

Deposed Catalan premier hands himself in to Belgian police

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6 November 2017

Bitter conflicts erupted inside the European Union (EU) this weekend over Spain's suspension of the elected government of Catalonia after the October 1 Catalan independence referendum and the flight of deposed Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont to Brussels. As Madrid escalates its repression in Catalonia after General Fernando Alejandro threatened the region with military intervention, a historic political crisis is shaking the EU to its foundations.

Puigdemont handed himself in to police officials yesterday in Belgium, where he fled as Madrid suspended his government, after the capital issued a European warrant for his arrest and extradition back to Spain. "We are prepared to fully cooperate with Belgian justice following the European arrest warrant issued by Spain," Puigdemont wrote on Twitter.

Amid growing criticisms of Madrid in official Belgian circles, prosecutors said they would examine the warrant, which Puigdemont's lawyers will contest, opening the prospect of a lengthy extradition trial. "We will study it, and put it in the hands of an investigating judge," the spokesman for the prosecutor's office, Eric Van Der Sijpt, told AP. "That could be tomorrow, the day after or even Monday... We are not in any hurry."

This came as lawyers for eight Catalan ministers jailed in Spain filed complaints over their handling by Spanish police. According to attorney Jaume Alonso-Cuevillas, officers stripped two of the ministers naked, handcuffed the ministers behind their backs, and had them listen to a repeating loop of the Spanish national anthem on their way to jail. Deposed Catalan Justice Minister Carles Mundó reportedly suffered injuries due to the handcuffs. The ministers were treated "as if they were drug dealers," Alonso-Cuevillas told Catalan public television Saturday.

Madrid's drive towards dictatorship, which has for a month received the EU's full support, is deeply reactionary and must be opposed. All political prisoners in Spain must be released, and the working class across Europe must be politically mobilized in struggle against the rising danger of military-police rule. In this struggle, workers must act independently from and against forces in the European ruling elite working with the Catalan nationalists, who speak for factions of the Catalan bourgeoisie, and are hostile to the working class and to

democratic rights.

Behind Belgian prosecutors' reluctance to rapidly extradite Puigdemont lie concerns in ruling circles that the Catalan crisis has exposed the entire EU's shift to police-state rule and could provoke explosive popular opposition. Strike action is called in Catalonia for November 8, and protests are also being held in the Basque country and southern France, including in Toulouse and Perpignan.

After a decade of imposing deep austerity and police repression at the behest of the financial aristocracy, with millions unemployed in Spain and across Europe, the EU is deeply discredited. Videos of the brutal police crackdown on peaceful voters during the October 1 referendum shocked millions worldwide. The major EU powers backed Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy, however; Berlin, London and Paris issued statements stressing that they saw Rajoy as their only partner in Spain.

Since October 1, the major European powers have given a green light at every turn to the most aggressive forces in the Spanish ruling class. Alejandro, who listed Catalonia as a possible target of military action and hailed Spanish soldiers "of all epochs"—thus including fascist Generalissimo Francisco Franco's 1939 invasion of Catalonia in the Spanish Civil War—made clear that Madrid is reacting by legitimizing its fascist heritage to prepare mass repression. He also said that Spain's NATO allies are all making similar plans.

After Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) officials last week warned that working-class suburbs of Barcelona are a "powder keg," however, some EU officials fear that an immediate military clash with Catalonia might have dangerous consequences, provoking uncontrollable opposition across Europe. They are asking whether, now that Spanish troops and *Guardia Civil* are seizing infrastructure and state buildings across Catalonia, a deal with the Catalan nationalists might be possible.

Belgian Interior Minister Jan Jambon, whose Flemish separatist New Flemish Alliance (NVA) sent observers to the October 1 Catalan referendum, criticized Madrid's policy on VTM. He said, "now the Spanish government will act in the place of a democratically elected government, of members of a government who are jailed... What did they do wrong? They only tried to act on the mandate they received from their

electors. So I'm asking myself questions.”

Criticisms of Madrid extended beyond the Flemish separatists, however. Elio di Rupo of Belgium's opposition francophone Socialist Party said: “I oppose Puigdemont's politics, but I would be shocked if the Belgian justice system jailed him. Let's have a minimum of dignity. Let's oppose secession but remain democratic. Puigdemont abused his position, but Rajoy behaved like an authoritarian Francoite. Let us find the path to a more federal Spain.”

The French Socialist Party's (PS) 2007 presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal, also raised questions on RTL radio. “Anyone can see how strange it is for people to be jailed, in the heart of Europe, for carrying out an ideological struggle,” she said. Royal added that this represents “a dysfunction of Europe. European institutions, the commission or the parliament, must provide a forum for negotiation.”

These comments were a response to Puigdemont's appeals last week to the EU for support. In an interview with Belgian RTBF radio on Friday night, he repeated these appeals and made clear that they aim to prevent the eruption of a confrontation between the workers and the Rajoy government. Offering to run from Brussels in the December 21 elections being held in Catalonia under the jackboot of Madrid, Puigdemont called the events in Catalonia a “European crisis.”

Asked if there was a danger of a new “eruption” in Catalonia, he replied: “Precisely, I am here to prevent a new wave of violence.” He warned that this eruption “depends on the choice of the Spanish state. I have always called for dialogue, for nonviolence.” Puigdemont also offered to meet Rajoy in Brussels, adding: “I have always been inclined to have such dialogue.”

Workers must be warned: what Puigdemont and his allies in the Belgian and French ruling elite are proposing is not a democratic policy after Madrid's repression in Catalonia. They are not opposed to Madrid's turn towards police-state rule or the legitimization of fascism. Royal helped oversee the state of emergency in France by the PS government, which invited neo-fascist National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen to the Elysee presidential palace for talks.

As for the NVA, its ties to Flemish neo-Nazis and Jambon's sympathies for the Belgian collaboration with the Nazi Occupation during World War II are well known.

Rather, Puigdemont and his EU allies are closing ranks with Madrid against the workers, accepting the December 21 elections called by Madrid after it suspended the Catalan government, and asking Rajoy for talks even as Madrid seeks to impose a dictatorship. A Rajoy-Puigdemont deal brokered by the EU could only be at the expense of the workers, based on stepped-up repressive measures and continuing EU austerity.

Broad sections of the Catalan capitalist class principally fear the working class and would enthusiastically support such an antidemocratic deal. This was underscored by the Catalan business federation *Foment del Treball's* decision to present

today a lawsuit to block strike action on November 8. It claimed the strike's motives are “not labor issues” and that the strike organizers “aim to hide the political motives” of the action, that is, to express opposition to Madrid.

The only way forward to defend democratic rights and prevent a further turn towards police-state forms of rule in Spain and across Europe is the independent mobilization of the working class across the continent. Workers cannot defend their interests inside the rotten political set-up created by Madrid's suspension of the Catalan regional government and its turn to dictatorship, backed by the EU. Rather, the working class must take up the defense of their social and democratic rights as a struggle for socialism, based on a revolutionary and internationalist perspective.

The turn towards military-police forms of rule cannot be opposed based on the bankrupt perspective of the various Catalan nationalist parties, which aim to set up an independent capitalist state in Catalonia allied to the EU. This orientation, which divides the working class and blocks the unification of workers' struggles against austerity and police-state rule, is reactionary. It aims to leave the Catalan bourgeoisie in power, even as it turns ever more directly against the workers.

This is in particular the role of the Catalan petty-bourgeois Candidacies of Popular Unity (CUP), which is working out its strategy in the December 21 elections based on appeals to Puigdemont. “We want to know where the [Catalan] Government is going. And we want determination. Whether here or in Brussels,” said CUP deputy and Pompeu Fabra University professor Mireia Boya.

Such appeals only underscore the impotence of the CUP, which demands “determination” from Puigdemont even as he seeks to open talks with Rajoy to muzzle working-class opposition to Madrid.



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