

Catalan election campaign begins amid Popular Party government repression

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Campaigning has begun in the Catalan regional elections scheduled for December 21. The elections are a travesty of democracy, proceeding in the shadow of the repression instigated by Spain's Popular Party (PP) government.

The former Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont, and four other ministers remain in exile in Belgium. They are seeking to avoid arrest under the provisions of Article 155 of Spain's constitution, through which the PP imposed direct rule over Catalonia in response to the October 1 referendum on independence organised by the separatist coalition heading the regional government.

On Monday, Spain's Supreme Court refused bail for imprisoned former Catalan Vice-President Oriol Junqueras, former Interior Minister Joaquim Forn and the leaders of the civic groups Catalan National Assembly and Omnium Cultural, Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart, respectively. Like Puigdemont, they are accused of sedition, rebellion and embezzlement for making a unilateral declaration of independence (DUI) following the October 1 referendum. The court declared that a "criminal repetition" of the independence process could take place if the prisoners were released.

Six other imprisoned former ministers were released on bail of €100,000 only after they agreed to abide by the terms of Article 155 illegalising their political avowal of independence. Article 155 was used for the first time ever against Catalonia, accompanied by the dispatch of troops and thousands of Civil Guards, who launched brutal attacks on voters in the referendum.

The PP's decision to keep the four separatist political leaders in prison was taken despite Puigdemont's Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT) and Junqueras' Republican Left (ERC) coalition having declared the October 1 referendum to be "advisory" and the October 26 unilateral declaration of independence (DUI) purely "symbolic." They are both taking part in the December 21

election after earlier branding it illegal, and have omitted any reference to the DUI in their election programmes.

Even this is not enough for the government of Mariano Rajoy. It is intent on making clear that any attempt to resuscitate the "independence process" will be met with further repression. In an October 29 interview with *El Mundo*, PP parliamentary spokesman Pablo Casado stated, "Article 155 is a warning. Any secessionist challenge, whatever the majority it may have, is not going to succeed."

The PP's turn to police state measures has implications that go far beyond moves to repress the Catalan separatists. The PP government delegate in Castille-La Mancha, José Julián Gregorio, has warned the region's Socialist Party (PSOE), which is in coalition with the pseudo-left Podemos, that its policy "begins to be worthy of the use of article 155." Alfonso Alonso, PP leader in the Basque Country, also warned that the region could end up in the "same situation" as Catalonia because it has the "same ingredients."

Nor is the threat of police and military repression to be confined to Spain's regions. It is an essential weapon in the arsenal of a fragile and unpopular minority government seeking to impose savage cuts and crush all opposition to its attacks on democratic rights in pursuit of austerity, militarism and war.

The PP utilised a lesser-known Budget Stability Law for the first time in Catalonia to prevent the use of state funds for the October 1 referendum, claiming it was an "exceptional" intervention to stop a "situation of manifest illegality." In November, however, the PP announced that it would exercise weekly control of finances of Podemos-backed Madrid Mayor Manuela Carmena and threatened her removal, even though her administration has cut the city's €2 billion debt by one third. More recently, the Ministry of Finance sent letters to 22 large city councils, mostly in the poorer south, including Seville, Cádiz and

Granada, warning them to pay their unpaid suppliers or it would take over.

The dangers posed by this planned offensive are magnified thanks to the bankrupt political perspective pursued by the Catalan separatists. Despite their invocations of the historic struggle waged against Francoite fascism and the fact that they have fallen foul of the PP, the Catalan nationalists have as little intention of defending the working class as do the PSOE-Podemos administrations being attacked elsewhere in Spain.

A major reason the PDeCAT/ERC coalition launched their independence bid was to deflect mounting social opposition to their implementation of savage cuts since the 2008 global economic crisis. The separatist parties blamed every attack they made on Catalonia being forced to pay too much tax to support less prosperous regions of Spain. They appealed to a middle class layer on this basis, while focusing on promoting cultural nationalism in a manner that divided workers in Catalonia and Spain, and in Catalonia itself, where large sections of the working class are Spanish-speaking and supporters of independence are in a minority.

The pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) played a pernicious role in dressing up secession in a left guise and portraying it as the answer to austerity. Following the 2015 regional elections, it held the balance of power and, in return for enabling the ERC and PDeCAT to form a government and continue with austerity, successfully demanded an independence referendum. The common concerns of workers and youth, Spanish and Catalan, were subsequently buried under an avalanche of divisive nationalist rhetoric just as the need for unity has become of paramount importance in confronting a capitalist class facing an unprecedented crisis of rule.

The real aim of the separatist parties was always to continue developing Catalonia as a low-tax and low-wage investment platform for the major corporations and banks. Like the October 1 referendum, mobilisations on the street were carried out only to back up appeals to the European Union to support greater tax-raising powers and other concessions for Catalonia from Spain's central government, similar to those already granted to the Basque region.

When the EU instead backed Rajoy's clampdown and banks and corporations began pulling out of Barcelona, the nationalists declared that the referendum and DUI were meant to be "symbolic" and not binding, while Puigdemont stated that he was "always open to another relationship with Spain."

Former Catalan Vice-President Junqueras said that they had all been "naïve." He continued: "We didn't think the state would dare to apply these levels of oppression. Or that the European Union would tolerate the PP government, in the name of the unity of Spain, taking so much tough action against the people and institutions of Catalonia." CUP Barcelona councillor and former Generalitat deputy Eulàlia Reguant stated the problem was that "the coercive capacity of the state" had been "underestimated."

The working class must take an independent stand against Madrid's repression in Catalonia, including demanding the release of the four political prisoners, the dropping of all charges and the cancellation of Article 155.

On the eve of the October 1 referendum, the International Committee of the Fourth International issued a statement titled "Oppose the state crackdown on the Catalan independence referendum!" We explained: "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."

The statement insisted 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... 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."



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