Exposure of Trump's lies on COVID-19 implicates Spain's Podemos party

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Revelations that US President Donald Trump deliberately misled the public about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic also expose the "left populist" Podemos party in Spain. Podemos is in government with the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and had access to the same type of information as Trump. Just like him, they issued misleading statements downplaying the risks posed by the pandemic.

This is a warning about "left populist" parties and politicians allied to Podemos internationally, such as Bernie Sanders, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise, Katja Kipping of Die Linke in Germany, and Syriza in Greece. Drawn from the affluent middle class and based on the identity politics of race and gender, these parties lie and adopt murderous policies on issues that mean life and death to the working class.

Last week, well-known journalist Bob Woodward revealed that on January 28, US intelligence told Trump the pandemic was "the biggest national security threat you face in your presidency." On February 7, Trump told Woodward that Chinese President Xi Jinping had warned him about COVID-19: "This is deadly stuff. It's also more deadly than … even your strenuous flus … this is 5 percent [case fatality rate] versus 1 percent and less than 1 percent." Trump added, "It goes through air, Bob. That's always tougher than the touch."

Another politician doubtless receiving such warnings was Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, who is deputy prime minister of Spain's PSOE-Podemos government and, since February, sits on Spain's Intelligence Affairs Commission. That commission directs, supervises and controls the activities of the *Centro Nacional de Inteligencia*(National Intelligence Centre—CNI). Working closely with the CIA and other NATO intelligence services, the CNI assesses issues identified as major threats to Spanish national security, specifically including pandemics.

Nonetheless, Iglesias was silent as Trump, top PSOE-Podemos government officials and the entire European ruling establishment downplayed COVID-19, encouraging the public to act as if nothing unusual was happening as the virus spread.

Experts on the CNI's activities have already stressed that the CNI and its overseers were well aware of what was occurring. In June, Fernando Rueda, a leading authority on Spanish intelligence, said on radio that the CNI's role during the pandemic has been "very important." The CNI's task, he said, "is to inform the government of everything that may be of interest to them in order to make the appropriate decisions."

Rueda said the CNI had extensive information about COVID-19 since January, thanks to its US partners. "If the US had information at the beginning of the year and the CIA informed the [US] president that what was happening in China was more serious than what was being said, it is logical to think that the CIA would have also informed other secret services that China was not telling the truth about the expansion of the coronavirus."

Woodward's reports have subsequently shown, however, that Trump was in fact being accurately briefed by China. It was Washington and the EU countries who downplayed COVID-19.

Rueda then said, significantly, that "having information does not mean that you act. … Although the secret services must warn about any danger that could affect national security, governments sometimes ignore them. The CIA warned in January of the danger that the coronavirus could cause and Trump ignored their recommendations."

Other reports suggest the CNI informed the Spanish government directly by the end of January. According to the right-wing news site OkDiario, the CNI transmitted to the Spanish government "concerns" raised by the head of the CNI delegation in China after the virus emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan.

This was based on contacts CNI Delegate in China Beatriz Méndez de Vigo had with intelligence sources at the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the ministry overseeing China's intelligence services. Her notes from Beijing, written in mid-January 2020, highlighted an "alert" issued by a group of doctors from Wuhan Central Hospital, led by Dr. Ai Fen.

Thus, by January the Spanish government, and by February Iglesias, had access to reports on the severity of the disease, its ability to spread, and the necessity of lockdowns to contain it.

This information was also publicly available in the World Health Organization's [WHO] January 30 notice, which declared the pandemic "a public health emergency of international concern." Significantly, the WHO warned in the note that it was still possible to prevent the spread of the virus if countries put in place strong measures to detect the disease, isolate and treat cases, trace contacts and promote social

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distancing measures.

Yet Madrid and other EU governments refused to take action. At the time, Podemos was focused on its brainchild, the Sexual Liberty bill, to define all non-consensual sex as rape and establish special courts to deal with sexual offences. The virus continued to spread, however, and on February 24 Spain detected its first COVID-19 cases.

The first cases did not, however, change the course of the PSOE-Podemos government. On March 4, just 10 days before Spain implemented a nationwide state of alarm and lockdown, Spain's National Security Council downplayed the threat posed by the virus.

Despite WHO notices, CNI warnings and the fact that the virus had already spread to Spain (Italian schools were already closed), the Council approved a report placing a pandemic as one of the least likely of 15 risk scenarios contemplated by Spain's National Security Strategy. The only scenario judged less likely was one involving proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Iglesias attended this meeting.

Official accounts trivialised this act of criminal negligence as a bureaucratic error, with *El País* claiming that "the bulk of the document had been drafted months earlier" and dismissing the event as "underscoring experts' limited foresight."

On March 5, the day after the Council downplayed the virus, Podemos' Minister of Labour Yolanda Díaz evaluated the risk very differently. Her ministry sent a guide to companies warning that work activity must cease if there is a "serious, imminent and inevitable" danger of COVID-19 infection, stressing that the interpretation of risk must be "restrictive."

This immediately provoked a firestorm of denunciations. The big business associations CEOE and CEPYME denounced Díaz's guide as a "grave mistake." A CEOE official said, "Let's be realistic. What do we do? The worker evaluates that he has coughed a lot? What if the employer says no, he has only coughed three times? Let's be serious."

The government rebuked Díaz for not having coordinated her response with the Ministry of Health; the Secretary of Communication called it a "grave mistake."

Díaz quickly backed down, drafting a statement with the Prime Minister's Office agreeing that only the Ministry of Health is authorized to send information on COVID-19. Iglesias intervened to praise Díaz and the "great work she is doing," without referring to either the guide or COVID-19.

As the virus spread, Podemos continued to downplay it, calling instead for mass participation in the upcoming feminist march for Women's International Day on March 8. By then, there were already 17 confirmed dead and nearly 600 recorded infections. Against WHO advice, the government let the demonstration proceed with 120,000 people in attendance, including PSOE and Podemos ministers.

This was followed by an abrupt shift. On March 10, the PSOE-Podemos government adopted limited measures against COVID-19, like banning sports events and flights to Italy—then the European country worst hit by COVID-19. On March 13, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez suddenly announced a nationwide lockdown, as industrial strikes spread from Italy across Europe.

Podemos' conspiracy against workers and youth continues to this day, even though nearly 50,000 people have died in Spain and over 930,000 worldwide since then. Instead of using the time granted by lockdowns to test the population and prepare contact tracers to contain new outbreaks, however, the Spanish government focused on forcing workers back to work to produce profits after billions of euros in EU bailouts had been doled out to the banks and big corporations. Today, hospitals are once again teetering on the brink due to the lack of staff, and nursing homes are registering mass infections.

The PSOE-Podemos government is sending millions of children and students back to school, aware that this will lead to disaster. Education Minister Isabel Celaá reported that Podemos Minister of Equality, Irene Montero, told her privately that without a general protocol, the return to school will be "chaotic."

In fact, the return to school is a politically criminal act that will massively accelerate the ongoing resurgence of the virus. The right-wing regional premier of Madrid, Isabel Ayuso, bluntly declared: "It is likely that practically all children, one way or another, will be infected with coronavirus." Podemos is helping implement this herd immunity policy. It bears full responsibility for the tens of thousands of infections already recorded in the ongoing resurgence of COVID-19 and the wave of deaths set to ensue.

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