

Barcelona: Hundreds of thousands protest against jailing of Catalan independence leaders

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Hundreds of thousands protested in Barcelona on Sunday against the imprisonment of Catalan nationalist leaders and for those who fled abroad following the failed independence bid last October to be allowed to return.

Since October, Catalonia has remained under the control of Madrid after Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy invoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution and sought to “decapitate” the secessionist movement through arrests with the support of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Citizens party.

The Catalan parliament has been unable to appoint a new premier or administration four months after Rajoy imposed elections on December 21, when the separatist parties were re-elected with a small majority. If a new leader is not elected by May 22, new regional elections must be held.

Around 315,000 people took part in the demonstration, according to the Catalan municipal police. The organisers—Space for Democracy and Co-existence (Espai Democràcia i Convivència), which comprises social and cultural groups; the Catalan branches of Spain’s two largest trade unions, the CCOO and the UGT; nationalist political parties; and the pseudo-left Podemos-led coalition Catalonia in Common—all estimated the turnout at 750,000.

The demonstration was held under the slogan, “We demand the freedom of all politicians and imprisoned leaders, as well as the return of the exiles”—a reference to the nine jailed and seven exiled secessionist leaders who organised the failed independence bid. They are accused of sedition, rebellion and embezzlement and could face sentences of up to 30 years in prison.

Many of the protesters wore a yellow ribbon to show

solidarity with the jailed leaders. However, there were far fewer independence flags than in previous demonstrations, as it attracted considerable numbers of workers and youth who did not support secession but opposed Rajoy’s repressive actions.

The manifesto of Space for Democracy and Co-existence calls for the “defence of Catalan institutions and the right of the Catalans to decide their future” and makes a “firm commitment to the outcome of 21-D [December 21 election].” It pleads that “Political problems have to be solved in the political sphere and through dialogue and negotiation.”

A message was read out to the demonstration from the president of Òmnium Cultural, Jordi Cuixart, saying, “There are moments of injustice but also of hope. All of you are the motor of the struggle for freedom for a future without sacrifices for anyone. Unity, dignity and courage. ... Thank you for not forgetting us...do not let yourselves be frightened, continue fighting for civil rights in a peaceful way.”

For six months, Cuixart and Jordi Sànchez, the former president of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), have been locked up in prison. Sànchez was elected a Together for Catalonia (JxCat) deputy on December 21, but attempts to propose him as a candidate to head a new Catalan regional government have twice been prevented by the courts refusing to let him out of jail to be sworn in.

Both men are accused of organising pro-independence demonstrations last September, which led to some policemen being trapped inside a government building and their vehicles being damaged...to the tune of around €17,000! They are also accused of mobilising people to obstruct police as the

police attempted to close down polling booths and confiscate ballot boxes during the October 1 independence referendum.

Former vice premier and Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) leader Oriol Junqueras; ex-ministers Joaquim Forn, Jordi Turull, Raül Romeva, Josep Rull and Dolors Bassa; and former parliamentary speaker Carme Forcadell also remain incarcerated.

Ousted regional premier Carles Puigdemont is in Germany awaiting a decision on his extradition following his arrest there on a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) earlier this month. The court in Schleswig-Holstein freed Puigdemont on bail on April 6 and rejected the charges of rebellion in the warrant. It has yet to rule on another, lesser charge of embezzlement. Last week, Spanish prosecutors sent new information claiming Puigdemont incited violence—hoping to bolster the rebellion charge.

Others nationalist leaders in exile are Toni Comín, Meritxell Serret and Lluís Puig in Belgium, Anna Gabriel and Marta Rovira in Switzerland, and Clara Ponsatí in Scotland. EAWs have been reissued against them.

During the demonstration, the spokesperson of Puigdemont's Together for Catalonia coalition, Elsa Artadi, said it disproved claims that the independence movement had disintegrated: "To all those who say that the movement is demobilised, that people are tired, we show them once again that is not the case and that the result of 21-D is felt today in the streets."

Lluc Salellashas, a national secretariat member of the petty-bourgeois nationalist Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), went further, proclaiming that the demonstration marked the "definitive beginning of the Catalan spring to end the authoritarianism and the regime of '78 in Catalonia"—a cipher for the bourgeois democratic state set up after the end of the Francoist dictatorship.

Roger Torrent, the current speaker of the Catalan parliament, denounced the "repression that threatens the fundamental pillars of democracy that the Spanish State is making."

Referring to the broad number of organisations on the demonstration, some of whom do not support independence—including the CCOO, UGT and Catalonia in Common—Torrent added, "When we are transversal, when we are plural and we join in the

defence of rights and democracy, we are unstoppable."

The theme of "transversality" was also stressed by Marta Vilalta, spokesperson for Esquerra Republicana, who repeated the party's call for "a democratic front against repression," and the head of Catalonia in Common, Xavier Domènech, who declared that "transversal mobilisation is the way to recover rights and freedoms."

That broad layers of the population took part in Sunday's protest against mass repression and authoritarianism shows the deep-rooted opposition that exists and is to be welcomed. However, the most urgent warnings must be made: Xavier Domènech's words are a fraud. Spain's Podemos party has played the central role in blocking an independent mobilisation of the working class against the PP's attacks, adopting an impotent policy of issuing moral appeals to Rajoy to negotiate with Barcelona.

Last year, Podemos helped organise "White" demonstrations, since demobilised, under the slogan, in Spanish and Catalan, "Hablemos/Parlem" (Let's Talk). But the manifesto was wrapped in the language of patriotism and an appeal for Podemos to be recognised as a potential saviour of Spain at a time of acute crisis.

This crisis is not simply one of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, as Podemos and the CUP suggests, but of European and world capitalism. The budget battles and fights over regional autonomy between the ruling elites in Madrid and Barcelona developed over a decade, as the European Union reacted to the global financial collapse with massive bank bailouts financed by devastating austerity measures against the working class across the continent. 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.



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