

Divisions mount in Spain's Podemos as Catalan independence referendum looms

Alejandro López
24 July 2017

For decades separatism and regionalism have been used to split the working class and prevent it from waging an independent and unified struggle against capitalism. Now the pseudo-left Podemos party is suffering factional divisions over which type of nationalism to cultivate.

The backdrop is the sharp tensions between Madrid and Barcelona, after regional Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont announced a referendum on independence to be held on October 1. The Spanish government under the minority conservative Popular Party (PP) has declared the referendum a “coup against the state” that will not be allowed to take place.

This month Defence Minister María Dolores de Cospedal, in a threat to the Catalan secessionists, made a speech to army leaders reminding them of their duty to “protect the integrity and sovereignty of the country.”

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy met with Socialist Party (PSOE) opposition leader Pedro Sánchez to show their “absolute agreement” over the “fundamental issues” related to Catalonia: the rejection of the referendum and the defence of the Spanish Constitution. Sánchez, however, has concerns that PP threats to use Article 155 of the Constitution to take control of Catalonia “only serves to feed independence.”

The speaker of the Catalan Parliament, Carme Forcadell, has replied to the threats, stating that “Catalan deputies will defend their rights as representatives mandated by the citizens of Catalonia and thus the sovereignty of the Catalan people.”

Soon after the ruling, the Together for Yes coalition and the pseudo-left and ultra-nationalist Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) presented to parliament a draft Referendum Law giving the referendum a legal cover. According to CUP parliamentarian Gabriella Serra, the draft means that if “yes” wins the declaration on independence will be carried out in 48 hours.

Against this background, further divisions are appearing in Podemos.

The party has already been wracked by a factional dispute between the Errejonista wing led by the former number two,

Iñigo Errejon, and the Pabloite wing led by party leader Pablo Iglesias. Their various disagreements are over how best to suppress opposition in the working class, whether through token protests in alliance with the trade unions or by avoiding any and all social mobilisations in favour of purely electoral and parliamentary manoeuvres oriented to the PSOE. But at the Podemos's Vistalegre II Congress in February a new dispute erupted over the relationship between the central leadership and regional affiliates.

From its creation Podemos has been an amalgam of forces with opposing views on regional nationalism. Its Pabloite wing, represented by Anticapitalistas, defends the right of the secessionists to hold a referendum and declares the breakup of Spain—always referred to as “The Spanish State”—as progressive. Its Stalinist wing opposes this idea and favours instead giving economic and constitutional concessions to the Catalan bourgeoisie as a way of defending the unity of the state. The suppression of these differences is now unravelling.

In Andalusia, the party's Pabloite leader Teresa Rodríguez demands her regional affiliate be delinked from the control of Madrid. In Castilla La Mancha the local leadership is currently consulting its membership over an invite from the PSOE to enter into a formal coalition, the first time since Podemos was created, in order to get the budget approved in the regional parliament.

In Catalonia, a faction in Podem (the Catalan branch of Podemos)—against Iglesias's wishes—has refused to join the umbrella party Catalonia in Common (CiC), founded in January by Barcelona's mayor Ada Colau. CiC integrates the majority of Catalan pseudo-left organisations, including Initiative for Catalonia Greens, the Stalinist-led United and Alternative Left, Barcelona en Comú and the green Equo.

Podem has publically announced that it backs the referendum and is calling on people to vote as an act of protest against the “obstinacy and authoritarianism” of the Spanish government. Their main difference with the secessionists is that they do not consider the vote binding and are therefore opposed to an immediate declaration of

independence.

The Podem announcement goes against the stated position of the Podemos leadership, expressed by Iglesias, who declared, “If I were a Catalan citizen—which I am not—I probably would not participate in the October 1 referendum, and I would not vote for one option or the other.” He said the vote has “no guarantees” and therefore cannot be seen as an exercise of the “right to decide.”

The leadership position was approved on July 8 by the CiC executive, which voted 85 against 29 in support of “all the mobilisations in defence of the right to decide” but added that it would not actively call for participation in the referendum “because we understand that, probably, some things have not been done well in the roadmap” to independence.

CiC’s declaration represents a setback for the Catalan separatists, who have courted Colau’s party. In effect the position of the Podemos and CiC leaderships means that a referendum can only be held through an agreement with the Spanish government and amendments to the constitution, something virtually impossible given that such changes require the support of three-quarters of Congress deputies.

This position has come into conflict with a range of pseudo-left forces orbiting around Podemos and CiC. Typical is Class Struggle, attached to the International Marxist Tendency and working inside Podemos, which has posted, “We do not share at all the position” of CiC and Podemos, and calls for a “Catalan Republic.”

These forces have for years encouraged workers and youth to put their hopes in Catalan separatist forces as a way of solving deep social problems. They dressed up as progressive the project of splitting off Spain’s most prosperous region—it contributes 20 percent of Spain’s GDP—by saying it would provide better social conditions for Catalans.

Separatism, whether under the guise of far-right separatist movements like Lega Nord in Italy, Vlaams Belang in Belgium or the supposed “progressives” of Catalonia and Scotland, offers nothing to the working class. These forces exploit legitimate social grievances fuelled by the savage cuts and austerity measures imposed by central governments to forge direct ties with the European Union and global finance capital. Their reaction, in what is almost always the most prosperous parts of a country with potential control of some valuable asset such as North Sea Oil taxation in Scotland is, in essence, to say, “We’re paying too much to central government to subsidise the poor, we want it back.”

They are aided by the pseudo-left tendencies, who also hope that the relative wealth of their regions will allow them a more privileged existence.

In one recent article published in the Pabloite *Viento Sur*,

veteran Anticapitalistas leader Jaime Pastor states that those opposing independence are the same people that approved article 135 of the Constitution, which enshrined austerity in the constitution, are breaking down the limited “non-confessional” (secular) features of the state by giving more power to the Catholic Church and attacking “fundamental rights like the freedom of speech.” He then adds the massive corruption scandals of the PP to the mix.

However, Pastor conveniently forgets that the Catalan separatist parties have imposed brutal austerity in the region, to the point it has become known as the “laboratory of the cuts,” and that the largest party, the Democratic Convergence (CDC), was forced to refound itself as the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDECAT) last year largely as a result of its association with corruption scandals—particularly of its long-time leader and Catalan President, Jordi Pujol.

Worse still, Pastor is completely indifferent to the fate of workers in the rest of Spain. For him, they could rot with the PP, austerity, corruption and the rest. Meanwhile, Catalans would be under the separatists, busy imposing austerity and channelling social anger towards over half of the population who oppose independence.

Pastor’s recipe is for the balkanisation of Spain and Europe, with workers struggling against one another in a race to the bottom in terms of jobs, wages and conditions, or, worse still, fighting one another in fratricidal wars, as the experience of Yugoslavia shows all too terribly.

Podemos meanwhile are staunch defenders of the Spanish nation state and its geopolitical interests worldwide. While defending concessions to the Catalan nationalists as a means to stop the secessionist drive, they abhor the possibility of Spain losing the wealth the region generates.

In their internal feuds, all factions of the pseudo-left are articulating the interests of privileged middle-class layers. They are auxiliary tools of the ruling class in helping to divide the working class, when everything depends upon the waging of a unified struggle on the basis of socialist internationalism. This means the overthrow of Spanish imperialism and its state apparatus, not the creation of a new repressive state in Catalonia.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact