

Huge demonstration in Barcelona in defence of refugees and open borders

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20 February 2017

Hundreds of thousands of protestors—160,000 according to the police and half a million according to the protest organisers—demonstrated on Saturday in Barcelona, Spain against the right-wing Popular Party (PP) governments' anti-immigration policies. The march, held under the slogan “No more deaths, open the borders,” was the largest held in Europe so far in defence of refugees and open borders.

Demonstrators condemned the continuing horrific treatment of refugees seeking shelter in Europe, as the European Union (EU) continues to deport thousands of refugees back to the war zones from which they are trying to escape.

The EU's anti-migrant policies led to the deaths of at least 4,500 people last year, most of whom drowned crossing the Mediterranean in small, overcrowded boats. According to the United Nations, 230 people have died so far this year. Spain bears a special responsibility for this tragedy, having helped to close down the shorter sea-crossing routes from North Africa, thereby forcing migrants to attempt the longer, more hazardous ones from Libya to Malta and Italy.

Many protestors criticised the government for having only taken in 1,100 refugees—a fraction of the paltry 17,000 it had agreed to in September 2015.

The demonstrators flooded onto one of the major avenues in Barcelona, Via Laietana, many holding homemade placards and banners bearing slogans including, “Enough excuses, welcome them now,” “Refugees welcome,” “Legal papers for all,” “Open the borders now,” and “No one is above another, no one is illegal.” The protest ended on Spain's Mediterranean coast.

A woman who had left Bosnia in the early 1990s during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia told *El Periódico*, “I see the same heart that opened to me in 1992, even stronger and with more solidarity. The only

difference is the current political obstacle, and the lies that they tell us every day [about refugees and migrants.]” Mira, an 18-year-old from Syria, said, “We don't want pity... There is no refugee crisis, we are victims of war.” Kissima, a 23-year old Gambian, told *El País* that “if the doors do not open, those people who are only looking for a better future will not be able to do anything.”

The fact that such a large march was organized within a short space of time without any media promotion by a small volunteer-staffed NGO, Casa Nostra Casa Vostra (Our Home is Your Home) shows the huge sympathy that exists within the population for the plight of migrants and refugees.

It exposes the lying claims of governments and political parties across Europe—of all political colourations—that they are responding to the “people,” who are demanding a crackdown on the entry of migrants and stronger borders. Such claims are used to shift the political climate to the right, as the post-World War II order collapses, in order to prepare the ground for more austerity, wars and attacks on democratic rights.

The humane, democratic sentiments of workers and young people attending the demonstration sharply contrasted with the hypocrisy and track records of those figures, which headed the protest. Every political party, except the PP, sent their leading representatives.

Not surprisingly, in a march pressuring the PP government to “open the borders,” Catalan nationalists cynically used the opportunity to promote the independence of their desired Catalan mini-state from Spain, which would lead to—more borders.

Members of the separatist regional Catalan government Junts Pel Sí (Together for Yes), comprising the Catalan European Democratic Party (which until July 2016 was called the Democratic Convergence of Catalonia), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy and the heavily state-funded

Catalan nationalist organisation Òmnium Cultural, sought to channel pro-migrant sentiments behind Catalan separatism. They claimed that an independent Catalonia “would be more supportive and welcoming towards refugees and migrants.” Carme Forcadell, the president of the regional parliament, demagogically attacked the “disastrous policies of the European Union” towards people fleeing from conflicts.

This is pure hypocrisy. The Catalan nationalists have devoted all their energies in recent years in trying to persuade the imperialist powers—those responsible for the bloodbath in the Middle East and the current refugee crisis—to support Catalan independence and accept it as a loyal capitalist state within the geostrategic orbit of the EU and NATO alliance.

Some Catalan separatists have welcomed the election of US President Donald Trump, seeing in him an opportunity to achieve their long-desired separatist ambitions. Catalan European Democratic Party leader Víctor Terradellas declared that in the context of a “clash of civilizations, with the West engaged in several simultaneous geostrategic struggles against Islam, Russia and China,” Catalonia could play its cards as a bulwark in the Western Mediterranean, working side by side with Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Catalan separatists were not the only ones to exploit the demonstration for their own purposes.

Sonia Sierra from the Citizens party demanded “the government comply with the promise to take in 17,000 refugees.” This same party—a right-wing and anti-Catalan secessionist party—is a fervent defender of the EU and NATO and is attempting to become the new “incorrupt” face of the PP. In the past, it has enthusiastically defended the PP’s attempts to prevent undocumented migrants from having any right to access the public health care system.

Also present at the demonstration was Miquel Iceta, the leader of the Catalan Socialist Party (sister party to the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE). He called for a “change” in EU policies because, “The current crisis is not as innocent as it may seem; it has been caused by the presence of Western countries in the Middle East.”

Anyone hearing such statements from Iceta will be rubbing their eyes in disbelief.

Just 24 hours before Iceta’s remarks, some 400 African migrants managed to force their way into the tiny Spanish North African enclave of Ceuta in search of asylum. The Red Cross said it had to treat 103 of them for injuries they had sustained, which included a brutal assault by the

border police. Some 25 people were hospitalised.

It was the PSOE government in 2005 that began construction of the original border fence, which now consists of 11 kilometres (6.8 miles) of parallel three-meter (10 feet) high razor wire fences, equipped with watch posts, CCTV, spotlights, noise and movement sensors.

Under the PSOE, Spain participated in the US-led NATO war on Libya, which killed approximately 30,000 people and destroyed the country’s infrastructure, paving the way for the current civil war and the spread of ISIS in North Africa.

The response of the pseudo-left to the demonstration was typified by the pro-Podemos mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, who pontificated, “It is very important that in a Europe of uncertainty where xenophobia is on the rise for Barcelona to be a capital of hope.”

This demagoguery will not wash. Last year, the same Colau ordered the police force of the “capital of hope” to remove migrant workers from the streets. They are mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, with little chance of finding work in a country with mass unemployment, and struggle to survive by selling trinkets. Now they are in constant fear of arrest and possible deportation.

Colau, as with Podemos as a whole, wholeheartedly defends the Syriza government in Greece, which is playing a key role in enforcing the EU’s reactionary Fortress Europe policy. Around 62,000 migrants are effectively trapped in Greece, barred from crossing the borders into other EU countries. In early January, three people froze to death in just one week—their tents totally inadequate in the cold weather that swept the country.



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