

New York Times backs calls for Catalan independence referendum

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Barely two weeks after Catalan regional Premier Carles Puigdemont announced a referendum on the independence of Catalonia from Spain in October, the *New York Times* published an editorial in defence of the plebiscite under the title “Catalonia’s Challenge to Spain.”

Spain’s Popular Party (PP) government led by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy is adamant that the referendum will not be allowed to take place, branding it an illegal “coup.” In all likelihood, once the official resolution is passed by the Catalan regional parliament, Spain’s Constitutional Court will annul it, as with a previous resolution fleshing out the secessionist road map approved by the regional parliament in November 2015.

The *Times* criticises the PP for its “intransigence” with respect to Catalonia and for “galvanizing Catalan separatists by putting their leaders on trial “for the crimes of disobedience and breach of trust”—in 2014 they staged a non-binding independence referendum. Secessionist sentiment, the newspaper adds, has also increased because of the corruption scandal engulfing the PP the instability of its rule, as witnessed by it barely surviving a no-confidence vote on June 14.

The *Times’* recommendation is for the Spanish government to give concessions to the regional Catalan bourgeoisie, which has whipped up Catalan secessionism as a diversion from its own savage austerity measures. Its threat is to establish a mini-state that will deprive Spain of tax revenues from what is the wealthiest region in the country, and serve as a major competitor by offering the global corporate elite tax cuts and stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

Although the *Times* does not call for the PP government to be changed it declares, “A more capable central government could head off the independence

fervour by giving the region a better economic return. Catalonia contributes nearly a fifth of Spain’s gross domestic product, yet the region receives just 9.5 percent of Spain’s national budget. Negotiating in good faith with Catalan leaders to find a political solution, rather than relying on the judiciary’s restrictive interpretation of the Constitution to punish Catalan efforts for greater autonomy, would also help.”

While calling for the referendum to be held, the newspaper makes clear it does not support the breakup of one of Washington’s closest allies in Europe, declaring, “The best outcome for Spain would be to permit the referendum, and for Catalan voters to reject independence—as voters in Quebec and Scotland have done.”

The editorial was posted three months after Puigdemont met with editors of the *Times* in his visit to the US to lobby for support for the referendum. On that occasion, Spanish officials and the Madrid-based media declared his visit a failure. The Carter Foundation refused to endorse his pleas to act as a mediator between Barcelona and Madrid, and the US embassy in Madrid posted a note in defence of “maintaining a relation with a strong and united Spain.”

However, like any editorial of the *Times*, this is more than an opinion piece. The newspaper is the semi-official voice of the Democratic Party establishment, and has intimate ties to US military and intelligence officials. It is currently waging a factional war against the Trump Administration for having retreated from the anti-Russian foreign policy adopted by the previous Obama administration.

The *Times* main concern is that the latest “round in a long game of chicken,” as the newspaper calls the tensions between Madrid and Barcelona, might provoke an explosive situation if Madrid uses repressive

measures such as the suspension of the Catalan statute or sending in the militarized Guardia Civil or army to suppress the ballot.

Such actions would take place against a backdrop of massive youth unemployment of over 40 percent, a fifth of households with incomes below poverty level, and over a quarter of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The traditional two party system has fractured, leading to the growth of two new parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos.

Under such conditions, the *Times* worries that neither Madrid nor the Catalan separatists will be able to control a possible social explosion. This could rapidly spiral out of control, destabilizing a key ally in the Mediterranean region, within the European Union and NATO, in a context of growing geopolitical tensions with Russia and China.

Spain is a geostrategic partner of US imperialism in its battle to defend its national interests. The US has a naval base at Rota and an air base at Morón in the south of Spain, both of which have played a major role in all US-led wars since the First Gulf War in 1990. The Rota base also holds the Aegis radar system, part of the Missile Defence System, an essential component of the Pentagon's plans for fighting an offensive nuclear war against Russia and China.

Spain also holds the key to the Mediterranean, controlling the Straits of Gibraltar, one of the main sea routes in the world. The Straits are vital, not only for their strategic military value, but also for the supply of oil upon which northern European countries depend carried by tankers from North Africa and the Persian Gulf.

Catalan secessionists have seized on the *Times*' editorial as a confirmation of their political position after years of unsuccessful international lobbying. Puigdemont tweeted, "I see they do not buy the idea that a referendum is a coup d'état," referring to the accusations from Madrid.

Despite all of Spain's major newspapers posting articles in response to the *Times* editorial and eliciting thousands of comments from their readers, the government has not made any official response. This will only increase the instability of the minority government.

One of first parties to react was Podemos, with its secretary for organisation, Pablo Echenique, tweeting

that the *Times* "adopts point by point Podemos' position: an agreed referendum and vote NO to independence."

That Podemos prides itself on being in political agreement with one of the main and most aggressive voices of US imperialism is proof the party will do anything to save Spanish capitalism from its "intransigent" old guard.



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