Spain holds political show trial of Catalan nationalist defendants

Alejandro López, Alex Lantier
4 March 2019

Over the last two weeks, Madrid has launched a judicial frame-up of Catalan nationalist politicians and leaders in a public show trial. Their prosecution on charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds for organising the 2017 independence referendum is groundless and reactionary.

Defendants include former Catalan regional ministers, the former speaker of the Catalan parliament and leaders of two pro-independence groups, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium Cultural. Nine of them have been in preventive custody for over 500 days and face up to 25 years in jail for organising a peaceful referendum on Catalan independence from Spain. The most serious charge they face is rebellion, i.e., "violently and publicly" trying to "abrogate, suspend or modify the Constitution, either totally or partially."

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) opposed the Catalan referendum, calling for a "no" vote on a proposal that would have divided workers in the Iberian peninsula by forming a Catalan state oriented to the reactionary European Union (EU). But Madrid's charges against the defendants are lies. The Catalan separatists sought to obtain independence via a peaceful referendum and negotiations with Madrid, who cracked down brutally on pro-independence voters.

Now, the Spanish media and political establishment are whipping up a nationalist frenzy around distorted accounts of various events. One was the September 20, 2017 protest in Barcelona, 10 days before the referendum and the police crackdown that left over 1,000 people injured.

On September 20, paramilitary Civil Guards arrested top Catalan officials and searched state offices for evidence that the referendum had been illegally organized. The ANC and Òmnium called rallies outside the offices. Later that night, as tensions rose, ANC leader Jordi Sánchez and Òmnium President Jordi Cuixart tried to disperse the crowd. Two Civil Guards vehicles were vandalized, but no one was injured.

Last Thursday, Cuixart testified about these events. Under questioning by public prosecutors and the state's attorney—named by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government—he rejected claims that minor clashes constituted "a continued assault" on searches by the Civil Guards and a judicial team. Cuixart stated it was a legal protest. He also stated that he talked with the Civil Guards in charge of the operation, as shown on video, as well as Catalan interior security official Joaquim Forn (also accused of rebellion), and the head of the regional police force, the *Mossos d'Esquadra*.

Despite trolling through Cuixart's emails and Tweets, prosecutors failed to show that he instigated violence.

Sánchez said the authorities requested help to open up a corridor through which the judicial team could pass, which was done: "That this was a public order issue and it wasn't my responsibility." He said that at no point did he encourage "a riotous uprising by ordinary people."

Charges that Catalan officials were guilty of "misuse of public funds" are also groundless. Former Spanish Finance Minister Cristobal Montoro, who imposed a draconian auditing regime on the Catalan government before the referendum to keep public funds from being used to hold it, testified that "the Catalan government ... had no possibility to call the referendum using public money." In this, Montoro was repeating his public statements to the Spanish parliament.

Trying to maintain the credibility of the trial without perjuring himself, Montoro added a vague statement that "we cannot exclude that there were fraudulent

© World Socialist Web Site

actions to organize the referendum."

The Spanish bourgeoisie is using the trial to legitimise its bloody crackdown on the referendum and move towards a fascistic dictatorship by rehabilitating the 20th century fascist regime of Francisco Franco. This is shown by the court's extraordinary handling of the new, pro-Francoite VOX party.

VOX's officials have publicly hailed Franco's army in the 1936-1939 Civil War, which started when he launched a coup against an elected government and ended in a fascist victory and mass slaughter of hundreds of thousands of left-wing workers and youth.

VOX was also authorized to constitute itself as a plaintiff in the Catalan trial. When it demanded testimony from Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP) party members Antonio Baños and Eulàlia Reguant, they refused. Baños said, "I won't respond due to democratic dignity and anti-fascism."

Remarkably, both were fined €2,500 for taking this position.

Last week, the three top officials of the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government that was in power during the referendum crisis all defended the crackdown on voters. Former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría and Interior Minister Juan Ignacio Zoido all testified. They accused the Catalan nationalists of systematic violence in the autumn of 2017 and of using civilians as "human shields" to keep police away from voting stations. They also all denied they were in charge of the police crackdown.

VOX took this occasion to attack Rajoy for not using the referendum to impose martial law. Its general secretary, Javier Ortega Smith, asked Rajoy why he had not used Article 116 of the constitution—the state of alarm, exception and siege, involving the use of the military—but simply suspended Catalan self-rule, using Article 155 of the Constitution.

Rajoy, the chief architect of a battery of police state laws during his seven-year rule, cynically replied that he "did not want to interfere with the individual liberties of the people."

The trial has also exposed the bankruptcy and impotence of the Catalan nationalists. Their plan throughout the crisis never went any further than striking a deal with Madrid involving the granting of increased Catalan regional powers. But Madrid offered them no such deal, instead taking their secessionist bluster as an opportunity to crush them and shift official politics far to the right.

Basque regional premier Íñigo Urkullu, who during the crisis acted as an intermediary between Rajoy and Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont, told the Supreme Court that "Puigdemont had no intention of declaring independence." Puigdemont implicitly threatened to do so when Rajoy refused to guarantee that he would not impose Article 155 if new elections were called.

Former parliamentary speaker Carme Forcadell said former regional premier Carles Puigdemont's October 27 independence declaration, which he immediately suspended, was purely symbolic. She said they hoped for support from the EU, which backed Rajoy's crackdown: "Our movement has always been pro-European and we believe that self-determination is our right. The EU should support us, not for independence but for exercising our rights."

Former Catalan regional minister for business Santi Vila declared that "It wasn't a referendum," but "It was a major political mobilization."

These events constitute an urgent warning on the state of Spanish and European democracy. That such a blatant show trial can proceed without provoking the organisation of mass protests and universal condemnation is an indictment of the political system. It is yet another exposure of the impotence of Spain's pseudo-left Podemos party: despite having won 5 million votes in the 2016 elections, it has organised no meaningful opposition.

The only force that can defend democratic rights is the working class, mobilised independently of and against the entire ruling class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site