Political issues in the Spanish election crisis

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The emergence of a hung parliament from Sunday's general election in Spain marks a new milestone in the disintegration of the traditional bourgeois political set-up in Europe since the eruption of the global economic crisis seven years ago.

The year 2015 began with the collapse of Greece's social democratic PASOK party and the coming to power of a Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government, which swiftly repudiated its anti-austerity platform and imposed tens of billions of euros in new social cuts. The year ends with a similar collapse of decades-old parties of rule, this time in Spain.

After Greece, Spain is the country in Western Europe where the financial crisis and austerity policies have created the greatest devastation. Despite a slight economic upturn based on rock-bottom wages, Spanish capitalism is moribund. After deep cuts to state budgets and social programs, unemployment is over 20 percent, with half of young workers jobless. There is explosive social anger against austerity and the ruling elite.

Sunday's vote produced a disavowal of the two parties, the ruling conservative Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE), which have ruled Spain since the fascist Franco dictatorship collapsed in 1977. Both of these parties have imposed brutal austerity measures since 2008. In Sunday's election, the two parties combined barely received half of the vote. The remaining vote was split between Podemos, the right-wing Citizens Party, and smaller groups including Basque and Catalan nationalist parties.

With no party or likely coalition of parties able to assemble a parliamentary majority, an unprecedented and protracted crisis has begun, with the various parties desperately trying to form a new government or place themselves in the best position if a new round of elections is called.

The central question facing the working class in this crisis situation is not the electoral tactics of the bourgeois parties, but how to intervene independently and assert its own interests. The challenge it faces is that middle-class "left" parties such as Podemos and Syriza, which are coming forward to fill the void left by the collapse of the old social democratic parties, are, in reality, pro-austerity organizations.

Podemos and its ally Syriza are claiming that the collapse of the PSOE-PP two-party system and the creation of an unstable four-party system in Spain will pave the way for a new era in which the political establishment will suddenly prove responsive to voters' demands. Greek Prime Minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras posted a message of support to Podemos on Twitter that declared, "Austerity has now been defeated politically in Spain as well [as in Greece]."

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias said, "A new Spain has been born," and proceeded to lay blame for the austerity measures imposed by the PP and PSOE on Germany and the European Union. "Our message to Europe is clear," he proclaimed, "Spain will never again be the periphery of Germany. We will strive to restore the meaning of the word sovereignty to our country."

This is cynical nationalist demagogy designed to lull the working class to sleep.

Syriza is imposing austerity in Greece, not defeating it. Podemos, which backed Syriza in its election campaigns and defended its imposition of austerity in Greece, saying Syriza had no choice, will prove no different. To the extent that it succeeds in blocking a struggle of the working class against austerity, it gives the bourgeoisie time to regroup and prepare a new offensive, in which Podemos itself will play a major role.

The central challenge facing workers and youth is to draw the political and strategic lessons from the coming to power of Syriza, the party that served as the model for the formation of Podemos early last year. Syriza's

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pledges to carry out a “left” policy against austerity have proven to be lies, designed only to win power. Once in office, its policies conformed to the interests of the affluent middle-class layers it represents, including the remnants of Greek Stalinist “Eurocommunist” officialdom and petty-bourgeois elements from the student movement that emerged after the 1974 collapse of the Greek military junta.

Syriza made no attempt to appeal for support from the European working class against EU demands for austerity. Rather, after a few weeks of EU negotiations, it signed a pledge to uphold the austerity Memorandum. When the EU demanded new cuts in the summer, Tsipras organized a referendum on EU austerity that he hoped to lose so as to provide a pretext to step down and allow a right-wing government to take power and impose the EU’s demands.

When the working class defied threats from the EU and the Greek corporate media and voted “no” to EU austerity, Tsipras repudiated the vote. To prevent Berlin from expelling Greece from the euro zone, he accepted a new, draconian austerity package.

Later, on a visit to Wall Street and the Clinton Global Initiative, he touted his pro-investor policies and pledged that “in a few years, Greece will become a prime destination for foreign investment”—that is, the bankers will be drawn to super-exploited Greek labor, the result of his policies.

Drawing the lessons of the Syriza experience, the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote in its statement of November 13, 2015: “The only way forward is through a genuinely revolutionary policy, mobilizing the working class in Greece and internationally in struggle. It requires a direct assault on the capitalist class, the confiscation of their wealth, the seizure of the major banks and productive forces, in order to place them under the democratic control of working people, and the creation of workers states across Europe and the world. Such struggles require the building of Marxist parties to offer political leadership to the working class, in ruthless struggle against parties like Syriza.”

A party fighting for working people in Spain can emerge only in ruthless struggle against Podemos. Formed by a group of Stalinist professors from Madrid’s Complutense University, aided by pseudo-left groups such as the Anti-capitalist Left that had supported Syriza, it has combined populist slogans against the ruling “caste” with appeals to Spanish patriotism, the army, and the free market.

Last year, in an interview with financial channel CNBC while on a visit to New York, Podemos leader Iglesias proclaimed that his party could work with either the PSOE or the PP, and declared that the free market was a “reality.” After launching a recruitment drive in the army this year, Podemos proudly announced it would field General Julio Rodríguez Fernández, who led Spain’s participation in the 2011 NATO war in Libya, as a candidate in Zaragoza province.

No less than Syriza, Podemos will prove a ruthless opponent of a struggle to unify the European working class against war, austerity and the European Union.

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