

# The Spanish elections and the struggle against authoritarian rule

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, Socialist Equality Party, Parti de l'égalité socialiste  
27 April 2019

The upcoming general election in Spain on Sunday sharply expresses essential political issues facing workers across Europe and internationally.

The election campaign was a degraded spectacle, dominated by the financial aristocracy's promotion of fascistic forces. Throughout the campaign, the the pro-austerity Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government organized a show trial of Catalan nationalist political prisoners who called peaceful protests amid the brutal police crackdown on the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. The other major campaign issue was the emergence of Vox, a far-right party hailing Spanish fascist dictator Francisco Franco, as a potential party of government.

Vox leader Santiago Abascal praised the record of Franco's army, which launched a coup in 1936 leading to a three-year civil war that ended in Franco's victory and the mass murder of 200,000 political oppositionists and left-wing workers. Abascal called for banning Marxism and separatism, saying Vox alone could stop a "popular front" of the PSOE, Podemos and Catalan nationalists. Right-wing Popular Party (PP) leader Pablo Casado responded by asserting that he wanted to unite all of Spanish politics to the right of the PSOE—that is, including Vox.

It is impossible today to predict the election outcome. Two-fifths of voters are undecided. With Podemos and the PSOE at 14 and 29 percent, and the right-wing PP, Citizens and Vox at 20, 15, and 11 percent respectively, a hung parliament could emerge. Two such indecisive elections took place in 2015 and 2016. Various government coalitions (PSOE-Podemos-Catalan nationalist, PSOE-Citizens, PP-Citizens-Vox) are possible. All of them would, however, continue the rapid shift to the right that unfolded under the current PSOE government.

Millions of workers in Spain and internationally are disgusted by this election. With 14 percent of workers and 34 percent for youth still jobless after a decade of draconian European Union (EU) austerity since the 2008 crash, polls found 61 percent of Spaniards believe the key election issue is unemployment. Amid mounting social anger, they cited

corruption and Spain's political parties as the next most serious problems. Only 10 percent saw the Catalan issue as a serious problem.

Official anti-Catalan hysteria and the rise of Vox, which has run six retired generals in the elections, does not reflect mass support for neo-fascism. Rather, in Spain as across Europe, it reflects the promotion of the far right by the media, the political establishment, and the repressive apparatus of the state. As German right-wing extremist professors rehabilitate Hitler to justify remilitarizing Berlin's foreign policy, and French President Emmanuel Macron hails fascist dictator Philippe Pétain and represses "yellow vest" protests, the entire European bourgeoisie aims to keep power despite growing social opposition by turning to fascistic and authoritarian forms of rule.

The turn is to the international working class. After decades of austerity and imperialist wars since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, anger at social inequality is reaching levels at which the class struggle cannot be suppressed.

As militant strikes spread from US schools to the civil service and plantations of the Indian subcontinent, the European working class is entering into action. The simultaneous eruption of Polish teachers strikes, French "yellow vest" protests, mass strikes in Portugal, and protests against Algeria's military regime point to the objective potential for the revolutionary unification of struggles of the working class across Europe.

Within Spain, growing layers of workers are coming into struggle. According to the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations, the hours of work lost due to strikes in Spain stood at 13,369,478 in the first quarter of the year, up 163 percent from the same period in 2018. The number of workers involved—728,186—went up by 54 percent.

The key issue facing workers is that this struggle can only proceed by building a new revolutionary leadership in the Spanish and international working class. It requires a ruthless political break with petty-bourgeois parties, based on the postmodernist "left populist" theories of Chantal

Mouffe, like the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

These elections highlighted the bankruptcy of Podemos. Founded in 2014 as an alliance of Stalinist professors, army officers and members of the *Anticapitalistas* party linked to France's Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party, it promised radical change. Starting in the 2015 elections, however, it pushed for alliances with the PSOE, the Spanish bourgeoisie's preferred party of rule in the post-Franco era. Podemos insisted that this nationalist, pro-capitalist strategy would block the rise of a far-right party: in Íñigo Errejón's words, its "popular and patriotic discourse" meant that Podemos occupied the same political "space" as the far-right.

The bourgeoisie's promotion of Vox, even as Podemos deputies backed Sanchez's minority PSOE government and gave it a majority in the Congress, refuted this complacent view. Powerful forces in the ruling class seized upon the 2017 Catalan referendum—itsself a maneuver by pro-austerity Catalan nationalist parties to divide the working class, and negotiate better terms in their financial relations with Madrid and the EU—to shift official politics far to the right.

The PSOE lined up behind the Catalan crackdown organized by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's PP government. After taking power last year with Podemos support, the PSOE continued its march to the right. As it voted austerity and spent billions of euros on the army, it held show trials of Catalan nationalists and supported Vox officials' role as prosecutors in these trials. In the 2019 elections, PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez again hailed Rajoy's "sense of duty to the state," claiming that "Catalonia united us"—that is, around the attack on Catalan voters.

Finance capital recognizes the PSOE as its own. Britain's free-market and pro-EU *Economist* called on voters to "give the Socialists a governing majority," predicting the PSOE would make cuts to Spain's "schools system, its pensions, its complicated political structure and the labour market, building on [former PP Prime Minister] Mr Rajoy's useful work."

History shows that the only way to defeat the European bourgeoisie's turn towards fascistic politics is to mobilize the working class in a struggle to take power and expropriate the capitalist class. This requires building a Trotskyist vanguard in the working class, to overcome the counterrevolutionary role of parties like Podemos, the PSOE and their allies, including the union bureaucracies, and offer workers revolutionary leadership.

As the Civil War becomes the basic reference point of Spanish politics, Leon Trotsky's words written in response to Franco's 1936 coup take on intense contemporary

relevance. He stressed the unbridgeable gulf separating the Marxist perspective of world socialist revolution that underlay the October 1917 revolution in Russia, from the Popular Front perspective of the social-democrats, Stalinists and anarchists.

The Popular Front government's failure to foresee and halt Franco's coup, Trotsky wrote, was "not at all a question of the perspicacity of this or that minister or leader, but of the general direction of the policy." By running the capitalist state, Trotsky noted, the Popular Front protected the fascist officers until they were ready to launch the coup: "The People's Front government, that is to say, the government of the coalition of the workers with the bourgeoisie, is in its very essence a government of capitulation to the bureaucracy and the officers. Such is the great lesson of the events in Spain, now being paid for with thousands of human lives."

While the social democrats and Stalinists have lost the working class base they had in Trotsky's time, this analysis still illuminates the role of Podemos, which is in full retreat. Despite winning over 5 million votes in 2016, it organized no mass protests against the Catalan crackdown or show trials. Having issued an election manifesto hailing the 1978 constitution agreed by the Francoite fascists, the PSOE and the Stalinists, it serves not as a force for change but to defend the existing social order. It faces the loss of up to half its seats in these elections.

The decisive issue now is building the Trotskyist revolutionary vanguard of the working class. At the heart of the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) campaign in the 2019 European elections is the fight to build sections of the ICFI in Spain and across Europe as the political leadership of the working class. In this way, workers will be able to counterpose to the EU's drive towards fascistic-authoritarian dictatorship a revolutionary struggle of the working class for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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