

# Oppose the state crackdown on the Catalan independence referendum!

## For working class unity! No to separatism in Spain!

**Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International  
30 September 2017**

On the eve of the October 1 independence referendum in Catalonia, Spain is in the throes of its deepest political crisis since the fascist regime of Generalissimo Francisco Franco collapsed amid mass working class struggles in the 1970s. After a decade of deep economic crisis, social austerity, and mass unemployment across Europe, Spain is at the breaking point. As Madrid unleashes draconian police repression to block the referendum, with the support of governments across Europe and America, Spain is teetering on the brink of dictatorship and civil war.

Spain's minority Popular Party (PP) government, relying on support from the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the right-wing Citizens party, has pledged to prevent the referendum and to mobilize military police at polling stations. It has imposed a de facto state of emergency in Catalonia, mobilizing 16,000 police and paramilitary civil guards and is trying to seize Catalonia's finances and police. Far-right protesters have gathered at police stations, waving Spanish flags and cheering as police depart to Catalonia, chanting "Long live Spain" and "Go get them."

Fourteen Catalan government officials have been arrested, over 144 websites closed, millions of posters and leaflets seized, print shops and newspapers searched, meetings banned, and over 700 mayors threatened with prosecution for supporting the referendum. The separatist Candidatures of Popular Unity's (CUP) headquarters was raided without a warrant and besieged by police.

The National Court, descended from the Public Order Court set up under Franco to punish "political crimes," has filed sedition charges against separatist leaders carrying jail terms of up to 15 years. In the army, sentiment for martial law is rising. Retired General Manuel Altolaguirre has called the referendum "an act of high treason that necessitates the application of a state of war."

The PP crackdown enjoys the support of the major European powers and the United States—which fear the break-up of a member of the European Union and the NATO alliance—despite fears that Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's measures are inflaming separatist sentiment. France's President Emmanuel Macron declared alongside Rajoy, "I know a partner and a friend, which is Spain, Spain as a whole... The rest does not concern me." During Rajoy's visit to Washington this week, US President Donald Trump said, "Spain is a great country and it should remain united."

After the bloody experience of the 1936 fascist coup and the subsequent three-year Civil War in which Franco came to power, there is deep, historically rooted opposition in the working class to a relapse into war and authoritarian rule. Port workers have refused to unload ships bringing Spanish police to arrest Catalan separatist politicians and voters, and Barcelona firefighters have vowed to protect the polls from police. However, opposition cannot be mounted under the grip of the ruling parties in Madrid or the Catalan nationalists, who are unflinchingly hostile

to the working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) insists that the only viable policy against the danger of war and dictatorship is to fight to unify the working class in Spain and Europe in a struggle against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of society. This can be carried out only in revolutionary struggle against all of Spain's bourgeois factions.

The ICFI's opposition to the EU, the social democrats and the post-Francoite PP does not in any way lessen its opposition to the Catalan nationalists—the Catalan European Democratic Party, the Republican Left of Catalonia, and the petty-bourgeois CUP. The division of the Spanish working class by the building of a new capitalist state in Catalonia, governed by parties with a long record of supporting war and imposing austerity, offers workers nothing. It would separate Catalan workers from their greatest ally against Madrid's onslaught: the entire Spanish and European working class.

Many workers recognise this and will not participate in the referendum. Many will choose to vote and register their social anger. To them, the ICFI urges the casting of a No vote against a move that threatens catastrophic consequences.

The problems facing workers in Catalonia are fundamentally rooted in class and not national oppression. The Catalan working class can respond to the threat of police-military rule only by establishing a fighting unity with its class brothers and sisters.

The calling of the latest referendum and the declaration that a Yes vote would lead to separation was a rotten manoeuvre. Last year, Madrid was without a government for eight months after two general elections produced hung parliaments. In Barcelona, the CUP supported 2016 and 2017 austerity budgets in Catalonia. To give a false, "radical" gloss to their anti-worker policies, the CUP then advanced the demand for separation, trying to blame its own reactionary role on Madrid.

Advocated by the CUP, the separation demand was then taken up by the other Catalan nationalist parties. Its aim was to divert rising social discontent at unemployment and austerity into nationalist channels, as the Spanish capitalist class faced an unprecedented crisis of rule.

The referendum helped the ruling class by burying socio-economic concerns of workers and youth, both Spanish and Catalan, under a torrent of nationalist rhetoric. This was pursued as a conscious and deliberate strategy. The current Catalan councillor in charge of business, Santi Vila, cynically remarked in a meeting of politicians and businessmen that if Catalonia "had not put forward a discourse based on nationalism, how would it have weathered adjustments of over €6 billion?"

The Catalan crisis has yet again exposed the Podemos party's reactionary role. After backing Syriza when it took power in 2015 and imposed European Union (EU) austerity in Greece, Podemos is still

calling for an alliance with the PSOE, even as the PSOE supports the PP's onslaught in Catalonia. With its law-and-order criticisms of the PP for leaving Spain unguarded by sending too many police to Catalonia, however, Podemos is signaling the ruling class that it is also available to form an alternate government to try to de-escalate the crisis and reach a deal with the Catalan nationalists.

Such a government, were it to be formed, would offer no alternative to the drive to dictatorship and austerity currently being prosecuted by the PP.

Indeed, their own records make clear that they would use the army and the security forces to escalate attacks on the workers. A PSOE government mobilized the army to smash the air traffic controllers strike in 2010. Ada Colau, the Podemos-backed mayor of the Catalan capital, Barcelona, smashed a transit strike and backed the mobilization of the Civil Guard last month to crush an airport security workers strike. Should Podemos come to power, it would respond to strikes and popular opposition, like Syriza in Greece, with police state measures.

### **The Catalan referendum and the crisis of capitalism**

Behind the assault on the working class in Spain is a European and indeed global crisis of capitalism. After a quarter-century of social cuts and escalating imperialist wars across the Middle East since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991, European capitalism is in an advanced state of collapse. Particularly since the 2008 Wall Street crash and global economic crisis, the ruling elites in Europe and America have all sought to strengthen the military and police agencies while imposing devastating austerity on the workers.

This left Spain—like Greece, Portugal, Italy and much of Eastern Europe—in ruins. Spanish capitalism is economically moribund. Spain's unemployment rate stands at a massive 17.8 percent and at 38.6 percent for the under-25s. One in four unemployed has not had a job for at least four years. Some 2.5 million workers came off the unemployment rolls, not because they found jobs in Spain, but because they emigrated to find work elsewhere.

As a result, social inequality has surged. Half of all households now have incomes below the official poverty level (just €8,010 for single-person households and €16,823 for those with two adults and two children) or are at risk of poverty. In contrast, the nation's rich—those with at least €700,000 in assets—have increased by over 44 percent; around 0.4 percent of the population now owns half the wealth in Spain. This includes 28 of Spain's 100 richest billionaires who are either Catalan or have based their fortunes in Catalonia, compared with 25 billionaires in Madrid.

Across Europe and America, social inequality is reaching levels incompatible with democratic forms of rule. Faced with mass discontent, the ruling elite is turning to war and police state forms of rule. As Trump issues genocidal war threats of "total destruction" against North Korea, his administration is sanctioning and whipping up fascist sentiment, applauding neo-Nazis responsible for the murder of a left-wing protester, Heather Heyer, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

One only need look to neighboring France to know where Madrid's authoritarian policies lead. The indefinite suspension of basic democratic rights under the state of emergency is being used to impose labour "reforms" dismantling workers legal rights and protections and to impose cuts in health, education and unemployment benefits despite overwhelming popular opposition.

In Spain, the social crisis has claimed the political order established in 1978 following the death of Franco. The PSOE and the Stalinist Spanish

Communist Party (PCE) hailed the "Transition" as a peaceful turn to parliamentary democracy. Accompanied by a "pact of forgetting" and a 1977 Amnesty Law for fascist crimes, it allowed the Franco regime to avoid any reckoning for its crimes by incorporating the PSOE and the PCE into the ruling establishment.

During the Transition, the old Franco regime granted substantial concessions to the regional bourgeoisies to ensure their loyalty to the state machine. The Catalan language was allowed to be broadly and publicly used. Since then, it has become the ninth-most widely spoken language in the EU. More than 80 television channels and 100 radio stations are broadcast daily in Catalan, more than 150 universities in the world teach Catalan, and over 400 journals are published in the language.

While the Catalan bourgeoisie in Barcelona flirted with demands for autonomy and separation throughout the post-Franco era, it was tacitly agreed that the Catalan bourgeoisie would not seek separation, and that Madrid would not aggressively attack Catalan nationalist sentiment.

This post-Transition regime has now broken down, and a bitter and violent faction fight is unfolding in the Spanish ruling class. In a country where many workers still can remember the Franco regime from barely 40 years ago, Madrid's draconian crackdown must serve as a stark warning. Amid the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, the post-Transition regime is increasingly turning back toward the authoritarian policies of the Francoite regime from which it emerged.

Workers opposing Madrid's crackdown on Catalonia cannot limit themselves to simply opposing one or another repressive measure of the PP. What they face is not the failure of Spain's minority government, but a failure of capitalism. They must seek the removal of this government through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class for socialism in Spain and across Europe.

### **The reactionary role of Catalan separatism and its pseudo-left supporters**

The Catalan separatists represent the interest not of left-wing forces struggling against Spain's financial aristocracy, but of factions of the ruling class advancing their interests against both the working class and the central government in Madrid.

They would not have been able to capitalize on social discontent, much of it created by their own policies, and to profit from hostility to the EU and Madrid had it not been for the myriad petty-bourgeois "left" groupings. These parties, which in post-Transition Spain adapted to the PSOE and the Stalinist forces in the PCE and Podemos, have promoted nationalism for decades as an alternative to the class struggle.

Time and again, these pseudo-left groups have proclaimed support for "self-determination" to justify alliances with right-wing bourgeois movements and to suppress independent struggle by the working class—even using this to justify supporting imperialist proxy wars in Libya and Syria.

They are again intervening to support separatism and divide the workers. *International Viewpoint*, the central organ of the Pabloite United Secretariat, argues, "A victory in Catalonia would be a victory for all the popular, revolutionary and democratic forces of Europe and the world."

The Morenoite Workers' Revolutionary Current calls for a mass mobilization in the referendum, "which would be a big blow to the Regime," thereby "opening a constituent process in Catalonia and the rest of Spain over its ruins." It adds that this would supposedly "resolve the great democratic and social demands."

The Balkanisation of Spain—allowing global capital to pit workers against one another in a race to the bottom in terms of jobs, wages and

conditions—would not be a “victory” for the working class.

The most telling example of separate states emerging from the “ruins” of a larger one is the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, where the pseudo-left groups used deceitful invocations of the “right to self-determination” to back an imperialist drive for dismemberment and capitalist restoration that ended in a bloodbath. In a series of ethnic wars lasting a decade, from 1991 to 2001, an estimated 140,000 people were killed and four million displaced. This culminated in the 1999 NATO war against Serbia. Nearly two decades later, the entire region remains decimated.

The reactionary, anti-working-class policy of the Catalan nationalists is yet another vindication of the assessment of bourgeois nationalism formulated by the ICFI during the wars in Yugoslavia.

Examining the implications of the unprecedented global integration of production processes that objectively strengthened the international unity of the working class and created the basis for a world socialist economy, the ICFI warned nearly two decades ago that these same developments provide “an objective impulse for a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states. Globally-mobile capital has given smaller territories the ability to link themselves directly to the world market ... A small coastal enclave, possessing adequate transportation links, infrastructure and a supply of cheap labor may prove a more attractive base for multinational capital than a larger country with a less productive hinterland.”

Catalonia is Spain’s richest region, representing a fifth of the country’s GDP. The separatist parties aim to create a new mini-state through which they can claw back taxes presently paid to the central government, while establishing direct relations with global banks, transnational corporations and the European Union. They hope to transform Catalonia into a low-tax free trade area based on stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

The Catalan nationalists and their pseudo-left backers dress themselves up as progressives. However, nothing fundamental distinguishes Catalan separatism from similar separatist formations across Europe—the Scottish National Party in the UK or those parties of an explicitly right-wing character such as Italy’s Northern League and Belgium’s Vlaams Belang. In all these instances, separatism has emerged in regions enjoying some economic advantage over the rest of the country, which the local bourgeoisie seeks to exploit to its own benefit.

An “independent” Catalan republic, were it established, would be nothing of the sort. It would be even more dependent on the major powers, in Europe and internationally. In alliance with the EU, it would continue the policies the Catalan separatist parties pursued in their alliance with Madrid: brutal austerity, slashing funding for education, health care and other social needs and using police to smash strikes and protests. It would be a dead end for workers.

### **Against war and dictatorship, For the United Socialist States of Europe**

Madrid’s police crackdown and the Catalan nationalists’ drive for separation are both responses of factions of the ruling class to a mortal crisis of capitalism. The ruling elite is terrified of growing revolutionary sentiment in the population. The EU’s own 2017 “Generation What” poll found that over half of European youth under 34—over 60 percent in Spain, Italy, France, and Britain—would join a “mass uprising” against the existing order.

On the centenary of the October 1917 Revolution and the overthrow of capitalism in Russia by the Bolshevik Party led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the EU is heading towards a massive upsurge of working

class struggles across Europe. This objective tendency of development must, however, be made a conscious political strategy.

The threats being exchanged by Madrid and Barcelona are a stark warning. Even before it has entered into mass struggle, the working class faces the danger of civil conflict and war erupting in the heart of Europe. Workers must oppose threats of violence and the escalating attempts to whip up nationalist conflicts, but individual spontaneous actions cannot suffice to resolve the crisis in Spain.

The conflict in Catalonia vindicates the ICFI’s insistence that the defense of basic social and democratic rights means building a conscious international and revolutionary movement of the working class against war and dictatorship, and for socialism.

This requires above all the building of a new socialist political party to give leadership to the struggles of the working class. What is necessary is a turn to the traditions of uncompromising struggle of the Bolshevik Party and the Trotskyist movement, represented by the ICFI.

Linking the struggles against all the social ills of life under capitalism with a political struggle against austerity, war and capitalism must be discussed in factories, workplaces, working class districts and schools and universities in Spain and across Europe. This will lay the basis for building a network of popular workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of and in opposition to the pro-business parties and trade unions, and the development of a socialist movement to take state power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Against capitalist Spain and the creation of a capitalist Catalonia, the ICFI calls for building the United Socialist States of Europe. Only the formation of workers’ governments in every country and the unification of Europe on a socialist basis can prevent a descent into social reaction and war and permit the harmonious development of Europe’s economy to meet the needs of its population. The ICFI appeals to all workers and youth who agree with this statement to read and distribute its materials, contact the WSWs and join in the struggle to build a section of the ICFI in Spain.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**