After EU election, Podemos backs Spanish social democrats' repressive policy

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Following its debacle in the European elections, Podemos is intensifying its calls to form a Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos coalition government, even as Pedro Sánchez's interim PSOE government prepares historic attacks on the working class and intensifies repression of Catalan nationalists.

Last week, Podemos' secretary for organization, Pablo Echenique, stated, "Our position is firm and, although we will ask our members, the coalition government is the guarantee" that the PSOE will fulfill its electoral promises. He insisted that a coalition was the only arrangement Podemos would accept, rejecting the idea of supporting the PSOE in parliament without having ministers in a PSOE government.

Echenique implied that his party's participation in government was necessary to push the PSOE to adopt more left-wing policies. "We see what happens when the PSOE rules alone," he said, stating that the PSOE "agree with us not to raise rents and then they don't comply." He added, "We have to talk about the programme and a number of articles of the Constitution that are not implemented."

This is a political fraud. Podemos is asking to enter a pro-austerity and militarist government that plans to intensify its attacks on democratic rights and workers' social conditions. The main issue for Podemos, reflecting the interests of the upper-middle class layers of academics and media personalities that control the party, is obtaining positions in the state machine to carry out these attacks.

This is the response of Podemos to its collapse in the May 26 regional, local and European elections. Its European parliament vote fell from 18 percent to 10 percent (11 seats to 6). In the regions, Podemos lost two thirds of the seats it won in 2014, falling 860,000 votes, from 13.7 to 6.7 percent. Of the eight "municipalities of change" Podemos ruled—Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, Santiago, Ferrol, A Coruña, Valencia and Cádiz—it kept control of only the last two.

Podemos is responding by shifting closer to the PSOE, even as the PSOE unveils deep attacks on social and democratic rights and possible alliances with right-wing parties. On Wednesday, PSOE Organisation Secretary José Luis Ábalos said, "The Citizens Party's only possibility to have its own distinct political profile is to not subordinate itself to the interests of the PP [Popular Party]… and even being able to aspire to have some representation in some of the institutions" under the PSOE.

The PSOE is preparing stepped-up austerity against workers, with draconian attacks on pensions and unemployment coverage. In its "Stability Programme 2019-2022" report outlining future economic reforms and its "National Reform Programme" outlining future laws and decrees, the PSOE lays out far-ranging plans.

It intends to abolish the annual automatic increase in pensions based on the consumer price index (CPI). Until 2022, pensions will rise in accordance with the CPI, but thereafter the increase will be only 0.25 percent—meaning the real value of pensions will collapse in the coming years. The previous Popular Party (PP) government unveiled this plan but had to retract it amid pensioners' protests.

The PSOE will also raise taxes over the next four years, aiming to collect 26 billion euros. Its warning that it could target large companies and the wealthy has already provoked opposition from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. Predictably, these institutions do not oppose Sánchez's plan for petrol tax increases, which would disproportionately affect the working class. Echoing French President Emanuel Macron's claims that sparked the "yellow vest"

protests, the PSOE fraudulently claims that it aims not to "pursue tax collection per se, but to protect the environment."

In labour relations, the PSOE wants to implement the so-called "Austrian backpack" endorsed by the right-wing parties and the big business association, the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations. Inspired by a 2002 measure imposed in Austria, it will force workers to pay into a "personal savings fund" to buffer the impact of dismissal instead of receiving severance pay from employers.

The objective, in addition to eliminating employers' severance pay costs, is to slash pension spending. One part of pension benefits will be covered by the state and another by private pension plans generated by the "backpack." Another objective, according to an analysis by Eduardo Luque for the magazine *El Viejo Topo*, is to refinance the banks with the funds freed up by the pension spending cuts, in what amounts to a shameless money grab by the financial aristocracy.

At the same time, the interim PSOE government is furiously signaling its support for the police-military establishment and plans for stepped-up attacks on democratic rights. It has halted its occasional criticisms of the PP's law on public security, dubbed the "gag law," which restricts freedom of speech, prohibits mass gatherings and imposes fines for protesting and making comments on social media. The PSOE has also accelerated the previous plans, with a price tag of nearly 4 billion euros, to acquire 348 "Piranha 5" 8x8 wheeled armored vehicles.

According to the previous secretary of state of defence, Vicente Conde, these armored vehicles will be "especially suitable for current low-intensity operations, especially in Africa."

Above all, with the tacit support of Podemos, the PSOE is intensifying its repression of the Catalan nationalists. The parliamentary Speaker's Committee, which is controlled by the PSOE and Podemos, carried out an unprecedented anti-democratic action by suspending the mandates of four Catalan nationalist deputies elected while in custody. They are being prosecuted in a show trial in connection with their role in the Catalan nationalist referendum in 2017.

The members of the Speaker's Committee, which governs Spain's lower house of parliament, were appointed in talks between Podemos and the PSOE.

Podemos hypocritically opposed the suspension, claiming that the decision should have been made by the High Court, the body organizing the show trial of the Catalan secessionists. Podemos spokesperson Irene Montero told the press, "We have expressed our disagreement, but we accept the decision taken by the committee on a majority basis."

This decision came a week after the Public Prosecutor's Office—controlled by the interim PSOE government—announced its intention to seek the prosecution of senior officials of the Catalan government for participating in a "criminal" organization seeking independence. Those targeted include senior officials of Catalan ministries and public bodies of the regional government, the heads of the Catalan public television and radio stations, and leading businessmen.

At the same time, the public prosecutor is continuing to uphold the charges against the Catalan nationalists in the show trial now coming to an end in Madrid. After nearly four months of testimony by over 400 witnesses and the presentation of hundreds of images from the fall of 2017, no evidence has emerged that the Catalan nationalists organized a violent uprising to overthrow the government. The public prosecutor, however, has declared that the accused promoted a strategy "perfectly planned, concerted and organised" to fracture Spain's constitutional order, calling it a "patent insurrection."

The interim PSOE government was also behind last week's decision of the European Parliament to block exiled former Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont and Toni Comín, two newly elected Catalan MEPs, from taking their seats in the body. It also attacked this week's UN report calling for the jailed Catalan nationalists' release. The Sánchez government denounced the report as "particularly serious," saying it "could be interpreted as interference in an ongoing criminal trial."

This record exposes the pretensions of Podemos that it will pressure the PSOE government to the left.