Unions demand jailed Catalan leader support Spain's PSOE-Podemos government

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Last week, the leaders of Spain's two largest trade unions, Pepe Álvarez of the social-democratic General Workers Union (UGT) and Unai Sordo of the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO), met with the jailed leader of the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), Oriol Junqueras. Acting on behalf of the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE) and of Podemos, they demanded the ERC support a PSOE-Podemos government.

The UGT and CCOO are collaborating with the attempt by Podemos and the PSOE to install a pro-austerity and militarist government. In these efforts, they shamelessly pressured a political prisoner, Junqueras, incarcerated under the PSOE government under fraudulent charges for organising peaceful protests and a referendum. The goal of their visit—to obtain the support of a political prisoner for the police-state regime imprisoning him, which is pledged to billions of euros in social cuts targeting the workers—underscores their hostility to democratic rights and to the working class.

The meeting took place as the PSOE and Podemos, with a combined 155 of the 350 seats in the parliament, need ERC support to secure a parliamentary majority for acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whether through abstention or voting directly to install him in power. The PSOE has already received the endorsements of other small regionalist and nationalist parties. However, the ERC's 13 lawmakers are essential.

Álvarez publicly claimed that he did not act on behalf of the government, declaring: "The Government has not asked me anything, and they were not even informed."

The CCOO for its part issued a press release after the meeting, admitting that it went to see Junqueras to convince the ERC to facilitate "the investiture of a progressive and left-wing Government that proposes dialogue and effective solutions for the political conflict that exists in Catalonia, and breaks the institutional and political blockade that has been going on for too long."

CCOO added that it had asked ERC to support a progressive government to set as a political priority "the social agenda" and issues such as labor reform, pensions, housing, social protection, fiscal policy, the "feminization" of society and policies for young people. It concluded saying that CCOO had transmitted the message that no more time can be wasted to establish a government with a progressive programme, since "there is a lot at stake." This includes as promoting "a political solution in Catalonia" and "stopping the xenophobic, homophobic, sexist, neo-fascist and anti-Catalan extreme right" through social policies that benefit broad sectors of society.

Such statements are completely cynical. A PSOE-Podemos government will not stop the growth of the far-right Vox party, but pave the way for its growth via right-wing policies indistinguishable from previous governments. The accord between the social democrats and Podemos commits the new government to austerity, estimated at around €10 billion according to European Union demands.

On democratic rights, the PSOE government has already shown its true colours by passing the Digital Security Law. Popularly dubbed the "Digital Gag Law," it opens the door to mass censorship, allows the state to shut down web sites, internet infrastructure and apps at will, without a court order. It was passed due to the support of the right-wing parties and the abstention of Podemos.

Whatever the claims of the unions, the anti-Catalan campaign is in fact escalating under the acting PSOE government. Catalan regional premier Quim Torra faces charges of "disobedience" which, if successful, will bar him from office. Thirty-three businessmen, civil servants and senior officials in the former Catalan regional government, including the directors of the Catalan public television and radio, TV3 and Catalunya Ràdio, are also currently being prosecuted in connection with the October

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2017 independence referendum.

The PSOE in Catalonia is also proposing to increase the use of Spanish in schools at the expense of Catalan, after having defended the primacy of Catalan in schools for the past decades.

The PSOE-Podemos agreement says nothing about overturning the hated labour reforms passed by successive right-wing PP and PSOE governments that have devastated the working class, causing mass precariousness and wage cuts. One can only conclude that this is because both parties intend to keep the measures.

In foreign affairs, the acting PSOE government has supported the savage police repression of workers and youth by the right-wing government of Sebastian Piñera in Chile that has killed more than 20 people in protests against austerity and inequality. According to *El Mundo*, Sánchez gave his approval to Spain's Interior Ministry to carry out "everything necessary" if the Chilean government contacted it to ask for police support.

According to *El Mundo*, "Spain will train the Chilean Police to deal with the violent incidents that shook its streets in recent weeks. The president of the South American country requested collaboration from the Executive in functions to take advantage of the Spanish experience, both in Catalonia and the Basque Country." That is, they will provide the Chilean regime with Spanish methods of mass surveillance, trumped-up charges and torture.

The unions' role as chief negotiators on behalf of the PSOE and Podemos with the ERC reflects the long evolution of the trade unions, which decades ago functioned as defensive organizations of the working class, but now attack the social and democratic rights of the working class.

As David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, noted over two decades ago, "Standing on the basis of capitalist property relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude towards the class struggle." North added: "Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts."

In Spain, CCOO and UGT have overseen the relentless attacks on working conditions and living standards. According to the Catholic NGO Caritas, 2.4 million out of 47 million Spaniards live in extreme poverty and 1.8 million suffer from social exclusion. In job insecurity, between 2008 and 2016, the salary of young people aged 20 to 24 fell by 15 percent and the salary of those between 25 and 29 years old fell by 9 percent. Youth unemployment stands at 30 percent.

The unions have played a key role. Since the outbreak of the 2008 crisis, they have negotiated labour reforms with PP and PSOE governments, called toothless one-day strikes to let off steam, and negotiated wage cuts and precarious working conditions. They have also allowed the ruling class to proceed with the anti-Catalan campaign, the main means through which the ruling class has imposed police-state measures in the past years directed at the entire working class.

For these services, local, regional and national governments have showered the Spanish unions with hundreds of millions of euros. Just for training courses they delivered to unemployed, underemployed and civil servants, the unions received €350 million last year. This does not include the subsidies at the regional level, where in Catalonia alone last year they received nearly €3 million. The trade unions also receive direct subsidies of €8 million from state coffers.

Over the decades, workers have reacted by deserting these rotten organisations. Over the past decade alone, CCOO and UGT lost 730,000 members, their membership falling from 17 to 13 percent of the workforce according to the latest statistics. However, during this period, they continued to be the main tools of the ruling class to enforce "collective agreements" arrived at with company management that affect 73.1 percent of workers.

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