

Spain's Popular Party government falls after no-confidence vote

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Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy lost a no-confidence vote—180 to 169, with one abstention—in congress yesterday, leading to the fall of his minority Popular Party (PP) government. Socialist Party (PSOE) leader Pedro Sánchez is the new prime minister.

The PSOE's no-confidence motion was supported by the pseudo-left/Stalinist Unidos Podemos coalition and regional nationalist parties—the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT) in Catalonia, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and EH Bildu in the Basque Country, Compromís in Valencia and the New Canaries Islands party.

In 40 years of democratic rule since the end of the Franco regime, there has never been a successful no-confidence vote before. Its unprecedented nature indicates the deep crisis facing the country. In 2011, the PP won a landslide victory in the general election with 45 percent of the vote and 186 seats. But in October 2016, the PP had to be put into power as a minority government, with the support of the right-wing neo-liberal Ciudadanos (Citizens) party and the abstention of the PSOE after 10 months of stalemate. No one party had managed to win an outright victory in the election in December 2015 or the one that followed in June 2016.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that as a result of the PSOE's rotten agreement: "The new government is the weakest since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s, and rules under conditions in which the bipartisan arrangements, in which power alternated between the right-wing PP and the 'centre-left' PSOE for four decades, have been thoroughly exposed as a result of the austerity agenda pursued by both parties."

Today, the PP is polling around 20 percent due to the combined impact of its austerity measures and the

repressive intervention in Catalonia.

In response to last October's unilateral independence declaration by the separatist parties, Rajoy sent in thousands of riot police and took the unprecedented step of using article 155 of the Spanish constitution to sack regional premier Carles Puigdemont and his government and assume direct control of Catalonia.

He gambled on provoking a wave of populist xenophobia to reassert his party's dominant position. But this backfired, with substantial opposition in the working class to his assault, even though this opposition could find no political expression.

Regional elections Rajoy called for December 21 were won by the separatist parties, while the PP, with just four percent of the vote, was eclipsed by the Citizens Party as the main advocate of Spanish unity.

Though Rajoy is seeking the extradition of Puigdemont and other ministers who sought refuge in Europe and Catalonia continues to witness the arrest of scores of activists, his strategy is considered a failure on all sides.

With Citizens representing Francoite sections of the ruling elite demanding a decisive showdown with the separatists, Sánchez of the PSOE has been persuaded to seek a working arrangement with the separatists to stabilise bourgeois rule and prepare to tackle the working class.

Sánchez signalled a willingness to engage in "dialogue" with Catalonia's pro-independence government headed by the new regional premier, Quim Torra. "Catalonia is a political problem that needs to be solved", he said, while insisting that any negotiations would have to abide by the constitution and the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation".

Direct rule from Madrid ends today, following Torra's decision to abandon attempts to appoint jailed

or fugitive members of Puigdemont's cabinet to his new administration. Once his cabinet is sworn in, Article 155 will lapse.

Sanchez also secured the backing of the right-wing PNV, whose five votes only last week kept Rajoy in office by agreeing to his much-delayed budget. In return Sánchez said that by honouring Rajoy's budget, the PSOE would give the Basque Country €540 million in investments it included. He has also suggested reforms to the regional financing system.

Whatever concessions may be offered to the separatists, and despite the insincere anti-austerity rhetoric, the working class will not be spared.

Sánchez has made it clear to ruling circles that he will implement the PP's budget proposals and that the ouster of the discredited PP administration—using the pretext of the Gürtel corruption case sentences handed out to PP officials last week—is a means to continue austerity and suppress rising social discontent.

This is made more necessary by a significant growth in the class struggle—expressed in the strikes at Amazon, of air traffic controllers and in the energy sector—and social protests such as recent demonstrations against pension cuts.

Speaking during the no-confidence debate, Sánchez said his plan for government would be based on maintaining “institutional, budgetary, social and territorial stability,” before calling fresh elections. To roars of approval from the PP caucus that surprised the PSOE leader himself, Sánchez insisted his government would “preserve the general state budget approved by this House.”

The budget includes huge increases in expenditure for the military, police and intelligence services, while other public spending is slashed. It will mean 13 percent less for education than eight years ago, 8 percent less for health, 27 percent less for research and technological development, 70 percent less for housing access, 35 percent less for culture, 58 percent less for infrastructure investments and zero funding for Civil War “historical memory” projects.

The key political role in bringing the PSOE to office was played by Podemos. Its leader, Pablo Iglesias, positioned himself as kingmaker by urging a political settlement in Catalonia last year while loyally orienting to the PSOE even as it fully backed the PP's repression. Iglesias has urged Sánchez to seek a

“progressive alliance” with Podemos and the nationalists.

During the debate Iglesias declared, “Thank you, Mr. Sánchez, thanks for the tone in the first place, you have done something very brave... It also honours you the fact that you have not supported a PP Government. I ask you to talk about what [Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn proposes in the UK or [Bernie] Sanders in the US... We have worked together in the regional governments and in City Councils and we are doing well. I think what we have to do is win the next general election together.”

Claims that there is anything progressive about such an alliance were refuted almost immediately, when Sánchez thanked Iglesias for his “generous” support of the motion “without having negotiated anything”—and then made his first announcement: a commitment to the PP budget which Podemos supposedly opposed! Rajoy said that Podemos would now have to “eat” the PP's budget with a side-order of chips.

The PSOE now heads an unstable minority regime, propped up by Podemos and the separatists and likely to clash with the working class over its plans to impose sweeping and unpopular austerity measures.



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