

Draconian verdict against Catalan politicians exposes bankruptcy of Podemos

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The eruption of mass protests against decade-long prison sentences for Catalan nationalists on trumped-up sedition charges a week ago has exposed the bankruptcy of Podemos. As a half-million people marched in Barcelona, broad layers of workers struck across Catalonia, and fires burned in Barcelona as police violently attacked protesters, top Podemos officials spent the week calling for the population to accept or ignore the verdict while hailing the police.

This crisis is giving workers and youth internationally yet another bitter lesson in the reactionary role of affluent middle class, “post-Marxist” populist parties. The Greek sister party of Podemos, Syriza (the “Coalition of the Radical Left”) led a 2015-2019 government that pledged to end European Union (EU) austerity and then imposed the largest EU austerity package in Greek history. Now, Podemos is promoting and supporting the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government as it moves to set up a fascistic police-state regime in Catalonia and across Spain.

Its attempts to confuse and demobilize opposition started even before the verdict was published last Monday. As Supreme Court leaks that weekend confirmed that leading Catalan politicians would be sentenced to a decade in prison, and the PSOE sent thousands of police to Catalonia to repress expected mass protests, Podemos officials claimed the issue was a distraction.

Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias said: “We hope that the verdict will not be the main issue in the campaign, because then the problems facing Spaniards will not be discussed.” Implying that Podemos would focus on bread-and-butter “social issues” of concern to workers, Iglesias concluded: “It is our obligation to talk about other issues. And we will do it.”

This is a political evasion, and an attempt to divide workers in the rest of Spain from their class brothers and sisters in Catalonia. Long years of struggle—from the protests before the installation of the Syriza government, to the brutal crackdown on “yellow vest” protests in France and the Hamburg G20 protests in Germany, to the PSOE’s austerity record—have made one thing clear. Workers will obtain nothing on social and economic issues if the ruling class is allowed to build a police state regime that brutally represses all opposition to austerity and militarism.

Last Monday, the published verdict confirmed the previous leaks. A dozen defendants were found guilty on various counts of sedition, misuse of public funds and disobedience, and received sentences totaling over 100 years in prison. The Supreme Court fraudulently argued that since police violently attacked peaceful protesters and voters amid the 2017 Catalan independence that the defendants supported, the defendants—and not the police—are guilty of encouraging mass violence between the population and the state.

The WSWS warned that on this basis, anyone calling protests that the state may target for police violence can be put away in prison for decades. And indeed, the authorities in Madrid are calling to investigate organizers of this week’s Catalan protests on sedition charges.

As tens of thousands of people poured into the streets in Barcelona and across Catalonia, however, Podemos leader Iglesias demanded: “Everyone must abide by the law and accept the verdict.” Instead, he declared, it is time “to talk about reconciliation.” He complacently concluded, “It is time for us to roll up our sleeves and work to rebuild bridges between a divided Catalan society and ...Spanish society.”

This was followed by a full-court media campaign to indicate, without openly saying so, that Podemos supports the PSOE government and its police-state measures in Catalonia. The following day, in a rally in Zaragoza, Iglesias said that had Podemos joined a PSOE-led government as he had wanted during the ill-fated negotiations in August, “We would have discussed the verdict in the Council of Ministers and agreed on one stance. We would have been loyal and acted with responsibility and sense of state.”

Hours later, on La Sexta television, Iglesias once again insisted that had Podemos been in government with the PSOE, it would have acted “with loyalty and state responsibility.” However, he claimed, our attitude “would be more democratic and less overcharged.”

On Wednesday, as mass protests and clashes erupted between demonstrators and the police across Catalonia, with dozens injured or arrested, Iglesias met with Sánchez as part of the government’s roundtable discussion with all the main parties in parliament to discuss the Catalan question. While the right-wing parties, including the pro-fascist Vox party, called to suspend the Catalan government or send in the army, Podemos insisted nothing unusual would happen.

In the press conference afterwards, Iglesias whitewashed the PSOE’s policies. He said that his “impression” was that the PSOE “has no plans for any measure that goes in the direction of an exceptional situation.” Instead, he said he agreed with Sánchez that the situation is “under control.” Pledging to support Sánchez “in all the initiatives which go to the direction of de-escalation and dialogue,” Iglesias added, “What we need now in Catalonia is empathy, dialogue and, in the framework of the law, to look for a political solution.”

While Iglesias spoke of empathetic policies and the un-exceptional nature of the PSOE’s policy, the PSOE government was launching the greatest crackdown since the fall of the fascist Francoite regime in Spain in 1978. After deploying over 2,000 police, Madrid sent hundreds more last week, including the notorious GRS anti-riot special forces.

Millions of Spaniards and Europeans turned to social media to view thousands of videos of police brutality throughout Catalonia. So far, hundreds have been injured, over 70 people have been arrested, 14 protesters are in prison without bail and four people have lost eyes due to rubber bullets.

The week ended with Iglesias criticizing youth in Catalonia for clashing with police after over half a million marched in Barcelona and a general strike paralysed the region. He called the violence a “disaster” that was “doing a lot of harm” to attempts to resolve the Catalan crisis. Heaping the blame for the violence not on the police but on protesters, he said that “sectors and young people who go on that path [of violence] is a disaster for the secessionists, democracy and for all of us who are committed to dialogue.”

To make clear where his loyalties lay, Iglesias also applauded the collaboration between the Catalan regional police, the National Police and the Civil Guards in the repression, saying “institutional relations between the police forces is working.”

Five years after the founding of Podemos as a supposedly radical populist party of “democratic regeneration,” it is necessary to draw a balance sheet. It is aligning itself with the Spanish bourgeoisie’s drive back to authoritarian rule, 41 years after the end of the fascist regime founded by Generalissimo Francisco Franco at the end of the Civil War. Its claims to represent a more democratic alternative to EU austerity and police-state measures imposed by the PSOE were a political fraud.

As with its sister parties across Europe, it is implicated in austerity and growing military-police violence against workers and youth. In line with Syriza’s EU austerity policy in Greece, Podemos has spent much of the last two years in failed attempts to prop up a minority PSOE government that imposed austerity and handed billions of euros to the army.

Podemos’ attempts to prop up the PSOE ultimately failed, however; with elections set for November 10, it aims to burnish its support in ruling circles on a law-and-order basis. It has deep ties in the army, having recruited top officers including Spain’s Libyan war commander, General Julio Rodríguez Fernández. After Podemos’ German affiliate, the Left Party, met with former domestic intelligence chief Hans-Georg Maassen, who has covered official ties to violent neo-fascist groups, Podemos is in turn covering for Madrid’s promotion of neo-fascism.

Four months before issuing this verdict against the Catalan nationalists, the Spanish Supreme Court ruled that Franco became head of state by issuing his October 1, 1936 Burgos declaration. It thus legitimized the fascist coup Franco launched shortly before, his waging of a civil war, and the mass murder and jailing of hundreds of thousands of left-wing workers and youth after his victory. The ruling against the Catalan nationalist defendants thus has the character of a retroactive vindication of Franco’s suppression of left-wing politics and of Catalan nationalism.

The decision of Podemos to nonetheless continue backing Spain’s crackdown in Catalonia reflects the privileged social interests and counterrevolutionary politics it represents. It is composed of privileged union bureaucrats, “left” academics, military officers and media pundits, who are entirely bound up with the institutions through which the class struggle was strangled in Spain since 1978. They have also consistently stressed their support for Spanish “patriotism,” that is, the nationalist basis of the support for the PSOE in the Stalinist and Pabloite wings of Podemos.

They feel their interests threatened by a growing international

movement in the working class against unpopular governments and for social equality. Amid the eruption of “yellow vest” protests and strikes in France and Portugal, mass protests in Sudan, Algeria and Hong Kong, and a mass strike wave in America and Mexico, they see the growing movement from below as a threat to their financial interests. They are consciously hostile to an emerging mass movement against a return to fascist-authoritarian rule, instead falling in line with repression and the promotion of the far right.

Broad sections of youth and workers are nonetheless mobilising against the emerging police state in Spain. Forty years after the end of the fascist dictatorship, there is still a strong anti-fascist sentiment among workers and a growing sense of the anti-democratic implications of the anti-Catalan verdict.

As Iglesias was sitting with Sánchez on Wednesday, thousands of young anti-fascist protesters rallied in Madrid chanting “here we are, the anti-fascists,” “solidarity with the people of Catalonia” and “freedom for the political prisoners.” In the following days, similar protests went forward in Vitoria, Cádiz, Zaragoza and Murcia. On Saturday, a 4,000-strong demonstration in the centre of Madrid was violently dispersed by police, leaving 26 injured.

An important feature of these protests are reports of explicit hostility to the Catalan nationalist parties that had previously worked closely with Podemos.

Podemos is terrified at even calling protests, fearing that it may lose control of the situation. In Catalonia, secessionist forces who have so far controlled protests are losing ground. On Saturday, Gabriel Ruffian, spokesperson for the pro-secessionist Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), was forced to leave a demonstration as he was jeered by protesters calling him “Botifler” (a term used by nationalists to refer to Catalan “collaborators” with Madrid) and saying, “you guys are the old Convergencia” (that is, the explicitly right-wing, pro-austerity Catalan nationalists).

The record of Podemos is unanswerable evidence that unifying the emerging struggles across Europe and turning them into a struggle against fascist-authoritarian rule requires a decisive break with the politics of the Podemos Party.



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