

Spain: Pseudo-left Barcelona mayor persecutes migrant street vendors

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In a further demonstration of the reactionary politics of the Podemos-linked mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, the city's police force is targeting migrant workers who earn a living by street vending for dispersal, arrest, and possible deportation.

The street vendors, mainly migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, are called “manteros” because they typically spread out a blanket, or “manta,” to display their wares—CDs, sunglasses, handbags, T-shirts, and the like. They have been present for decades in Spanish cities and coastal areas, receiving the sympathy of workers who understand their uphill struggle to survive.

Large numbers of municipal police are being deployed in streets and beachfront promenades, where they confine the manteros to a small area. Police often set up “ambushes” in the exits of certain metro stations and confiscate the manteros' merchandise. Arrested manteros are subject to the application of Spain's Foreigners Act, which includes deportation among the possible penalties. Fines of up to 500 euros have been announced for anyone making a purchase from a mantero.

The crackdown on immigrant vendors is part of a more sweeping anti-working-class program. Earlier this year Colau opposed a strike of 3,200 workers on Barcelona's public metro system (TMB). When it went ahead, Colau supported a legally mandated “minimum service” requirement to keep trains running, helping to ensure the strike's defeat.

Colau once led a movement against house repossessions and evictions following the 2008 global economic crisis and collapse of Spain's real estate sector, becoming a key figure in Podemos' “government of change” line-up. Not only is she now exposed as nothing more than a tool of big business

interests, but so are the pseudo-left's claims that when in power they will use “social” measures to counteract the results of poverty and inequality. Instead, they are bringing in the police and other state forces.

Colau's hypocrisy was in full view at an official ceremony in late July supposedly showing solidarity with the thousands of refugees who have drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean. This involved the unveiling in a Barcelona city square of a digital “shame counter” that records each death.

However, rather than play along with the token display of sympathy for the plight of the refugees, mantero associations and sympathisers demonstrated at the ceremony, drowning out the speakers and singers, and demanding the release of arrested manteros. They denounced the hypocrisy of organising such an event while the authorities are employing an iron fist against those who have actually survived the voyage across the Mediterranean.

Spain has been at the forefront of the European Union's (EU) “Fortress Europe” policy, closing off the short sea crossing routes from North Africa to Spain. This has forced migrants into making the much longer and more perilous journeys across the Mediterranean further east.

One of the main arguments for the repression against the manteros is that their presence hurts nearby small businesses and restaurants. But Colau's crackdown is aimed at mollifying the real beneficiaries of the policy—namely the business associations representing the upmarket luxury shops and department stores in Barcelona that accuse the manteros of selling imitation goods. Few, if any, of the small shops in areas where manteros sell their goods (such as the Barceloneta beachfront) have joined the campaign against them.

The campaign started after these business

associations presented a manifesto in early July demanding a harsh policy against the vendors. The very next day, one of Colau's lieutenants in the city government held a press conference to announce details of the new policy, stating that Barcelona "would not allow the use of public space for unauthorized vending..."

This was quickly followed by Colau declaring that she would literally "eradicate" street vending. Colau called a meeting of representatives of 40 towns in Catalonia, the Catalan government, and the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid to coordinate efforts. She endorsed the unsupported assertion of the Catalan ombudsman, Rafael Ribó, that a "mafia" was behind the *manteros*.

The Colau city government is outpacing previous Barcelona city administrations in filing charges against people accused of unlawful street vending. Her government levied 34,473 fines in the first six months of 2016. This compares to 28,253 fines in the same period in 2015, under Barcelona's previous mayor, Xavier Trias, of the right-wing party Democratic Convergence of Catalonia.

Colau likes to stress the "social" component of her new policy, rather than the "policing" one. This is a fraud, as the social aspect amounts to a plan to provide occupational training and employment to all of 40 vendors who give up the activity, when hundreds depend on it to survive.

The reaction of the pseudo-left forces inside or orbiting around Podemos to Colau's attack on the *manteros* is to either remain silent or to excuse her.

The Pabloite Anticapitalistas and the state-capitalist Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left) have said nothing. The Morenoite Corriente Roja (Red Current) carried an article calling for the release of *manteros* arrested by the Barcelona police, but their main complaint is that "unfortunately, this is the face of the badly named 'governments of change'."

En Lucha (In Struggle) published an interview with one of the spokesmen of the *manteros*' union, Daouda Dieye, in which he explains the terrible plight of the *manteros*, their status as illegal migrants, before denouncing the "white left." Dieye's racist view was not only left unchallenged by the interviewer, but the next question was "How do you think we could move to integrate immigrants and the white left in the same

struggle?"

The refusal of the pseudo-lefts to oppose Colau is the latest in numerous betrayals and capitulations. In government they would go even further, as demonstrated by the Syriza government in Greece, at the other end of the Mediterranean. Syriza is continuing the enforcement of a brutal austerity programme and has locked up refugees in de facto concentrations camps, in order to act as the guardian of Fortress Europe.

The pseudo-left's intervention is aimed at propping up the fiction that Colau somehow represents progressive "change." They seek to aid Colau in separating the struggles of workers and youth from those of migrant workers and refugees.

The working class must fight for an immediate halt to all repressive measures carried out by the police and immigration authorities and defend the rights of immigrants and refugees to live and work anywhere they want, free from harassment by the state and super-exploitation by employers.



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