

Catalan premier affirms right to independence from Spain, but delays formal declaration

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11 October 2017

Speaking Tuesday evening before the Catalan parliament in Barcelona, regional premier Carles Puigdemont announced that Catalonia would secede from Spain, in line with the result of the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. However, he put off a formal declaration of independence for now and requested negotiations with the central government in Madrid. The Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has declared the referendum illegal and treasonous and ruled out talks with Puigdemont.

The contradictory announcement, coming after Puigdemont reportedly took calls from politicians from across Europe, left the European political situation in a highly unstable and explosive state, with Spain teetering on the verge of military rule and civil war.

Puigdemont delivered his speech amid an unfolding Spanish military and police intervention into Catalonia and the looming threat of a crackdown even bloodier than that carried out on October 1, the day of the referendum. At that time, 16,000 *Guardia Civil* assaulted peaceful voters and smashed polling places in a failed attempt to halt the referendum, shocking the world as videos emerged of police beating civil servants and voters, including elderly women. Since then, however, the Spanish military-police presence has been considerably reinforced.

European Union officials and heads of government are continuing to make clear their support for Rajoy's repression. French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday denounced the "economic egotism" of the Catalan independence movement, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman announced on Monday that she had contacted Rajoy to give her support.

Spanish army logistics units and at least 6,000 more national police have deployed to the region since October 1, taking over Catalonia's ports and Barcelona's El Prat Airport. Amid reports that the Spanish Interior Ministry is planning to arrest Puigdemont, several Special Forces units, including the Special Operations Group (GEO) of the police and the *Guardia Civil*'s Rapid Action Group (GAR) and Special Intervention Unit (UEI), have made preparations to intervene.

On Monday, a spokesman for Rajoy's PP government said that Puigdemont could end up like Lluís Companys, who was jailed in 1934 after proclaiming a Catalan state within Spain. In 1940, Companys was captured by the Gestapo in Nazi-occupied Paris and handed over to the Spanish fascist regime of Francisco Franco, which executed him by firing squad.

On Tuesday, Catalan regional police, the *Mossos d'Esquadra*, closed down the grounds surrounding the parliament before Puigdemont spoke. They are now carrying out round-the-clock protection of Catalan cabinet members, including Puigdemont. These Catalan government officials are traveling in unmarked cars, *El Confidencial* reported, to prevent Spanish police from grabbing and arresting them.

Puigdemont spoke at 7 pm, arguing that relations between Catalonia and the rest of Spain had irretrievably broken down. He thanked those who organized or voted in the October 1 referendum, recalled the police assault that day, which wounded over 800 people, and declared that the Catalan issue was no longer an internal Spanish matter, but a European issue. He then said that the Spanish political order that emerged from the 1978 Transition from the Francoite regime to parliamentary democracy had failed the Catalan population.

Citing Catalonia's role as an "economic motor" of Spain, which, he claimed, helped consolidate democracy, he indicated that Catalans had believed the 1978 Constitution would provide them with a framework for progress. Laying out the Catalan government's attempts to rewrite its autonomy statutes over the last decade, which were repeatedly vetoed by Spanish courts, he argued that Catalonia was now moving backward from 1978.

Puigdemont cited the October 1 referendum—which produced an 89 percent vote for independence, but on the basis of a voter turnout of just 42 percent—as a binding vote, requiring him to declare an independent Catalan republic. However, he said that he would suspend Catalan independence "several weeks" in response to international demands that he accept mediation with Madrid.

The Spanish government responded to Puigdemont on Tuesday through Vice-Premier Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría,

who flatly rejected all calls for mediation. She reiterated the PP's insistence that the referendum and the Catalan law on which it was based were illegal, and that there could be no negotiations with the Catalan separatists.

"Neither Mr. Puigdemont nor anyone else can draw conclusions from a law that does not exist, a referendum that did not occur, and from a will of the Catalan people that, yet again, they are trying to seize and make their own," she said. Adding that there could be no mediation, she announced, "Tomorrow, the leader of the government will bring together the council of ministers to discuss our next steps."

Rajoy is due to make a statement on the Catalan crisis today after the council of ministers meeting, at 4 pm.

The only force that can provide a progressive resolution of this crisis is the working class. The brutal policy of the Spanish state and the national bourgeoisie of using violence and repression to forcibly hold Catalonia within Spain is reactionary and must be opposed by workers across the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish and Catalan alike, together with workers throughout Europe and internationally. The demand must be raised for the immediate withdrawal of all national police and military forces from Catalonia.

With the support of the Spanish Socialist Party, the PSOE, the right-wing Rajoy regime is seeking to whip up nationalist sentiment and encourage Francoite fascistic forces in order to prepare a military crackdown not only against the Catalan masses, but also the working class in the rest of the country. This is its solution to the desperate and worsening crisis of Spanish and European capitalism.

But the Catalan separatist bourgeoisie and its middle-class allies offer no democratic or progressive alternative. They seek a separate capitalist state in order to establish more lucrative relations with the imperialist powers on the basis of more intense austerity, using Catalan workers as cheap labor to attract foreign investment. They whip up Catalan nationalism the better to divide the working class and exploit their "own" workers.

Only the independent mobilization of the working class in Spain and across Europe, in struggle against capitalism and the danger of dictatorship, on a socialist and internationalist perspective, offers a way forward.

The basic problems facing the broad mass of the Catalan and Spanish populations are rooted not in national, but class oppression. The majority of the Catalan population that did not participate in the October 1 referendum includes large sections of the working class that oppose secession.

What is unfolding is not a crisis simply of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, but of European and world capitalism. The budget battles and fights over regional autonomy between the ruling elites in Madrid and Barcelona unfolded over a decade, as the EU reacted to the global financial collapse with massive bank bailouts financed by devastating austerity measures against the working class across Europe. The formation of a Catalan

capitalist republic, led by politicians who have long supported austerity and imperialist war, will do nothing to resolve this international crisis.

There is every indication that Madrid, working with Washington and the major EU powers, is now preparing its political strategy to justify a new crackdown. There is extensive discussion in the Spanish media of applying either Article 155 or 116 of the Spanish Constitution to suspend Catalan regional self-government and basic democratic rights. This would pave the way for a rapid extension of military rule not only in Catalonia, but across all of Spain.

A major element of this crackdown would be the closing down of Internet and social media accounts to censor information and block protests. Yesterday, Madrid suspended the Twitter accounts used by two Catalan nationalist organizations, the Catalan National Assembly and Omnium, to communicate with their supporters.

Madrid is preparing a bitter clash with the Catalan nationalists and their supporters, many of whom sharply criticized Puigdemont for not immediately declaring independence. Puigdemont delayed his appearance yesterday for one hour as he negotiated with the petty-bourgeois nationalist Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), which has supported Puigdemont's austerity budgets in the Catalan parliament. The CUP ultimately boycotted his speech, however.

CUP deputy Anna Gabriel took the floor later to criticize Puigdemont, declaring, "We believe that today was the opportunity to solemnly proclaim the Catalan republic and that we perhaps missed an opportunity." Issuing a hollow pledge to continue with a Catalan separatist program until it produces "class and gender liberation," she concluded: "We came to make a republic."

Spain's Podemos party is again playing the central role in blocking an independent mobilization of the working class against the danger of a crackdown and military rule, instead adopting an impotent policy of issuing moral appeals to Rajoy and the PP to negotiate with Barcelona.

Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias applauded Puigdemont's decision to suspend independence. He asked Rajoy to negotiate based on the recognition that "Spain is pluri-national and the Catalan people deserve to be listened to."



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