

Spain's Podemos aims to derail social anger through “back to the streets” campaign

Alejandro López
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Since the installation of a minority government of the right-wing Popular Party (PP) in October, the pseudo-left Podemos and United Left (IU) parties, along with Spain's trade unions, have launched a “back to the streets” campaign. They are going “back” to the streets after having held no significant protests for years, amidst the draconian austerity policies of previous governments.

The sudden about-face comes in a definite political context. There is deep anger at the Socialist Party (PSOE) for backing the PP government, for whom most of the Spanish people did not vote. The PP plans to impose €8 billion in European Union (EU)-backed cuts in two years, freeze pensions for the fourth consecutive year and slash public sector pay, unemployment benefits and public spending. It will pay €30 billion in interest on Spain's debt and announced tax increases of €4.65 billion last week.

The PP government is so weak and discredited that it is seeking support from the unions and pseudo-left parties to impose its austerity policy. It fears unrest and explosive opposition among workers and youth, nearly half of whom are unemployed. This is compounded by its fear of growing social opposition to war and austerity internationally, after Donald Trump was elected as US president despite losing the popular vote.

The unions met with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and business representatives in late November to plan the austerity measures. After the meeting, the Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and General Labor Union (UGT) claimed that Rajoy had imposed “too many limits to social dialogue.” They then announced joint protests, on December 15 and 18, while insisting that they would keep negotiating with Rajoy, because “negotiations and mobilization” are not incompatible.

Podemos is now offering political cover to the

unions' maneuvers to contain and dissipate workers' opposition to austerity. This well-worn tactic has been deployed internationally, above all in Greece. There, Podemos's ally Syriza worked with the unions to call one-day protests before coming to power in 2015 and implementing the harshest austerity package in Greek history. At one point, the Syriza government even supported a strike against its own austerity measures, confident that the unions posed no threat.

Podemos started similar actions soon after the PP took power. Podemos parliamentarians protested Rajoy's investiture outside parliament. Podemos then intervened in protests held against electricity company Gas Natural, after an 81-year-old woman died when her apartment caught fire. She was using candles to light the flat because she could not pay her electricity bill.

Suddenly, Podemos also began making a few stage-managed interventions in workers' struggles. Last week, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, alongside his number two Iñigo Errejón and IU leader Alberto Garzón, attended a rally for a 24-hour strike of telecom workers. Iglesias said strikers were “the social opposition to the PP” and criticized “unjust” and “inefficient” austerity measures of PP and PSOE governments.

Garzón joined in to declare his support for “workers who are fighting for their labor rights,” as part of IU's new, “Don't let them screw your life” campaign.

Days later, Iglesias visited a trade union protest of Coca-Cola workers outside PP headquarters. He declared, “We have to continue not drinking Coca-Cola, because Coca-Cola is attacking workers' rights,” and repeated that Podemos embodies “social opposition to the PP and large multinationals.”

The actions of the unions have been supported not only by Podemos but also by the PSOE, whose

abstention in parliament secured the installation of a PP government. PSOE interim leader Javier Fernández, replacing the ousted general secretary Pedro Sánchez, met with the union leaders and declared that “PSOE will give political and parliamentary support to the social agenda of the unions” and will support their mobilizations.

These forces are all now promoting the unions as they maneuver with the PP. The union federations have demobilized the working class, even as wages fell by 22 percent since the economic crisis of 2008. The number of strikes has fallen to record lows, from 810 strikes and 542,508 strikers in 2008, to 777 strikes and 217,047 strikers in 2014, and 422 strikes and 96,795 strikers this year. At the same time, the unions negotiated austerity measures with PSOE and PP governments, and worked with companies to impose job and pay cuts in the name of competitiveness.

Podemos’s promotion of the unions is a cynical propaganda campaign, aimed at trapping workers behind bankrupt organizations, launched by a party that has declared its contempt for social protest. In July, right after the June 26 general elections, Iglesias declared that social change should occur through state institutions, and the “stupid things we used to say when we were far-left, that things change on the streets and not in the institutions, are lies.”

Months later, in October, Iglesias again stressed that his populist rhetoric did not aim to effect a change in state policy. He said 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 added, “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.”

Podemos’s attempt now to posture as a voice of workers’ opposition and social protest is a conscious political fraud.

Created by a group of Stalinist academics and operatives of the Anticapitalist Left (IA) party in 2014, Podemos has worked primarily through the numerous media outlets offered to them by the bourgeoisie to channel social discontent back behind the political establishment. Just two months ago, Podemos was promoting illusions that it could create a “Government of Change” with the PSOE. Instead, the PSOE

supported the PP.

Podemos has put its politics into practice. Over the last year and a half, it backed “governments of change” running in major cities, including Madrid, Barcelona, Cadiz, Zaragoza, Valencia and Santiago de Compostela. These have reduced their debts by at least €2.3 billion and earned the applause of the banks. In the words of Cádiz mayor José María González (a Podemos member), “even the [Ministry of the] Treasury recognizes that the local town councils of change do their homework.”

In Barcelona, former anti-evictions activist and Barcelona’s current mayor, Ada Colau, targeted migrant workers working as street vendors for mass arrests and deportations. Earlier this year, she opposed a strike of 3,200 workers on Barcelona’s public metro system and supported a “minimum service” requirement to keep trains running and crush the strike.

As for the Stalinist-led IU, its pro-austerity positions are a matter of public record. In 2008, IU reacted to the economic crisis by deepening its collaboration with the PSOE, implementing billions of euros in cuts in the Andalusia, Catalonia, Asturias and Extremadura regions. At the same time, it used its positions in the union bureaucracy to prevent strikes from developing into political struggles against PSOE and PP governments.



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