

Podemos enters Spanish government

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On Tuesday, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez officially formed a coalition government with the pseudo-left Podemos party, the Spanish ally of Greece's pro-austerity Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left"). It was the culmination of two months of reactionary manoeuvres within the Spanish ruling elite after the November 10 general elections produced yet another hung parliament.

In an initial vote on Sunday, Sanchez failed to obtain the necessary 176-seat majority in the 350-seat Spanish parliament. In the second vote, however, the PSOE and Podemos needed only a plurality to formally invest Sanchez as prime minister and form a government. Sanchez was invested in a 167-165 vote.

The prime minister's 167 votes came from the PSOE (120), Podemos (35), the Basque National Party (six votes), a coalition between the Podemos split-off More Country and the Valencian-regionalist Compromis (three votes), and one each from regional parties in the Canary Islands, Galicia and Teruel. Voting against were the Popular Party (PP), the fascistic Vox party, the Citizens party and regional parties from Catabria, Asturias, Navarra and the Canaries.

What proved decisive was the role of the Basque and especially the Catalan nationalists. The PSOE and Podemos oversaw a violent crackdown on mass protests last year against the show trial of Catalan nationalist politicians stemming from the peaceful 2017 Catalan independence referendum. As a result, there was broad opposition in Catalonia to the PSOE and Podemos as well as to the PP. A critical mass of nationalist legislators abstained, nevertheless, allowing the PSOE and Podemos to form a government.

While the right-wing Together for Catalonia (eight votes) and the petty-bourgeois Candidatures of Popular Unity (two votes) voted against the PSOE-Podemos coalition, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the Basque-nationalist EH Bildu abstained. Had they voted against, Sanchez would have gone down to defeat. By instead abstaining, the 13 ERC and 5 EH Bildu legislators

gave the PSOE-Podemos coalition the critical margin to take power as a minority government.

Podemos will obtain five ministerial posts. Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias will be vice-premier under Sanchez, tasked with social policy, international affairs and sustainable development. His partner, Irene Montero, will lead a ministry for gender equality. Yolanda Diaz of Galicia en Comun, the regional Galician affiliate of Podemos, will control the labour ministry. Alberto Garzon, the head of the Stalinist United Left, will head a consumers' ministry with special responsibility for regulating toys, and sociologist Manuel Castells will lead the Ministry of Universities.

Despite the attempts of supporters of the PSOE and Podemos to promote the new government as "democratic," it will prove bitterly hostile to the social and democratic rights of the working class. The PSOE, the bourgeoisie's traditional party of government since the fascist Francoite regime fell in 1978, has a decades-long record as a party of imperialist war and European Union austerity. As for Podemos, it made its alliance with the PSOE last year while supporting the PSOE's pledges of billions in EU social cuts and its violent crackdown on protests in Catalonia.

The degrading debate that followed the investiture vote exposed the far-reaching shift to the right of the entire Spanish political establishment since the first hung parliament in 2015, and particularly since the police crackdown on the 2017 Catalan independence referendum.

Sanchez took the floor after the vote, followed by the leaders of the other major parliamentary parties. Alluding to the minority governments formed after every Spanish election since December 2015, he hailed the PSOE-Podemos "progressive coalition" as the "only option for government after the last five rendezvous with the polls."

Sanchez told the PP and Vox: "You can do two things, either continue with your hysteria or accept the election results."

Sanchez made clear, however, that the criticisms he

seemed to be delivering of the right actually targeted the workers. Provocatively lumping Vox with workers and youth in Catalonia and elsewhere who have protested against his policies, he said, “There is a curious coalition, of various colors, in which the far-right and anti-system forces are represented.” He called this “the Spain of blockage.” Sanchez said he would be fighting for a “majority of government against a majority of blockage.”

The PP and Vox responded to Sanchez with anti-Catalan and xenophobic rants appealing to fascistic forces in the military and the security forces. PP leader Pablo Casado accused Sanchez of allying with “terrorists” and “coup leaders” to “turn himself into a Trojan horse to destroy Spain,” based only on “pathological personal ambition.”

Vox leader Santiago Abascal declared that “Sanchez will co-lead an illegitimate government.” He thereby channeled a statement last month by Vox member and former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Fulgencio Coll calling on the “powers of the state” to topple the PSOE.

Abascal also absurdly accused Sanchez of having ties to the now-dissolved Basque terrorist group ETA, whose members had been killed in the 1980s by death squads unleashed by a PSOE government. Abascal also claimed that there was a “plague of gang rapes that are mostly carried out by foreigners.”

Iglesias then delivered what was effectively the PSOE-Podemos government’s response to Abascal and Casado. Defending the Spanish monarchy, he told them: “Maybe it is you who have converted yourselves into the greatest danger to the monarchy.” He added that Podemos would defend homosexuals’ rights, so “gays and lesbians can love freely and organise their lives however they see fit.”

Addressing Sanchez at the conclusion of his speech, Iglesias said, “Pedro, they will attack us not for what we do, but for who we are. Therefore I ask you two things: adopt a proper tone with the intolerant, and show the greatest democratic firmness.”

With these remarks, Iglesias perhaps said more than he intended. The PP and Vox are not attacking the PSOE and Podemos because they have profound differences on policy. Since the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, successive minority PSOE governments backed by Podemos have carried out EU austerity measures, blockades of refugees in the Mediterranean, show trials of Catalan politicians and violent crackdowns on mass protests. In the PSOE-Podemos government the working class confronts no less bitter an enemy than it confronts in the fascistic parties themselves.

The PSOE, Podemos and their allies know they are sitting on a social powder keg. In 2019, a resurgence of the international class struggle saw protests and strikes erupt against austerity across Europe, Latin America and worldwide. Spain, where strike activity rose in 2019, is surrounded by strikes against pension cuts in France, a growth of public sector strikes in Portugal, and ongoing mass protests against the military regime in Algeria.

The policies pursued by the PSOE since it took office in 2018 in a series of minority governments backed by Podemos underscores that the incoming government is shifting to the right and preparing for further and even more violent confrontations with the workers.

What Iglesias calls the PSOE’s “democratic firmness” with Vox has, in fact, consisted of a policy of legitimising Vox and trying to lull workers to sleep about the danger of dictatorship. PSOE governments backed by Podemos invited Vox to join the prosecution in the show trials of Catalan politicians last year and paid to move Franco’s remains from the Valley of the Fallen memorial to a cemetery in Madrid. The PSOE and Podemos have responded to Vox’s propaganda by telling workers that its rants and coup threats are a legitimate contribution to “democratic” debate.

Podemos, a party formed in 2014 by Stalinist and Pabloite middle-class youth who came to prominence during the *indignados* protests of 2011, has now completed its integration into the state machine. Iglesias, the press remarked, cried in Congress after Sanchez was voted into office.

Iglesias’s claim that Podemos will defend homosexuals’ rights, while supporting imperialist war abroad and economic attacks on the working class at home, typifies his party’s reactionary identity politics. In reality, no democratic right is secure unless it is won in struggle by the working class. The coup threats being issued by far-right factions of the Spanish bourgeoisie starkly underscore this point.

The critical question facing workers in Spain is orienting to the developing struggle of the international working class in opposition not only to Vox and the PP, but also to the PSOE, Podemos and their entire petty-bourgeois periphery.



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