

Spanish political establishment shifts to right in run-up to general election

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Tomorrow's general elections in Spain features an unstable four-way race between the ruling Popular Party (PP), the opposition Socialist Party (PSOE), and two newer parties, Podemos and the right-wing Citizens Party (*Ciudadanos*).

While the PP appears to be leading, the election outcome is highly uncertain. Days before the election, polls indicated that 42 percent of voters had yet to decide for whom they would cast their ballot. "These are the most volatile elections in our history," pollster José Pablo Ferrándiz told the *Financial Times* of London. "In 2011, about two million people changed their vote compared to the previous election. This year, we are talking about as many as eight million."

The parties on which the ruling class had depended on since the end of the fascist dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in 1975 have been discredited. In the May 2014 European Union (EU) elections, the combined PSOE/PP vote slumped to less than 50 percent compared to 80 percent in 2009; they are expected to muster a similar percentage tomorrow. As for the Stalinist-dominated United Left (IU), it is running well behind both the PSOE and Podemos.

This reflects the deep crisis of bourgeois rule brought about by the savage austerity imposed by the PP government of Prime Minister Rajoy and its PSOE predecessor since the eruption of the global crisis in 2008. Cuts in health care, education and pensions, and the attacks on workers' rights and conditions have been unprecedented since the end of Franco's reign. Unemployment remains at 20 percent (56 percent amongst the youth), 30 percent of children live in poverty, and Spain has one of the highest levels of social inequality in Europe.

What has emerged, however, is the bankruptcy of the "left" parties in Spain and across Europe, and the

absence of any party that speaks for the social aspirations of working people. In the face of explosive social anger and after the youth protests of the 15-M movement in 2011, after a mass revolutionary uprising of the Egyptian working class toppled the dictator Hosni Mubarak, the political establishment is shifting sharply to the right.

Neither of the two new parties represent a fundamental break with the old political establishment, let alone an alternative speaking to the social aspirations of workers. Podemos consists of a thinly-disguised rebranding of a layer of Stalinist and pseudo-left operatives, while Citizens has emerged on the national stage since Podemos' rise, repackaging a similar group of PP figures. Both parties seek a social base primarily in the affluent middle class.

The sudden emergence to prominence of Citizens this year highlights the rapid shift to the right in the ruling class. It is expected that Citizens will secure 16-22 percent of the vote and a parliamentary group large enough to make it almost impossible to be excluded from a role in the next government, most likely in coalition with the ruling Popular Party (PP). The opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) has also made overtures to Citizens.

They have profited above all from the bankruptcy and treachery of parties that postured as "left," both Podemos and groups such as the Anticapitalist Left (IA) that helped build it, and the Catalan nationalist parties that attempted earlier this year to secede from Spain. Podemos has abandoned the proposals in its January 2014 founding manifesto, including calls for leaving NATO, a "citizens' audit" of the debt, nationalising major companies and banks, lowering the retirement age, and raising pensions.

In January 2015, as its close ally Syriza came to

power in Greece, Podemos topped the opinion polls with 24 percent, becoming the leading party in Spain. Podemos supported Syriza even after it came to power, and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras comprehensively betrayed Syriza's election promises to end EU austerity, maintaining the EU austerity Memorandum and imposing tens of billions of euros in new cuts.

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias justified these betrayals, declaring, "What the Greek government has done is, sadly, the only thing it could do [...] Stability has won". In September, Iglesias travelled to Greece during the parliamentary elections to support Tsipras' re-election on a pro-austerity platform.

Podemos subsequently collapsed in the polls to around 10 percent, and responded by intensifying its right-wing appeals to the military and the Church. The party solicited the services of the spokesman of the Civil Guards Association and the former Chief of the General Staff and pledged to construct a programme to defend "the inalienable rights of the military".

Podemos now insists that it is "neither of the left nor the right," and Iglesias appeals to national unity and Spanish patriotism.

This has given an opening to Citizens, which used Podemos' promotion of right-wing conceptions as progressive to give a populist gloss to its own deeply reactionary program.

Citizens initially emerged in Catalonia by exploiting popular opposition, including among workers, to nationalist calls for secession. It was in opposition to demands for Catalan secession that the Citizens of Catalonia platform was created in July 2005 by long-standing Spanish nationalists in Barcelona, including Albert Boadella, Félix de Azúa and Arcadi Espada.

An unknown lawyer and former PP member without any previous political experience, Albert Rivera, then aged 26, was installed as a figurehead president. Boadella stated in his blog, "Citizens was born without a leader, and when we had to invent one, we hurriedly resolved it by alphabetical order from a list in which it was the [first] name not the surname that decided the election".

It postures as "progressive" based on certain lifestyle measures that cut across traditional Catholic sentiment and appeal to its upper middle class constituency, such as the legalization of marijuana and of prostitution.

Above all, it has campaigned on the thin gruel of anti-corruption politics, attacking PP and PSOE corruption scandals, most of them linked to the real estate bubble of the boom years of 2000-2007. There are currently 1,700 open cases and over 500 closed. Several of these involved members of the Royal Family; they contributed to the abdication of Franco's hand-picked successor, King Juan Carlos, after reigning for 39 years as head of state.

Citizens has an openly right-wing record on economic issues, however, opposing tax increases on the wealthy in Catalonia, calling for deep budget cuts to cut public sector staffing levels, and advocating a technocratic regime of "experts" freed from the "burden" of elections. It has avoided any significant criticism of PSOE or PP austerity, and it advocates an Austrian-style labor law reform making it easier to hire and fire workers. It calls for cutting corporate tax levels to 20 percent, while increasing VAT (sales taxes) on the population.

Since the November 13 terror attacks in Paris, Citizens has come out in favor of military escalation in Syria and made chauvinist, anti-immigrant appeals with calls to ban the burqa. It has opposed measures to recall the fascist character of the Franco dictatorship.

When workers move into struggle against war and in defense of their social rights, they will find that all these parties are determined enemies of the working class and defenders of a failed social order.



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