

Exhumation of Franco: Spain's ruling class pays homage to a fascist dictator

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On Thursday of last week, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government exhumed the remains of fascist dictator General Francisco Franco, moving him from the Valley of the Fallen mausoleum to Madrid's Mingorrubio cemetery. The PSOE had initially claimed the exhumation would lessen Franco's prominence by removing him from his vast official mausoleum. The event turned instead into a degraded spectacle paying homage to one of the bloodiest dictators of the 20th century.

Franco launched a fascist coup against an elected government in July 1936 to quell the spreading socialist radicalization of workers and peasants throughout Spain. The coup plunged the country into a three-year civil war during which Franco allied with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. At least 200,000 political oppositionists, intellectuals and left-wing workers died in a war that devastated most of Spain.

Another 700,000 to a million people passed through nearly 300 concentration camps during the war and in the 1940s, according to the investigation by Carlos Hernández de Miguel, published in "Los campos de concentración de Franco" [Franco's Concentration Camps (Ediciones B, 2019)]. Beaten and humiliated on a daily basis, many died of malnutrition and starvation. Another half-million fled Spain as political refugees.

Over the next four decades, Franco ruled Spain with an iron hand. Thousands were arrested, tortured or murdered by the secret police. Strikes, political parties and trade unions were banned, and democratic rights suppressed. Newspapers and books were censored, and higher education and good healthcare were only available to the privileged.

To this day, after Cambodia, Spain ranks second as the country with the highest number of "disappeared" people: 114,000, according to historians and relatives' estimates. Many were executed by fascist firing squads. Their bodies were dumped in mass graves and roadside ditches.

A casual observer of the detailed and rapturous media coverage of the Franco exhumation would have heard nothing of this, however. The carefully staged event was broadcast for fully eight hours by Spanish public television, complete with aerial views filmed from a helicopter.

Over 200 journalists were near the site. Franco's family, infamous for the wealth amassed through decades of robbery, corruption and nepotism, were transported at public expense via

microbuses to the Valley of the Fallen. The PSOE sent acting Justice Minister Dolores Delgado, who dressed in black to show her respect for Franco and the mourners. Nonetheless, a group of fascists shouted "desecrator" and "slut" at her when she arrived.

Accompanying the 22 descendants of the Franco family and the priest was the family's lawyer, Luis-Felipe Utrera-Molina Gómez, son José Utrera-Molina, general secretary of the only legal party under Franco, the fascist National Movement. Francis Franco, Franco's grandson, was allowed to bring the fascist Spanish flag.

The coffin, covered with a banner with the Laureate Cross of San Fernando—the highest military decoration awarded in Spain—was then carried out of the basilica on family members' shoulders to the helicopter, where Francis received a military salute from the helicopter crew.

When the coffin arrived in the cemetery of El Pardo-Mingorrubio, hundreds of fascists made the fascist salute while singing Francoist songs and carrying the flag of the old regime. One of the attendants was former Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero Molina, sentenced to 30 years in prison for the failed coup attempt on February 23, 1981 that attempted to reinstall the Francoite regime after the transition to parliamentary democracy after Franco's death. His son, Ramón Tejero, a priest, was in charge of the inhumation proceedings.

The Francoite regime fell amid mass strikes and protests of the working class in the late 1970s. In 1978, four years after the Carnation Revolution brought down the fascist Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, a new constitution was adopted in Spain through talks between officials of the fascist regime, the PSOE, and the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE). This Transition, together with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe in 1989, laid the basis for the founding of the European Union (EU) in 1992.

Millions of people around the world are now looking on with shock and disgust at the lavish commemoration of Franco, a fascist mass murderer despised in the working class. It comes amid a wave of mass strikes and protests against social inequality that have mobilized workers from Lebanon, Algeria and Iraq to Hong Kong, Ecuador and the "yellow vest" movement in France, and mass strikes in auto and mining

industries in America. After decades of austerity, war and rising social inequality, there is explosive anger at the EU and the Transition regime in Spain.

Whatever the efforts of the Spanish bourgeoisie to promote Franco as an alternative, however, historical judgment has been rendered on his regime. Like his allies Hitler and Mussolini, he was a monster whose career embodied the bourgeoisie's use of mass murder to defend its wealth and privileges. It was an integral part of European fascism, which committed the most heinous crimes of human history, plunging the world into wars that claimed tens of millions of lives and carrying out a genocide of European Jewry in defence of capitalism, nationalism and social inequality.

The Franco exhumation is of a piece with a universal promotion of fascists by the European bourgeoisie. In France, President Emmanuel Macron hailed fascist dictator Philippe Pétain as a great soldier as he organized a mass crackdown against the “yellow vests.” In Germany, a renewed effort is underway, led by Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski, to whitewash the Nazi regime's crimes. Baberowski infamously said, “Hitler was not vicious.”

In Spain the police state campaign has centred, besides the promotion of Francoism, on the bloody repression of pro-capitalist Catalan nationalists. This autumn, nine were sentenced to 9 to 13 years in prison after a show trial, after they called peaceful protests and organised a referendum on independence in the region. The PSOE has brutally repressed mass protests against the reactionary verdict. Clashes have left over 700 people injured and 200 protestors arrested, of which 31 were sent to prison without bail. Four protesters lost eyes to police rubber bullets.

The *Observatori del Sistema Penal i els Drets Humans* (Observatory of the Criminal System and Human Rights) has initiated investigations of torture and abuse of protesters in the National Police headquarters on Barcelona's Via Laietana—which was notoriously used as a torture centre under Franco. The observatory quoted several young women describing “very hard” scenes of their fellow prisoners being beaten there. One said, “Blood was literally flying from the hits the boys were getting, to the point of staining the walls.”

Trying to lull workers to sleep, the PSOE postures as critics of Francoism while leading bloody repression in Franco's former prisons. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said the exhumation was a step towards “reconciliation,” adding: “Modern Spain is the product of forgiveness, but it can't be the product of forgetfulness.”

The leading ally of the PSOE, the populist pseudo-left Podemos party, similarly promoted the exhumation. The Stalinist leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, tweeted that it was “good news,” although he also claimed to be disappointed that Spanish army officers would salute Franco: “It's a democratic shame to see members of the armed forces saluting the body of a dictator.”

These statements are based on political bad faith. Within the state machine and the armed forces in Spain and across Europe, as it is well known, there is deep support for fascism. In June, the Spanish Supreme Court ruled that Franco's October 1, 1936 Burgos declaration, proclaiming himself to be head of state a few months after launching his fascist coup, made him the legitimate head of state. Yet Podemos fell into line with the general silence in the media and the political establishment over this reactionary ruling legitimizing a fascist coup that led to mass murder.

As for the PSOE, its officials marched with the pro-Francoist VOX party in Barcelona against Catalan separatism and in support of police repression. Days later, acting Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo called José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the fascist Falange in 1934, a “victim” of the civil war. In fact, Rivera was a key conspirator in the Franco coup. He was accused of conspiracy and rebellion, tried and executed in the first months of the war.

Drawing the lessons after Franco's coup of the bankruptcy of the Popular Front policies of the precursors of the PSOE and Podemos, including the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (CPE), Leon Trotsky warned in 1936: “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.”

Many decades later, this warning is critical for workers and youth in Spain and around the world. Discredited by decades in which they imposed policies of austerity and war, the PSOE and Podemos do not have the base in the working class that their predecessors had in Trotsky's time. But they work, as Trotsky explained, to disarm the working class amid the rising threat of fascistic repression and state violence to create conditions for openly pro-fascist forces like VOX to grow.

To mobilize the growing opposition of working-class opposition in struggle against the fascistic violence of the state requires building a Trotskyist party as an alternative to Podemos. The critical task facing workers and youth is to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Spain and in countries across Europe.



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