

As crackdown looms in Catalonia, Spain's Popular Party calls protest in Barcelona

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Hundreds of thousands marched yesterday in a protest called in Barcelona by right-wing political forces, a week after the regional Catalan government held a referendum on secession and ahead of the potential unilateral declaration of independence by the secessionist forces on Tuesday.

After violently attempting to suppress last weekend's independence referendum in Catalonia, the Madrid ruling elite is moving rapidly towards a crackdown and military rule in the region.

Under the slogan "Enough, let's recover good sense!" between 350,000 and 400,000 people marched in the streets of Barcelona. Many waved Spanish flags, Spain's imperial flag, the European flag and also the *senyeres* (the Catalanian non-secessionist flag).

The demonstration was called by Societat Civil Catalana (Catalan Civil Society) and supported by right-wing organizations including the ruling Popular Party (PP) and Citizens, with the semi-official endorsement of the Socialist Party. Far-right groups also joined the protest including the Falange of 20th century fascist dictator Francisco Franco, the Platform for Catalonia, the Platform for a Civic Catalonia, Somatempus, VOX, and others.

Societat Civil Catalana aims to build an anti-secessionist alternative to the secessionist Catalan National Assembly, though it has only a few thousand members. Its links to the far-right are well known. In its founding congress in 2014, invited guests included Santiago Abascal (VOX), a delegation of France's National Front, a delegation representing the Francisco Franco National Foundation, and the neo-Nazi Social Republican Movement, the sister party of Greece's Golden Dawn.

The main chants during the rally were "[Catalan regional premier Carles] Puigdemont to prison," "I am Spanish," "Long live Spain, long live Catalonia, and long live the Civil Guards," and "Dialogue? No. To prison." When the march passed the National Police headquarters in Via Laietana, protestors clapped and chanted "you are not alone." At the same time, they chanted "traitors" against the regional Catalan police, the Mossos d'Esquadra.

Besides the thousands of right-wing and far-right wing sympathizers, many of which travelled on trains, cars and hundreds of buses from around Spain organized by Societat Civil Catalana, and upper middle-class layers of the rich areas of Barcelona, the protests also attracted layers of the working class from Barcelona's "red belt."

El Confidencial noted, "today thousands of Catalans from the workers' belt of Barcelona, from Lleida and towns of Tarragona, as well as families from 'noble' neighborhoods like Sarrià have come. Public transport from working class areas such as Santa Coloma de Gramenet was full of people with flags."

One worker from Lleida told *El Confidencial*: "It has been difficult for me to decide because I do not want it to appear that I come to defend [PP Prime Minister Mariano] Rajoy ... But now I cannot stay at home, because they are going to proclaim independence on Tuesday."

The PP's presence in Barcelona's red belt is minimal, and the growth of the anti-secessionist citizens party in the past years in this area has been at the expense of the Socialist Party, whose austerity policies at the national level have seen its support plummet over the years since the world economic crisis of 2008. In the most recent elections, Podemos took control of this area.

There is broad opposition to far-right politics and fascism, in a country that suffered under Franco's brutal fascist dictatorship from 1939 to 1978. Reflecting widespread popular hostility to fascism, organizers asked demonstrators to not bring their "pre-constitutional flags" (i.e., Francoist flags). The leader of the right-wing Citizens party in Catalonia, Inés Arrimadas, sent a controversial tweet asking people not to show Fascist flags "in front of the press".

However, there is also broad opposition to separatism in the region, with the last survey of the Catalan-funded Centre of Opinion Studies (CEO) showing that to the question "do you want Catalonia to become an independent State?" 49.4 percent of Catalans responded 'no', with those favoring secession representing 41.1 percent.

The same polling institute showed that only 32 percent of

Catalans with a family income of less than €900 want independence. It is only in more middle-class layers earning more than €1,800 a month—well over the regional average of €1,400 per month—that support for secessionism reaches above 40 percent. Among those earning over €4,000 a month, 54 percent want independence from Spain.

The fact that such numbers of people can be rallied to demonstrations led by the right and far-right is a testament to the bankruptcy of the Catalanian nationalists, who, having carried out austerity policies for years, are incapable of making any serious appeal to Spain's working class to oppose Madrid's brutal crackdown.

It also makes clear that the violent police repression in Catalonia was not required to block secession. Its main purpose was to create conditions for the violent suppression of the working class, in Catalonia and throughout Spain.

While there is a massive opposition towards the military crackdown being prepared by Madrid, backed by Citizens and the Socialist Party, there is not a single party calling on workers to mobilize in a common struggle in Spain and Catalonia against the crackdown that is being prepared.

The Catalan separatists are despised in broad sections of the working class for their austerity policies. Under their control, the region has seen cuts of 31 percent in healthcare spending and 26 percent in social expenditure from 2009 to 2015.

Last week's referendum did not give them an overwhelming mandate for a unilateral declaration of independence on Tuesday. They declared that 90 percent of voters supported separation in the referendum; however, on 42 percent voter turnout, this only represents 2.26 million of 5.3 million registered voters. Those motivated to vote tended to favor independence.

The petty-bourgeois Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), with its tie-breaking 10 seats in the regional parliament, is calling on Puigdemont to declare independence immediately. One of its leaders, Eulalia Reguant, a CUP parliamentarian, called for proposals to seize territorial control of Catalonia, including its ports and airports.

Such a scenario is being planned by the ruling PP, which is preparing a military-police crackdown. On Saturday, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy told *El País*, "Spain will not divide, and national unity will be maintained. To do so, we will use all of the instruments that the legislation gives us. It falls to the government to take the decision and to do so at the right time."

Asked if he would apply article 155 to seize control of the regional government by Madrid, and the potential use of the army to suppress social opposition, he said: "I am not ruling out anything that the law says."

Felipe Gonzalez, the former PSOE prime minister, who

was in Berlin over the weekend to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Chancellor Willy Brandt's death, similarly came out in favor of applying Article 155 in press statements in Berlin.

The Catalan crisis is also exposing divisions inside the pseudo-left Podemos party. At the national level, it is still peddling illusions in the PSOE, appealing to general secretary Pedro Sánchez to stop backing the minority Popular Party government. Podemos' main rallying call is dialogue between the Catalan separatists and the Rajoy government, something Rajoy has repeatedly rejected.

Podemos' section in Catalonia has now come out in favor of the separatists. Its leader, Dante Fachin, told the Catalan daily *naciodigital.cat* that he would support the unilateral declaration of independence, stating, "if Puigdemont calls for a [Catalan] Republic and a constituent process, we will get involved."

The International Committee of the Fourth International condemns last weekend's crackdown on the Catalanian independence referendum and Madrid's plans to keep the region within its borders through military occupation. At the same time, it opposes the politics of Catalan and Spanish nationalism from the left.

As it wrote in "An independent class strategy for the Spanish and Catalan working class!" workers throughout Spain "must assert their class interests by intervening independently in this crisis. This means resolutely opposing the actions of Madrid and urging their class brothers and sisters in Catalonia to join with them in a common struggle against austerity and war and for a workers' Spain within a Socialist United States of Europe."



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