rodríguez is too blatant, and that Podemos risks discrediting itself in front of workers and youth with an openly pro-military policy. This might create a situation where opposition in the working class emerged outside the control of Podemos, the main tool used in the past year and a half to channel widespread social anger in pro-capitalist directions.

Despite Vidal-Folch’s concerns, however, Podemos is bidding aggressively for the support of the armed services. Podemos’s integration of Rodríguez is sign to the ruling class that it can be trusted in foreign policy: in power, it would wage war no less ruthlessly than other bourgeois governments.

Podemos’ press conference came on the same day as NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg’s visit to Zaragoza to supervise Operation Trident Juncture, a military exercise involving 30 different governments and 35,000 troops, 140 warplanes and 60 warships. Such manoeuvres are aimed above all at threatening and intimidating Russia and China.

Spain is heavily involved in NATO’s operations. It has

deployed troops to Iraq to train the Iraqi army, for the first time after having been forced to withdraw them in 2004. Since 2013, Spanish forces have been involved in European Union military missions and supported French and US imperialist interventions. There are currently around 1,000 soldiers in 10 land, air and naval missions in Africa.

Next year Spain will lead NATO’s high-readiness force that could be deployed “in just a few days” against Russia. The Spanish military will supply 4,000 of the 5,000 land troops that will make up the new advance team.

The fact that Podemos is emerging as a champion of the army is above all a stark warning of its bitter hostility to the working class.

In the 20th century, Spain witnessed four military coups (1923, 1932, 1936 and 1981) and two military-fascist dictatorships that together lasted nearly fifty years. Its army is the direct descendent of Franco’s army which in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War killed hundreds of thousands of Spaniards in a counterrevolutionary uprising.

Last year, however, Podemos created party branches within the army. One of them published a statement declaring, “The army is necessary today, and we do not want to get into the anti-militarist debate. ... [W]hat we believe can embrace all the ideologies that exist inside the army.”

Iglesias also met with the president of the United Spanish Military Association, Jorge Bravo, pledging to “construct a political programme that includes the inalienable rights of the military”. Iglesias added, “Podemos assumes as legitimate the demands of the military associations and promises to defend them.”

Soon after, he included in his team José Antonio Delgado, spokesperson for the Asociación Unificada de Guardias Civiles (Unified Association of Civil Guards). The militarised Civil Guards have historically supported every dictatorship in Spain since their foundation in 1844.



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