The arrest of Catalan President Carles Puigdemont: Another step toward a police state in Europe

Peter Schwarz
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The arrest of former Catalan regional president Carles Puigdemont in Germany is a major step toward the development of a police state in Europe. The Europe-wide police-state structures, which emerged under the pretext of combatting terrorism and cracking down on refugees, are now being deployed against political opponents.

Puigdemont's arrest was conducted based on a European arrest warrant. These warrants were introduced in 2004 to simplify the extradition process between EU member states following the elimination of internal border controls. They were allegedly aimed at combatting terrorism, gangs, people trafficking, the drugs trade, and other serious criminal offences.

Ever since, the police, intelligence services and judiciaries in the EU member states have intensified their cooperation. Puigdemont's arrest was planned by Spanish intelligence, which had been following him across Europe with 10 to 12 agents. It was done in close consultation with Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office, which received information from Spanish intelligence about Puigdemont's car and route ahead of time and organized the arrest.

The charges against Puigdemont are as hypocritical as they are fraudulent. His "crime" consists of nothing more than advancing the demand—which has a long political history—for the separation of Catalonia from Spain. He has neither called for nor threatened violence to achieve this goal. The Catalan separatists have relied on peaceful and democratic means: elections, parliamentary motions, and demonstrations.

The German state accepts the claim of the right-wing regime in Madrid that the advocacy of separatism is a crime. But in the case of Yugoslavia, Germany ruthlessly pursued the breakup of that state in the 1990s, with catastrophic results. As always, the policies of the German ruling class are determined by its geopolitical and economic interests.

Puigdemont and 24 other Catalan politicians face charges of "rebellion," which carry a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison. The corresponding paragraph in Germany's Criminal Code, which could potentially serve as the basis for Puigdemont's extradition, punishes "high treason against the federation" with a sentence of between 10 years and life imprisonment.

Both criminal offences presuppose the use of violence, and Spanish judge Pablo Llarena resorted to completely specious arguments to claim the Catalonian leader was guilty of violent activities. He accused Puigdemont, absurdly, of accepting that there was a risk of violence during protests against raids on Catalan ministries by Spanish security forces.

The German government, which never tires of denouncing Russia, Turkey, and other countries for arbitrary judicial proceedings, is backing the legal farce of Puigdemont's extradition. German government spokesman Stefan Seibert stated that the arrest was carried out on the basis of German law and the regulations related to the European arrest warrant. Spain is a democratic, constitutional state, he claimed.

A German law professor rushed to Seibert's defence. Martin Heger, who is chair of the department of European criminal law at Berlin's Humboldt University, told *Spiegel Online*, "In principle, the legal situation is straightforward: When a European arrest warrant is presented, it will be carried out, so long as the prerequisites for it have been fulfilled ... So it is

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clear: Germany has to extradite Puigdemont."

Puigdemont is a pro-capitalist bourgeois politician, whose Catalan European Democratic Party (PDECat) is a member of the liberal parliamentary group in the European Parliament. When a pro-capitalist, democratically-elected politician is pursued in the EU for high treason, it is not hard to imagine how the leaders of mass protests or a general strike calling capitalist rule into question would be treated.

This is the more fundamental reason for the erection of a European police state, and the close collaboration between Berlin and Madrid. The goal is to intimidate and smother all forms of opposition, resistance and protest.

Europe is on the brink of bitter class battles. Social relations are at the breaking point. Hardly any European country has a stable government. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy leads a minority government that confronts mass social protests. Hundreds of thousands of retirees took to the streets last Saturday alone. On the same day, France was shaken by widespread protests against President Emmanuel Macron's labour market reforms. In Germany, the new instalment of the Grand Coalition, which came to power only after a six-month crisis, no longer has a majority in the polls.

In the UK, tens of thousands of university lecturers are engaged in a bitter contract dispute. And the US is in the midst of a strike wave by teachers throughout the country, while millions of students took to the streets last week to protest the violence that dominates American society.

Europe's rulers are responding to this growth of social and political opposition by moving ever more openly toward authoritarian and dictatorial forms of rule.

The crackdown on political opposition takes perhaps its most direct form in the drive toward Internet censorship, which is being driven by a series of laws throughout Europe and its member states making technology companies criminally liable for the posting of "violent" and "extremist" content on their services.

While the EU is increasingly breaking apart, its member governments cooperate ever more closely on the issue of building a police state.

Last Friday, Germany's Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer pledged to strengthen police-state measures in his first speech to parliament since taking office. "At the European level, we must do all we can to integrate the various databases so that our intelligence agencies can act to achieve their goals more swiftly," he said. The arrest of Puigdemont two days later shows what Seehofer meant by this.

The cooperation between Berlin and Madrid in the Puigdemont case recalls the darkest period in European history. German authorities have arrested a Catalan prime minister once before, in 1940. Hitler's secret police, the Gestapo, detained Lluis Companys, who fled into French exile in 1936 after General Franco, with German support, crushed the Spanish revolution and established his bloody dictatorship. They extradited Companys to Madrid, where he was tortured, sentenced to death and executed.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* condemn Puigdemont's arrest and demand his immediate release. His targeting by the German authorities is a warning. The only way to prevent the establishment of a police state, and a relapse into militarism and war, is through the development of a socialist movement to unite the European and international working class in the struggle against social inequality, dictatorship and war.

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