Spain abandons attempt to extradite Puigdemont from Germany

Alex Lantier
20 July 2018

Yesterday, the Spanish Supreme Court abandoned its attempts to secure the extradition of deposed Catalan regional President Carles Puigdemont from Germany back to Spain.

Puigdemont had fled Catalonia to Brussels last autumn during the brutal police crackdown launched by Madrid against the Catalan independence referendum he had organized. He was jailed in Germany in March and released on bail in April. Last week, a German regional court in Schleswig-Holstein ruled that Puigdemont could be extradited to Spain but granted extradition only on embezzlement charges, for using state funds to finance the referendum, and not on the more serious charges of rebellion.

Yesterday, Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena issued a statement attacking the German court ruling. Criticizing its "lack of concern" for actions that "could have overthrown the Spanish constitutional order," he accused the Schleswig-Holstein court of overstepping its authority based on an "unclarified position."

Llarena did not, however, aggressively pursue the legal avenues available to try to overturn the Schleswig-Holstein court ruling. Llarena declined to appeal this ruling to the European Court of Justice. He also withdrew European Arrest Warrants issued by Madrid for Puigdemont and other Catalan nationalist officials who fled Catalonia together with Puigdemont during Madrid's crackdown.

Spanish arrest warrants for Puigdemont on charges of rebellion and embezzlement remain in force, however. "Carles Puigdemont will be able to travel freely outside of Spain without fear of being detained," the social-democratic-leaning daily *El País* concluded yesterday.

On Twitter, Puigdemont called this "proof of the enormous weakness" of the charges against the Catalan nationalists and called for the freeing of Catalan nationalist political prisoners. Current Catalan regional President Quim Torra also reacted to Llarena's decision by calling for "the liberation of all nationalist prisoners and the return of exiled officials this very afternoon."

The Spanish district attorney's office does not plan to free deposed Catalan Vice-Premier Oriol Junqueras and other Catalan nationalists jailed by Madrid, however, or pardon the officials who fled Spain with Puigdemont. Under María José Segarra, named by the newly-installed Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government, the office is maintaining the position it took under the right-wing Popular Party (PP). The office is reportedly preparing the argument that due to the German ruling, these prisoners present a "flight risk" and cannot be freed.

The minority PSOE government and its backers in the pseudo-left Podemos party are still jailing Junqueras, other former Catalan ministers and the leaders of the Catalan National Assembly and Òmnium Cultural lobby groups, Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart. The PSOE and Podemos have cynically presented these prisoners' transfer to jails in Catalonia as a step forward in resolving the Catalan crisis. The prisoners face rebellion charges, however, carrying 30-year prison terms.

These violent conflicts are the political fallout within the Spanish ruling elite of the crisis that erupted in Catalonia after nearly a decade of deep European Union (EU) austerity since the 2008 Wall Street crash. As conflicts grew between Madrid and Barcelona over how to implement EU social cuts, the Catalan nationalists scheduled an independence referendum in an attempt to draw off growing social anger and divide workers in Spain along national lines. Madrid replied, however, with a mass police crackdown on peaceful

© World Socialist Web Site

voters that sent nearly 1,000 people to hospital.

Under Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, the PP whipped up a hysterical, fascistic atmosphere and tried to respond to the crisis through state terror, using Article 155 of Spain's 1978 Constitution to impose an unelected regime in Catalonia.

Plans were drawn up and publicly discussed for the mobilization of Spanish special forces and motorized infantry units against Catalonia. The PP backed far-right anti-Catalan protests singing the *"Cara al Sol"* anthem of former fascist dictator Francisco Franco and threatened Puigdemont with the fate of Catalan regional President Lluís Companys, whom Franco had shot. Army chief General Fernando Alejandro identified Catalonia as a military threat to Spain.

The ultra-reactionary atmosphere fell afoul, however, of growing opposition this year in the Spanish and international working class. Amid powerful strikes by US teachers, German and Turkish metalworkers, and French and British rail workers, Spanish port, retail, airline and transportation workers mobilized in struggle. Amazon workers in Spain are now at the forefront of international strike action against the world's richest man, multi-billionaire Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

Faced with growing opposition and continuing mass protests in Barcelona over the jailing of Catalan political prisoners, the balance of power inside the Spanish bourgeoisie shifted to the factions arguing for a less overtly provocative and fascistic approach in Catalonia. In May, Podemos and its allies in parliament abandoned their tacit support for the minority PP government and instead brought to power Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's minority PSOE government.

While continuing the PP's reactionary drive to war and social attacks on the working class, the PSOE sent definite signals to the Catalan bourgeoisie and the upper-middle class. Sánchez did not touch the PP's massive military budget and proposed to only marginally slow the pace of PP social cuts, but he argued for a visible shift on ethnic and gender issues. He called for adopting a new autonomy statute for the Catalan region, he named a cabinet with many female ministers, and his government backed "yes is yes" protests over sexual consent.

Powerful factions of the European ruling class clearly see the handling of Puigdemont's extradition as a more astute approach, going in the direction of Sánchez's strategy.

For now, Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, "the new social-democratic leader of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, is likely to be satisfied with Judge Llarena's decision to refrain from extradition. Sánchez has a huge problem on his mind. Had Puigdemont been extradited and condemned to 30 years imprisonment in Spain for rebellion, Catalan separatism would have had yet another martyr. A captive Puigdemont would have been a huge obstacle in trying to negotiate with the separatists, which Sánchez himself said he intended to do."

At the same time, explosive conflicts continue in the Spanish ruling elite over the Catalan crisis and in particular over Sánchez's proposal for a new Catalan autonomy statute to be approved ultimately by referendum in Catalonia. While PP spokesman Rafael Hernando denounced the PSOE for dealing with "populists, separatists, and the political heirs of ETA," the Basque-nationalist terrorist group, Sánchez has insisted that he will proceed with his plans, since the Catalan crisis "can only be resolved by voting."

In this unstable and explosive political atmosphere, the fate of the Catalan nationalists targeted by Madrid remains unclear. It demonstrates above all the trajectory of the Spanish bourgeoisie and the European Union (EU) as a whole towards ever more reactionary and repressive policies, which can only be opposed by a conscious, pan-European political struggle by the working class.

While the Schleswig-Holstein court did not rule to extradite Puigdemont on the rebellion charge, and Puigdemont is not currently rotting in a Spanish jail, what its decision has revealed above all is the enormous development of a European police state. The legal and police mechanisms to track, arrest and extradite politicians, including those facing draconian, politically motivated charges, exist and are functioning across Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site