Podemos prepares to become the official bourgeois opposition in Spain

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Podemos is preparing to become Spain's official opposition party, filling the void left by the expected collapse of Spain's Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

October 1 saw the ouster of PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez, and his replacement by Javier Fernández, animated by moves to let the right-wing Popular Party (PP) of Mariano Rajoy form a new minority government. The PSOE has aligned with the PP in a desperate attempt to avoid the total discrediting of the political system, nearly 10 months after the December 20 elections during which Spain has had a hung parliament and has failed to form a government.

The alignment points to the collapse of the bipartisan arrangements that emerged after the fall of the Franco dictatorship, in which power alternated between the right-wing PP and the "centre-left" PSOE. Podemos' response is to shift its rhetoric far to the right, pledging to abandon its empty populist rhetoric in preparation for assuming a "responsible" role in government.

Days after the PSOE coup, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias declared that "populism ends when politics culminate in the [public] administration, when administrative decisions have to be taken from the state, the town hall or the party." He concluded, "If we rule we will look for compromises and consensus, and we would openly say that our populism has ended, that it was useful in the fight."

If the ruling class can install a PP-led government, it is above all due to Podemos' role in channelling social discontent back into the political establishment and thwarting the growth of a politically independent movement of the working class. Since its creation in 2014, Podemos promoted illusions that it could work with the PSOE to form a progressive government. The PSOE was re-founded in the 1970s under Felipe Gónzalez with the aid of German and French capital, the CIA and the daily *El País*, and committed to austerity and the defence of NATO and the European Union.

Following the coup, Podemos has stepped up its appeals to the PSOE. Iglesias' initial reaction was to talk up the handful of PSOE deputies who threatened to break ranks and vote against a new PP administration, rather than allowing the PP to come to power by abstaining. He said their threat was "a demonstration of dignity."

This was empty rhetoric, however, insofar as Podemos is committed to maintaining its alliances with PSOE members inside regional and local governments, many of whom backed Sánchez's ouster. Podemos founder Juan Carlos Monedero indicated that initial reports that Podemos might break its accords to put pressure on the PSOE had been "magnified" and that "it was never under real discussion."

How to best orient to the PSOE has always been at the heart of the internal tensions between Podemos' ruling faction led by Iglesias, the "Errejonistas" led by Podemos number two Iñigo Errejón, and the Anticapitalistas faction, linked to France's New Anti-capitalist Party.

After last December's general election, the Iglesias faction preferred a government with the PSOE. However, the PSOE rebuffed Podemos' overtures and formed an alliance with the right-wing Citizens party. The Errejonistas demanded a Podemos abstention to allow the PSOE and Citizens to form a "government of change," but this was a step too far for Iglesias' faction. Podemos ultimately voted against, sparking second elections in June.

That election campaign saw Podemos intensify its orientation to the PSOE. It joined the Stalinist-led United Left (IU) to form Unidos Podemos, on an

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explicit basis of austerity and defending the EU. Unidos Podemos made repeated appeals to the PSOE to form a coalition government. Iglesias publicly called Podemos the “new social democracy” and described José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as “the best prime minister” the PSOE had produced.

In the end, Unidos Podemos lost 1.2 million votes in the June election and failed to overtake the PSOE, sparking new feuds within the party. Iglesias’ faction blamed the election collapse on the moderation of Podemos’ programme—though it was Iglesias who presented the concessions to the PSOE, claiming they were made with “terrible pain”. The Errejonistas retorted that the deal with IU had made Podemos look too “radical” and attacked Iglesias for not having allowed the PSOE to rule with Citizens.

The anti-Sánchez coup and moves to form a PP government, taking the question of Podemos’ support for an incoming PSOE government off the immediate agenda, lessened these conflicts in the short term. At last Saturday’s meeting of the highest body of Podemos, the Citizens Council, both factions agreed that Podemos should prepare to lead the opposition in parliament. A planned extraordinary congress to elect Podemos’ leadership is also to be postponed.

In his statement hailing political compromise and anti-populist administration, Iglesias said such methods were employed in the 1970s by Italian Communist Party (PCI) leader Enrico Berlinguer, a pioneer of “Eurocommunism” and of the PCI’s “historic compromise”.

Like Santiago Carrillo of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and Georges Marchais of the French Communist Party (PCF), Berlinguer did not aim to oppose the counterrevolutionary policies and crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy. These forces distanced themselves from Moscow in order to enter into more direct alliances with bourgeois parties, and to prepare to support capitalist restoration in the USSR amid rising workers’ struggles in Eastern Europe.

In the 1970s, the PCI renounced revolution and unsuccessfully sought a coalition with the conservative Christian Democrats. In 1991, as the Italian party system imploded in a flood of corruption scandals, the PCI split into the Democratic Party of the Left, predecessor of today’s Democratic Party (PD) and the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC). The PCI’s successors became pro-business parties supporting technocratic governments launching massive attacks on the working class. The PD, modelling itself on the US Democratic Party, became the main instrument to impose austerity, devastating Italy and threatening a new banking collapse.

The PRC, which integrated the entire pseudo-left milieu into its ranks, played an even more despicable role. Posing as a left alternative to the PD, it ensured that the PD’s anti-working class policies received the required parliamentary majority. It discredited itself in 2006 by entering Romano Prodi’s “Olive Tree” coalition government.

Iglesias’s admiration for Berlinguer, the right-wing trajectory of the PCI and its betrayal of its working-class support constitute a warning that Podemos will adopt ruthless policies against the working class in order to come to power.

When Iglesias refused to participate in the official, right-wing October 12 national day celebrations, he did so from the standpoint of finding better ways to promote nationalism. He said that “patriots do not have bank accounts in tax havens, patriots work and they don’t have to be wrapped around in flags; they get up early to go to work or to seek work.”

Sitting next to him, Errejón followed suit, stating that “to be a patriot is to defend those who work, the small businessmen and the self-employed.”

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