

Spanish ruling class closes ranks behind Washington's attack on Syria

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The coming to power in the US of Donald Trump's aggressively nationalist and protectionist administration sparked bitter divisions in the Spanish ruling class. Trump's attack on Syria's al-Shayrat airbase, the prelude to a broader military escalation directly threatening nuclear-armed Russia, marks a major shift in the political situation. The Spanish bourgeoisie is closing ranks in support of Trump and his alignment with the demands of the CIA, the Democratic Party and the Pentagon for a war policy.

Immediately after Trump's election last year, the influential daily *El País* published over 20 editorials against Trump and attacked Spain's right-wing Popular Party (PP) government for its submissiveness to Trump and called on the EU to adopt a more aggressive line toward the US.

In its Friday editorial, however, it states, "Trump had little room for manoeuvre, especially if he wanted to send a clear message to El Assad and other regimes which violate with impunity the principles and treaties on which international peace and security are based." It denounces Russia for blocking the US and its allies' regime-change initiatives in the UN Security Council.

Two months ago, Elena Valenciano, a European Member of Parliament of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and vice president of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, was demanding that the European Parliament act "forcefully" and "courageously" against Trump's statements criticizing the European Union (EU). Now, she is hailing Trump's strike on Syria, claiming it was meant to "send a clear message" to Assad, although she also said she disagreed with its unilateralism.

The PP government for its part has increased its collaboration with the US and endorsed the attack. Last Friday, it described the strike as "measured and

proportionate response" to the alleged gas attack last Tuesday in the village of Khan Sheikhoun in Syria's Idlib province. With no evidence, and discounting out of hand the Syrian government's denial of its involvement, the statement accuses the "Syrian army use of chemical weapons against the civilian population in the country."

The statement covers up the blatant violation of international law involved in Washington's action, claiming that the "American operation was a limited action in its objectives and means". The attack, it continues, struck "a military base, not civilian objectives"—though in fact, it killed at least 15 people, including nine civilians, four of which were children.

It concludes by stating that Madrid, "which has a strong sense of loyalty towards its allies, is in favour of concerted international action, and therefore regrets that the blockade of the United Nations Security Council in the Syrian conflict has not made this possible."

At a press conference, government spokesman and Minister of Culture Íñigo Méndez Vigo had nothing to say when asked why the government had changed its position from 2013. At that time, Spain opposed the Obama administration's attempt to use allegations of a chemical weapons attack, falsely attributed to the Syrian government, to launch a war.

Mendez baldly declared that the "situation has changed" from 2013, when Spain, under the same prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, stated that Madrid "does not at any time express support for a concrete military action." At the time, Rajoy added, "There is no possible military solution to the civil conflict in Syria, there is only one political solution," and that Spain wanted to prevent "Syria from becoming an Iraq II."

What has changed is not that Trump's act of war against Syria no longer threatens to plunge Syria into

ever greater bloodshed on the scale of that in the decades-long war in Iraq, or to provoke an even broader war. Rather, in light of Trump's sudden alignment on the CIA and the Democratic Party, the Spanish bourgeoisie has re-thought its position and is closing ranks behind Washington. The far right billionaire Trump now is seen by growing sections of the ruling class as an opportunity.

Once Trump was installed as President, the PP immediately went on a diplomatic offensive to become Washington's new strategic partner in Europe, as its traditional closest ally, Britain, began its departure from the EU under Brexit. During his first conversation with Donald Trump, Prime Minister Rajoy offered Spain as "interlocutor in Europe, Latin America, and also in North Africa and the Middle East." Rajoy said he was prepared to "develop a good relationship with the new US administration."

The White House statement on the conversation said that Trump had emphasized the importance that all NATO allies share the burden of defence spending.

Last month, and at Washington's request, Spain's Defence Minister María Dolores de Cospedal met with US Secretary of Defence James Mattis in Washington. She promised that Spain would dedicate 2 percent of its GDP to defence spending within one decade.

No sooner had she returned, when Spain announced that the new 2017 budget would include a whopping 32 percent increase in military spending—from €5.7 billion in 2016 to €7.5 billion in 2017.

On March 26, Rajoy named former Defence Minister Pedro Morenés, with whom Rajoy has close ties, as Spain's new ambassador in Washington. Morenés was one of the chief architects of the renewal in 2015 of a Spain-US bilateral defence agreement. It allows Washington's military permanent use of the Morón air base in Seville, with increased numbers of troops and aircraft. It also allows the stationing of two additional destroyers equipped with the Aegis radar system at the Rota Naval Base, bringing the total to four.

In the aftermath of Trump's attack on Syria, the Spanish social democrats, their political allies and their media supporters are joining the PP in aligning themselves on Trump's foreign policy.

Two of the destroyers posted at the Rota Naval Base, USS Porter and USS Ross, were used in last week's attack on Syria. Luís Simón, Senior Analyst and

Director of the Elcano Royal Institute think tank's Brussels Office, boasted that this showed "the increasing importance of Spain for the US Navy as a source of strategic depth for possible actions in the Middle East."

Trying to limit popular anger amid broad opposition to war, government officials and the media claimed that the destroyers "left days ago" and were "patrolling off the coast of Israel". Madrid was also quick to state, however, that even though it had not been previously consulted or received direct communication from Washington, it was forewarned about the attack by NATO.

Such statements aim to confuse and disorient the population. Rather than increasing security, as it was claimed on the eve of signing the defence agreement with the US, the Spanish and European bourgeoisies' support of imperialist wars and regime-change operations, put millions of people at risk of annihilation, especially as the US and its European allies recklessly escalate the confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China.



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