

Calls grow in Madrid to ban Catalan nationalist parties

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Demands are growing inside the Spanish political establishment to ban the main Catalan nationalist parties—the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the pseudo-left Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP). These calls to attack or outlaw parties that collectively receive millions of votes mark a major escalation in the drive of the Spanish and European bourgeoisie toward a police state.

A year has passed since the Catalan independence referendum last October and its violent repression by police, which left over 1,000 peaceful voters injured. Yet the underlying conflicts are as bitter as ever. The right-wing Popular Party (PP) and Citizens are demanding the outlawing of the CUP; a new electoral law making it harder for Catalan, Basque and Galician nationalist forces to get seats in parliament; and that Madrid impose an unelected regional government in Catalonia by again invoking Article 155 of Spain's 1978 constitution.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) opposed the Catalan referendum, a vote called by pro-austerity, pro-European Union (EU) parties aiming to split the working class along national lines. But its principled opposition to Catalan bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalism does not lessen its opposition to the moves by the Spanish bourgeoisie, backed by the EU, to build a police-state regime whose central target would be rising militancy and strikes in the working class.

The PP and Citizens are seizing upon various events as pretexts for a crackdown and relying on the reactionary policies of the minority Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government of Pedro Sánchez, backed by the pseudo-left Podemos party.

The first were clashes between Catalan police and

CUP-aligned forces protesting a provocative pro-Spanish police rally held by the right-wing Jusapol Foundation. The pro-police rally hailed the violent police crackdown on the Catalan referendum or, in Jusapol President Natan Espinosa's words, it was to "honour those who worked to preserve the unity of Spain."

The other pretext is Catalan regional premier Quim Torra's threat to withdraw his support for the minority PSOE government and push for unilateral independence if Sánchez does not recognise Catalan self-determination. Torra called for pro-CUP protesters to keep marching—saying, "Press hard, you do well in pressing"—again exposing the CUP's close ties to Torra's austerity regime.

The day after the clashes, PP leader Pablo Casado said all Catalan nationalist parties should be outlawed. He pledged to "request the modification of the Law of Parties so that we can already act against those parties and organisations in Catalonia that are encouraging violence and inciting civil confrontation. ... After the altercations yesterday, we cannot tolerate that there are political parties like the CUP, ERC or PDeCat that do not condemn these intolerable aggressions."

Casado proposed achieving this end by invoking the law used in 2003 to ban Batasuna, the political wing of the Basque nationalist group ETA. He also called for financially strangling parties that he said "encourage or justify violence" by eliminating all public subsidies to them.

Casado then attacked Sánchez, saying there is "no longer an excuse" not to implement Article 155 and impose a new unelected regional government in Catalonia. On Twitter, he compared Torra's comments to "support for *Kale borroka*," the Basque word for street fighting—like burning cars, attacking houses or

banking facilities, and attacking public transport as carried out by pro-ETA Basque nationalist youth in the 1980s and 1990s.

All but calling for the permanent suspension of the Catalan regional government, he demanded that Article 155 be implemented “with the necessary duration, the necessary extensions, and sufficient state involvement.”

Citizens leader Albert Rivera said he would discuss outlawing the CUP, which gives a pro-independence majority in the Catalan parliament for Torra’s secessionist, pro-austerity government. He also called for reforming Spain’s electoral law to set a 3 percent threshold for parties to enter Spain’s parliament. Since the Catalan nationalists have virtually no support outside Catalonia, this would de facto eliminate the ERC, PDeCAT and the Basque Nationalist Party from the national parliament.

As the PP and Citizens fall short of the parliamentary majority to reform the electoral law, Rivera called on Sánchez to support such a move. The PSOE is currently rejecting this, with the secretary of the party calling it “throwing petrol” over the political fire in Catalonia.

There is broad opposition to the PP in Spain, as well as to the secessionist programme of the Catalan nationalists in Catalonia, and a growing wave of strikes in Spain as well as across Europe. If the PP and Citizens can proceed with attacks on democratic rights and moves to build a police state, this is above all due to the reactionary role of Podemos in supporting the PSOE government and suppressing left-wing opposition to the PSOE and the PP. The absence of any opposition from these two parties emboldens the right wing to step up its attacks on democratic rights.

Sánchez has continued the previous PP government’s crackdown on the Catalan nationalists, while making a few symbolic concessions to try to smooth over relations. While Sánchez declared his sympathy for Catalan autonomy, he kept Catalan political prisoners in jail and retained “rebellion” charges against nine incarcerated Catalan officials and politicians. The charges carry sentences of up to 25 years in jail.

The PSOE, which like the PP before it runs a minority government, can hold power only through the support in parliament from Podemos, together with the various regional-nationalist parties. Podemos General Secretary Pablos Iglesias has visited Catalan political prisoners in jail to give them messages from Sánchez,

and has called upon Sánchez to design a “concrete state policy” on Catalonia. Iglesias makes no secret of the close political collaboration between Podemos and the government.

Iglesias said that “never has Podemos had as much influence as now,” adding that the party is “proud of our push” as Sánchez’s main supporters. These boasts are a devastating exposure of the reactionary role of Podemos.

The Podemos leadership is declaring its unstinting support to all the anti-worker policies the PSOE has implemented since taking power last June. The PSOE has not only continued jailing Catalan nationalists on fraudulent charges, but threatened to re-impose Article 155 on the region and passed the previous PP government’s austerity budget, including billions of euros in defence spending increases. It also sold precision bombs to Saudi Arabia in its bloody war in Yemen, carried out mass expulsions of migrants and sent police to break up strikes.

This again confirms the ICFI’s assessment of the role of Podemos as an anti-working class and anti-Marxist party, and its insistence that the key question in Spain and across Europe is building sections of the ICFI to give political leadership to the emerging struggles of the working class.

As the ICFI warned in its statement, “Oppose the state crackdown on the Catalan independence referendum!” on the eve of the vote, “The Catalan crisis has yet again exposed the Podemos party’s reactionary role. ... Podemos is still calling for an alliance with the PSOE, even as the PSOE supports the PP’s onslaught in Catalonia.” The ICFI warned that Podemos was “signaling the ruling class that it is also available to form an alternate government. ... Such a government were it to be formed, would offer no alternative to the drive to dictatorship and austerity currently being prosecuted by the PP.”

This assessment of the role a Podemos-backed government would play in Spain has been thoroughly vindicated.



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