

Second general election called in Spain

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King Felipe VI dissolved Spain's Congress on May 3 and called a new general election for June 26, after repeated attempts to form a coalition government following the December 20 election, which resulted in a hung parliament, failed.

Acting Popular Party Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy declared, "What happened over the past four months must not repeat itself. Vetoes are bad for democracy."

Initial polls indicate that the unprecedented and protracted crisis is set to continue. The outcome of fresh elections is difficult to predict, with 40 percent of voters still undecided. However, it appears the predicted result is much as last time, with no party close to winning the required 176-seat majority in the 350-seat Congress.

Support for the PP is 29 percent (around 127 seats) and for the PSOE 21 percent (82 seats). The pseudo-left Podemos is polling around 20 percent of the vote (79 seats) and the right-wing Citizens party 15 percent (42 seats). Popular Unity (UP), led by the Stalinist United Left, has around 5 percent, which would only give them a handful of seats, due to the way Spain's proportional voting system works.

The UK referendum on leaving the European Union (EU), being held just three days earlier, on June 23, could also impact Spain's position.

According to Congress deputy Antonio Roldán, a British exit could mean "the countries on the periphery will look particularly vulnerable, and Spain will stand out as the only country without a government as well as a large deficit hole... This will be a very fragile situation."

The parliamentary gridlock exemplifies the crisis of the traditional bourgeois political system in Europe since the eruption of the 2008 global economic crisis. Parties with decades of rule behind them have collapsed—the PP and PSOE between them used to command around 80 percent of the vote—and far-right

governments have emerged in countries across the continent.

In the case of Greece, where Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left") came to power last year, it too is pursuing an anti-working class, pro-austerity agenda.

Spain, like Greece, has been devastated by the financial crisis and austerity policies. Despite increased economic growth of 3.4 percent—one of the fastest growth rates in Europe—workers are seeing no benefit. The unemployment rate again hit 21 percent in the first quarter of 2016 (46.5 percent among youth). The jobs that are being created are low-paid and precarious—some 90 percent of new contracts are temporary. Widespread long-term unemployment has forced more families onto the bread lines, with more than one in three children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

This social catastrophe is set to worsen whichever government comes to power. This week the European Commission cited Spain's soaring debt, warning that without further austerity it would miss its budget deficit target of less than 3 percent of gross domestic product by 2018.

Podemos has responded to the political crisis by trying to reassure the EU and financial organisations that it is best placed to meet their demands and stifle working class opposition. Earlier this year, it published a 98-page document, "Government for Change" which stated the party's aim is to "restructure the debt" in agreement with the EU, and reduce the deficit to the 3 percent demanded by European institutions.

Last month, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias offered another 20 "concessions", in a final attempt to persuade the PSOE to abandon its pact with Citizens and form a "Government of Change" to include the IU and the Valencian nationalist Compromis. Podemos members voted 92 percent in favour of a "Government of Change" and 88 percent against the PSOE-Citizens

pact.

Iglesias's pleas to the PSOE were, however, unsuccessful. Since then, Podemos has sought to increase pressure on the PSOE by agreeing to a joint electoral campaign with IU—something it opposed in December because of the IU's dwindling influence and pro-austerity record. In Andalusia a PSOE-IU regional coalition government cut the budget by €2.6 billion, and in Extremadura IU supported a right-wing PP administration that imposed similar measures.

By running together, Podemos and the IU could boost their number of deputies in Congress by around 14, eclipsing the PSOE. In the last election, the combined result of Podemos and IU would have totalled 6.1 million votes, compared to the PSOE's 5.5 million and the PP's 7.2 million.

This week, IU announced the result of a referendum of its 20,000 members on forming an agreement with Podemos, which showed 84.5 percent in favour, 13.1 percent against, and 2.4 percent abstaining. IU leader Alberto Garzón declared, "I am one of those who believe we would at least come second, but that we would also be in a position to challenge for first place" at the forthcoming general election. Iglesias replied, "Alberto represents the future. I can see myself building a future with Alberto."

Podemos is courting PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez, but much of the PSOE leadership, led by Andalusian leader Susana Díaz and backed by former PSOE Prime Minister Felipe González, would prefer a grand coalition with the PP. González therefore has made the ludicrous claim that Podemos was out to "liquidate our democratic framework of coexistence" and the PSOE leadership.

Nothing could be further from the truth regarding Podemos, whose leaders have combined populist slogans against the ruling "caste" while insisting that the party is "neither of the left nor the right," and appealing to national unity and Spanish patriotism. The party reflects the interests of upper middle class layers of entrepreneurs, professionals and academics. They are fervent defenders of capitalism who will implement whatever is required by the ruling elite.

The Spanish ruling class understands, however, that class antagonisms are at breaking point. The hysterical statements of González, asserting that Podemos aims to liquidate the PSOE leadership and Spanish democracy,

amount to a threat to meet social opposition in the working class with brute force.

The central question facing the working class in this crisis situation is how to intervene independently and assert its own interests. The challenge is to draw the political and strategic lessons from the experience of Syriza.

In its statement of November 13, 2015, the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote, "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."



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