Two hundred thousand protest in Barcelona against show trial of Catalan separatists

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At least 200,000 people—500,000 according to the organizers—marched in Barcelona on Saturday against the show trial of 12 Catalan nationalist leaders, which began last week in Madrid. The trial is being held in the aftermath of last Wednesday's collapse of the Spanish government. The defendants are being prosecuted on fraudulent charges of sedition and rebellion for organizing the 2017 referendum on Catalan independence from Spain. They face a possible sentence of up to 25 years in prison.

The march was called by the pro-secessionist National Catalan Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium Cultural, as well as a number of political parties. These include Together for Catalonia, Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) and the Podemos-backed Catalonia in Common. Several trade unions also endorsed the demonstration.

Demonstrators marched peacefully under banners reading "Self-determination is a right, not a crime," "They are judging us all," and "*J'accuse*." Catalan Regional Premier Quim Torra led the march.

The mass participation was an indication of far broader opposition, centered above all in the working class, to the bourgeoisie's drive to establish a police state in Spain. This is proceeding now with European Union support, based on anti-Catalan propaganda that employs the political falsifications that form the basis for the show trial in Madrid.

The Catalan nationalist parties are bourgeois, pro-austerity parties oriented to the European Union. They tacitly back NATO wars. Their perspective cuts across the struggle to unify workers on the Iberian Peninsula against the drive towards authoritarian rule.

Despite these parties' reactionary character, however, the show trial in Madrid must be unequivocally opposed.

Like Saturday's protest, the 2017 secession referendum was conducted peacefully. Whatever violence occurred was perpetrated by the Spanish police, who assaulted peaceful voters. Bringing charges of rebellion—legally defined as a violent, insurrectionary uprising—on this basis means effectively outlawing protest and political opposition to the state and taking a major step toward authoritarian rule.

Prosecutor Javier Zaragoza, speaking at the Supreme Court on the second day of the trial, denounced Catalan voters as "human shields impeding the legitimate police operation." He added, "I don't think the responsibility for the violence on referendum day can be attributed to Spanish law enforcement, but to those who, knowing the law, mobilised thousands of citizens."

In fact, the police assaulted voters while seeking to seize ballots at 92 polling stations across Catalonia, injuring over 1,000 people. Responsibility lies with the Popular Party (PP) government in power at the time, which sent 16,000 policemen to Catalonia. It is shared by the Socialist Party (PSOE), which backed this move, and by Podemos, which refused to oppose it. Police arrested top Catalan regional officials, shut down 144 websites, seized millions of posters and leaflets, searched print shops, banned meetings and threatened over 700 mayors for having supported the referendum.

One indication of the fraudulent character of the charges of rebellion is that the courts in Belgium, Britain and Germany have declined to extradite Catalan officials who fled Spain and send them back to Madrid to stand trial. This includes the regional premier, Carles Puigdemont,

The Spanish government aims to politically decapitate the Catalan nationalist parties. A total of 29 people, seven of whom, including Puigdemont, are in exile, are wanted or under indictment. Beyond the 12 currently indicted, four Catalan regional police officials face a separate case, as do six Catalan parliamentarians charged with disobedience.

From the start it has been clear that the defendants will

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not be allowed a fair trial. The Spanish Supreme Court, not the High Court of Justice of Catalonia, is handling the case. Madrid is arguing that this is because websites set up for the referendum were hosted outside of Catalonia, ballot boxes came from France, and international observers were present at the referendum.

In fact, the Spanish state is using its Supreme Court in order to control the proceedings. Supreme Court judges are nominated by the General Council of the Judiciary, which is staffed by individuals nominated by the PP and the PSOE. Recently it was leaked that the PP's Senate spokesperson, Ignacio Cosidó, wrote on WhatsApp that the PP would "control" the court "behind the scenes" thanks to these nominations.

The European Democratic Lawyers (EDL) association, among other groups of legal experts, has warned that the defendants have not been given sufficient time to prepare their cases. EDL posted a statement noting that their pre-trial detention for over a year without having been charged had "negative consequences for their ability to defend themselves." Over the three months the trial is expected to last, detainees will have to rise every day at 6 a.m. and spend at least two hours traveling to court and back. They will be locked up in separate rooms during the breaks.

The panel of seven judges, headed by Manuel Marchena, has rejected 50 defense witnesses, including Puigdemont himself, as well as further expert witnesses and vital pieces of evidence that would allow the defendants to counter the prosecutors' version of events. The panel agreed to virtually all the witnesses and evidence put forward by the public prosecutor, Spain's solicitor general (controlled by the PSOE government) and the pro-fascist, anti-Catalan party Vox.

The only force that can halt the drive towards authoritarian rule is the working class. Discredited, isolated and afraid of growing opposition, seen in the strike waves in Portugal and the "yellow vest" protests in France, the ruling elite is determined to erect a police state. Attempts by the Catalan nationalists to appeal for dialogue and profess their love of peace are politically bankrupt efforts to work out a deal with the rest of the capitalist class. This will not halt the drive to authoritarian rule.

On Thursday, the former regional vice premier, Oriol Junqueras, declared that he is a political prisoner: "I'm convinced that I'm being accused for my ideas and not for my actions," he said. At the same time, he called for a "political solution" with the Spanish state. He added that "dialogue has always been denied. The chair opposite ours has always been empty." He concluded, "I have said it many times: I love Spain and the peoples of Spain and the Spanish language and culture."

Despite the pleas from Junqueras, the EU is backing the judicial lynching in Madrid. Last week, European Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen endorsed the trial, stating, "We fully trust the legal system in Spain."

On Friday, the EU banned a conference titled "Catalonia and the trial on the referendum: A challenge for the EU." The event was organised by the Flemish separatist party N-VA, in collaboration with Puigdemont and Quim Torra, the former and current premiers of Catalonia, respectively. The EU claimed that security officials had warned it could "pose a threat to the maintenance of public order on Parliament's premises." It cited a peaceful occupation of European Commission buildings in Barcelona by secessionist protesters, as well as "tensions linked to the start of the trial against pro-independence leaders."

European Parliament official Heidi Hautala tweeted that the EU Parliament cancelled the event under pressure from the main Spanish parties.

Meanwhile, the interim government of PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez, who on Friday called for snap elections after losing the vote on his government's budget, has called on Spain's embassies to defend the Madrid show trial. The Global Spain project is preparing an international smear campaign using video and social media and targeting the Catalan secessionists.

The junior minister for Global Spain, Irene Lozano, said there is "widespread concern in the government" of the trial's impact on Spain's reputation. She continued: "I am aware that the judiciary is very well prepared to explain to the Spanish and foreign press what is really happening, legally and technically, because predictably there will be attempts to misinform, to make incorrect interpretations of procedural questions in order to increase the victimization." She added that the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Affairs Ministry would handle the "most political" information.

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