The dissolution of ETA: A political balance sheet of Basque nationalism—Part three

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This is the final part of a three-part series on the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) announcing its dissolution. ***Part one*** *was posted on June 12 and Part two on June 13.*

ETA: The practical application of Jean-Paul Sartre's call for "action"

Drawing on its existentialist and other ideological influences, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) was formed as a clandestine "action" group in 1958. It defined its objectives as "Euskadi, a free Basque Country, through a Basque state like other states in the world, and Askatasuna (freedom), free people in the Basque Country," which also included Álava and Navarre in Spain and three French Basque provinces.

The resort to arms was viewed as the only way to liberate the Basque Country from "Spanish occupation." The ETA newsletter, Zutik (Arise), declared in nihilistic terms, "Violence is necessary. A contagious violence, destructive, which would help our struggle, the good struggle, the struggle that the Israelis, Congolese and Algerians have taught us."

Individual terror attacks were the essence of ETA's demoralised "spiral of action-reaction-action" perspective. The amorphous "masses" were to be cajoled into rebellion by "action." The "Theoretical Bases of the Revolutionary War" (1965) declared:

1. ETA, or the masses led by ETA, carry out a provocative action against the system.

2. The apparatus of state repression hits the masses.

3. In the face of repression, the masses react in two opposite and complementary ways: with panic and with rebellion. It is the right time for ETA to give a backlash that will decrease the first and increase the second.

ETA's first confirmed assassinations occurred in 1968, targeting high-ranking members of the Franco regime. They took place just as the 1968–1975 revolutionary upsurge of the working class erupted.

After the fall of the Francoist dictatorship and the "transition to democracy," ETA continued its terror campaign, adding Popular Party (PP) and Socialist Party (PSOE) politicians to its hit-list.

By the late 1980s, frustrated by the stabilisation of Spanish imperialism made possible by Stalinism and social democracy, ETA turned on civilians in what they called the "socialization of suffering." Their deadliest attack was the 1987 Hipercor shopping centre bomb atrocity, which killed 21 people and injured 45 in a working-class neighbourhood in Barcelona.

After the end of the fascist dictatorship, successive Spanish governments continued to use the Basque region as a testing ground for undemocratic measures, aimed at suppressing domestic political unrest. The PSOE, first elected in 1982, created the anti-terrorist Groups of Liberation (GAL) murder squad, which assassinated 23 people, mainly ETA members, but also innocent bystanders. By 1992, most of ETA's leadership had been arrested and tortured.

ETA's indiscriminate bombings, pro-capitalist regional policies and lack of any genuinely progressive social programme led to its isolation. Support haemorrhaged following the September 11, 2001 attack on New York and the 2004 Madrid bombings. The PP government and its PSOE successor pushed through draconian legislation—under the banner of the "War on Terror"—such as the Political Parties Law, under which Batasuna [Unity—a Basque nationalist party] was banned.

In 2011, ETA announced a "definitive cessation of its armed activity" and in the following years attempted to negotiate, unsuccessfully, with the Spanish government on the future of its imprisoned members.

ETA's armed struggle was justified by various pseudo-left groups as a legitimate expression of the "right of nations to self-determination." They invoked Lenin and Trotsky only to justify their own hostility to socialist revolution.

Lenin did not uphold the defence of the right to self-determination as some timeless principle, but with a definite historic objective in mind—combating nationalist influences over the working class and oppressed masses and striking down ethnic and linguistic barriers to the unity of the working-class characteristic of regimes with a belated capitalist development.

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In the “advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and the United States,” Lenin explained, “progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago.”

Neither did Lenin champion regional separatism. In the Balkans, he insisted, “self-determination” meant uniting the region’s population in a federated republic that would tear down the economically irrational boundaries of the petty states manipulated by imperialism.

Like Lenin, Trotsky opposed the forcible retention of peoples in one nation and any suppression of their democratic rights. He defended the right to self-determination, up to and including the formation of separate states, but it was not the role of Marxists to advocate their creation. Rather Trotsky saw this negative defence of self-determination as a means of championing the voluntary and democratic unity of the working class and the greatest advantages for economy and culture.

In “The National Question in Catalonia” (1931), Trotsky criticised “the economic and political dismemberment of Spain, or in other words, the transformation of the Iberian Peninsula into a sort of Balkanic Peninsula, with independent states, divided by customs barriers, and with independent armies conducting independent Hispanic wars.”

He added, “Are the workers and peasants of the various parties of Spain interested in the economic dismemberment of Spain? In no case. That is why, to identify the decisive struggle for the right to self-determination with propaganda for separatism, means to accomplish a fatal work. Our program is for Hispanic Federation with the indispensable maintenance of economic unity. We have no intention of imposing this program upon the oppressed nationalities of the peninsula with the aid of the arms of the bourgeoisie. In this sense, we are sincerely for the right to self-determination. If Catalonia separates, the Communist minority of Catalonia, as well as of Spain, will have to conduct a struggle for Federation.”

Since Trotsky’s time, there have been far-reaching transformations in the world. The masses of Asia and Africa have passed through the rise of bourgeois national movements and the experience of decolonization. This historic episode provides conclusive proof that the oppressed people of the world cannot achieve liberation through the establishment of new national states under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie—proving the correctness of Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union also led to the proliferation of nationalist and separatist movements demanding the creation of new states, encouraged by the US and European imperialist powers in pursuit of their own geo-strategic goals, most tragically in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

However, it was not only political considerations that underlay the intensification of communalist agitation. The development of globalization, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) explained, provided “an objective impulse for a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states. Globally mobile capital has given smaller territories the ability to link themselves directly to the world market. Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have become the new models of development. A small coastal enclave, possessing adequate transportation links, infrastructure and a supply of cheap labor may prove a more attractive base for multinational capital than a larger country with a less productive hinterland.”

The ICFI insisted that it was necessary, in the interests of the international unity of the working class, to oppose the revived calls for separatism, which seek to divide up existing states for the benefit of local business layers in the wealthier regions.

For the pseudo-left, the lessons of the end of ETA mean quite the opposite. They have set about intensifying the promotion of Basque and Catalan nationalism.

Revolutionary Left (Izquierda Revolucionaria), the Spanish affiliate of the Committee for a Worker’s International, claims, “The end of ETA must serve to strengthen and organize the revolutionary mass struggle in Euskal Herria [Basque Country]. The Basque Radical Left has shown that it has behind it the strength, the support, and the will of hundreds of thousands to defend a consistent left alternative.” The Revolutionary Left sows illusions in figures such as Basque bourgeois politician Arnaldo Otegi, claiming such people have “a great responsibility: to promote the mass movement, in a unitary way and with a clear anti-capitalist programme.”

This is a fraud. The experience with Syriza in Greece shows that such politicians have no intention of carrying out an anti-capitalist programme. Rather, the Basque nationalists are seeking a better deal with Madrid at the immediate expense of their supposed compatriots in the Catalan separatist movement—and by signalling their willingness to stand by as Madrid strengthens the repressive powers of the state for use against the entire Spanish working-class.

The end of ETA and the integration of the Basque pseudo-left in the state apparatus is a strategic experience of the international working class. The separatist organisations have demonstrated the absolute impossibility of the working class making any progress if it is strangled by nationalism and accepts a pro-capitalist perspective. Above all, the critical question is building a Spanish section of the ICFI that will explain to workers that the growing social and political struggles are part of an unfolding global process, posing to workers in every country the task of taking power and building a workers’ state pursuing socialist policies.

Concluded

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