Catalan Premier Puigdemont flees to Belgium as Spain asserts direct rule over Catalonia

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Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont sought asylum in Belgium on Monday as the Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid activated Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to seize control of the Catalan regional government. The move by Madrid was taken in response to the October 1 Catalan independence referendum.

The government in Madrid is now moving to dissolve the Catalan parliament, seize control of Catalan regional ministries and impose new elections on Catalonia for December 21. In the place of the deposed Catalan government, Spain's deputy prime minister, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, is to become the unelected head of the region.

Spanish Interior Ministry sources confirmed press reports that Puigdemont had arrived in Belgium together with five Catalan regional ministers. These include Administration Minister Meritxell Borràs and Interior Minister Joaquin Forn of Puigdemont's Democratic European Party of Catalonia (PDeCAT), and Health Minister Antoni Comín, Labor Minister Dolors Bassa and Agriculture Minister Meritxell Serret of the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC).

Regional Vice-Premier Oriol Junqueras has for now remained in Catalonia, together with several other members of Puigdemont's dissolved 12-member cabinet.

The Spanish Interior Ministry told *La Vanguardia* that Puigdemont's flight did not "bother" them, since they were "today more interested" in ensuring that Puigdemont was no longer occupying his Catalan government offices.

Yesterday, in a move to secure control of the Catalan police, Madrid sacked the director general of the Catalan police, Pere Soler. Soon after, Spanish Interior Minister Juan Ignacio Zoido ordered the removal of the chief of the regional Mossos d'Esquadra police, Josep Lluís Trapero, who is considered too close to the separatists. Trapero is being prosecuted on sedition charges for having allowed the October 1 Catalan independence referendum to go ahead. He issued a statement saying he would comply with his removal.

Madrid is also purging hundreds of Catalan civil servants. Since Friday, the Catalan delegations in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Austria, Italy, Portugal and Denmark have been sacked. Hundreds more are expected to be fired this week.

The Popular Party government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy is threatening all 200,000 Catalan civil servants with sacking if they oppose its attempt to seize control of the region. Rajoy has announced plans to discipline workers "without recourse to previous mechanisms regarding disciplinary measures."

On Sunday, there was a mass protest of 300,000 in the streets of Barcelona in defence of Spanish unity. The rally was called by the anti-secessionist right-wing group Societat Civil Catalana and supported by the pro-Article 155 parties: Citizens, the PP and the Socialist Party in Catalonia. Another pro-unity protest this month drew similar numbers. It included forces from working class districts in the suburbs of Barcelona hostile to secession.

Thousands also demonstrated in neighbouring Valencia against fascism and the attacks of October 9, when a peaceful demonstration in solidarity with the Catalans was assaulted by fascists.

The Spanish trade unions, while hostile to mobilizing the working class against the threat of a crackdown, are warning the political establishment of broad opposition among workers to Madrid's threat of military intervention in Catalonia.

Marc Casanova of the IAC trade union said that "we will not recognize the violation of the Catalan institutions' self-government. … our union will not recognize the legitimacy of these authorities." The spokesperson of the teachers union USTEC, Ramon Font,

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said that many teachers would not comply if Madrid attempted to change the Catalan education system.

Resistance is also expected from the firemen, who have opposed Madrid's police measures since the October 1 referendum, when many, dressed in their uniforms, intervened to protect the ballots. One fireman told AFP, "If [pro-independence protesters] block a road and they [the Spanish authorities] ask us to unblock it, maybe we will not respond."

On the judicial front, Madrid is preparing repression against the Catalan separatist movement on a scale not seen since the 1939-1978 fascist dictatorship established by General Francisco Franco. The Attorney General's Office is expected to charge Puigdemont, members of the Catalan government and the parliamentary committee that authorized the vote on independence, including parliamentary spokesperson Carme Forcadell, with rebellion, a crime punishable by up to 30 years in prison. Other charges will include disobedience, prevarication and embezzlement.

The office is charging "all of those who have participated in the events"—a term vague enough to allow the prosecution of thousands of people and anyone who opposes Article 155. The Attorney General's Office also said it would charge not only those directly responsible, but also all "cooperators."

Amid a looming threat of dictatorship in Spain, with the European Union backing Madrid, the only force that can offer a progressive solution to the crisis is the working class. The critical question is the mobilization of the working class in struggle, in Catalonia and the rest of Spain and across Europe, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective against the threat of police and military repression by Madrid.

The defence of the fundamental democratic and social rights of working people requires an end to Madrid's crackdown and the withdrawal of Spanish government forces from Catalonia. Workers can fight for these demands only by carrying out a conscious political break with the Catalan bourgeois nationalists as well as the entire political establishment in Madrid.

The Catalan nationalist parties are bitterly hostile to a political intervention in the crisis by the working class. While in power, they have carried out the brutal austerity policies dictated to Spain by the European Union, which they unconditionally support.

Puigdemont's flight to Belgium underscores the bankruptcy of the secessionists' perspective of forming a new, independent capitalist state in Catalonia. Puigdemont's government repeatedly sought a deal with Madrid even as Rajoy made clear time and again that he had no intention of negotiating with the Catalan regime. In the final analysis, Puigdemont and his Catalan nationalist allies led the Catalan and Spanish workers into a trap, providing Madrid with an opportunity to move for direct rule and a military crackdown against the working class.

The December 21 elections in Catalonia ordered by Madrid are entirely anti-democratic, held under the threat of Spanish military intervention and with hundreds of Catalan politicians expected to be in jail.

The Catalan crisis is also exposing the political bankruptcy of the Podemos party. Factional divisions are erupting inside the party, but they are over whether to orient to the Spanish state or the Catalan secessionists. On Friday, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias approved Rajoy's reactionary measures, saying that elections "should take place without repression and with all the political options available."

The Podemos leader in Catalonia, Albano Dante, implicitly criticized Iglesias on Catalunya Ràdio, saying that accepting these elections means "to accept [Article] 155," which is an "immense contradiction." He refused to rule out a coalition of Podemos Catalonia with the PDeCAT, the ERC and the pseudo-left secessionist Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP).

The Pabloite Anticapitalistas wing of Podemos posted a statement recognizing the "new Catalan Republic" and calling for rejection of Article 155. It promoted the "democratic, peaceful and disobedient defence of the will of the Catalan people and their right to decide."

While Iglesias orients to Rajoy to defend the Spanish nation-state, the Pabloites and the Catalan wing of Podemos are promoting Catalan nationalism. All these factions are united in working to suppress social opposition to Madrid and the threat of military rule.

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