

Spain's Podemos deliberately downplayed COVID-19 danger starting in January

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Revelations from the conservative daily *ABC* confirm that Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)–Podemos government knew about the deadly implications of COVID-19 by late January. In the following month and a half, while it downplayed the risks posed by the pandemic, the Ministry of Defence busily procured, evaluated and contracted the latest military-grade personal protective equipment (PPE) for the army. At least four major contracts were signed in this period.

Last September, the WSWS noted that well-known journalist Bob Woodward's revelations that US President Donald Trump deliberately misled the public about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed Podemos. As part of the government, it had access to similar information as Trump through Spanish intelligence. Moreover, just like Trump, they issued misleading statements downplaying the risks posed by the virus.

This has now been confirmed by the conservative *ABC*'s article, "Defence Signed Four Contracts to Protect Itself to Face Covid before the State of Alarm." Collating the information presented by Woodward's revelations in conjunction with that of *ABC* shows a clear chronology that criminally implicates Podemos.

Bob Woodward revealed that on January 28, Trump was told by his national security adviser, Robert C. O'Brien: "This will be the biggest national security threat you face in your presidency. ... This is going to be the roughest thing you face."

As the WSWS noted, this was undoubtedly shared at the time with the PSOE–Podemos government and the National Intelligence Centre (CNI), Spain's main intelligence service. Deputy Prime Minister and Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias sits on the commission that directs, supervises and controls the CNI's activities. The CNI works closely with the CIA and other NATO intelligence services, assessing issues identified as major

threats to Spanish national security—including pandemics, according to its latest strategy documents.

On February 1, days after Trump was briefed on the dangers of COVID-19, Spain's Ministry of Defence issued a contract for cleaning and disposable products in anticipation of the pandemic. This was the first of four contracts it issued before the PSOE–Podemos government announced the state of alarm and shelter-at-home policy on March 14, as strikes spread from Italy across Europe, including to Spain's auto parts industry.

As the contract was issued, however, the public was not being alerted to the dangers of the virus. Mass events like the Mobilise World Congress, with an annual attendance of around 100,000 people, had yet to cancel.

The day before, on January 31, Fernando Simón, coordinator of health emergencies, was saying that "Spain will have, at most, a few diagnosed cases," adding that he hoped that "there will be no local transmission and in that case, it would be very limited and very controlled."

On the day of the contract, the first confirmed COVID-19 case was detected in the Canary Islands. Pedro Sánchez said the health emergency "worries" him, but that "we are in good hands." He added, "Spain has a strong health system and an alert and detection network with professional experts who from the first minute work following the recommendations of the WHO."

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."

Nonetheless, no measures were taken by the Spanish PSOE–Podemos governments. Flights to and from Italy and China, two hotspots, continued. In public, Podemos, like Trump, downplayed the virus.

Podemos spokesperson Pablo Echenique, who is also a scientist at the Spanish National Research Council, tweeted on February 25 that COVID-19 was “a less aggressive flu than that of every year” and that it was “absolutely controlled in Spain.” He attacked the “pseudo-journalism of reporters with masks” for warning about the threat of COVID-19. He gave as an example the “rigor and professionalism” of journalist Lorenzo Milá, who was downplaying the seriousness of the virus.

While Echenique ridiculed the deadly pandemic, and his government’s Health Ministry took no significant measure to stop its spread, the Ministry of Defence signed another three contracts. *ABC* reports: “The four contracts awarded before the state of alarm are for the purchase of material of different types. In all cases, these are useful elements to avoid contagions, or at least prevent them: from the aforementioned PPE kits to disposable cleaning materials through hydroalcoholic gel or disinfectant substances.”

While the army obtained PPE and other protective gear, health care workers would soon face the virus nearly empty-handed; many would fall ill and die. Figures released in July show that Spain had one of the highest infection totals among health workers—51,849, according to the European Federation of Salaried Doctors. This was higher than the number of health care workers infected in Italy (24,683) and France (25,727) combined. Sixty-three died in Spain during the pandemic.

On February 24, Spain detected its first COVID-19 case on Spain’s mainland, in densely populated Madrid, Catalonia and Valencia. On March 2, the Ministry of Defence issued another PPE contract. Nevertheless, Spain’s National Security Council still downplayed the threat posed by the virus two days later, placing a pandemic as one of the least likely of 15 risk scenarios contemplated. Iglesias attended this meeting.

They ignored the WHO, which was already issuing warnings that the virus had spread to Spain. Italian schools were already closed at the time.

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. In early March, it made repeated calls to participate 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.

On March 10, the PSOE–Podemos government adopted limited measures, like banning sports events and flights to Italy—then the European country worst hit by COVID-19. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defence signed another two contracts, on March 11 and March 13, a day before the government adopted an abrupt shift in policy amid a wave of strikes throughout Europe. On March 13, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez suddenly announced a nationwide lockdown.

Podemos’s conspiracy against workers and youth continues to this day. The Spanish government’s priority continues to be forcing workers back to work and children back to school to produce profits as billions of euros in European Union (EU) bailouts are doled out to the banks and big corporations. Iglesias himself will sit in the commission to distribute €140 billion to the super-rich.

This policy has led to more than 70,000 deaths and over 1.8 million infections in Spain. Worldwide, the death toll is now over 1.7 million and nearly 78 million worldwide. Like most of Europe, Spain now faces a third wave, without having ever controlled the second.

An answer to the social and public health crisis facing millions can only be found by opposing the “left populist” politics of Podemos and fighting for an internationalist, socialist movement of the European and international working class.

It is critical to assimilate the Podemos experience in Spain and internationally. It is a warning that its international allies—the DSA in the United States, Die Linke in Germany, La France insoumise, and Syriza in Greece—would implement “herd immunity” as well, were they in government. Drawn from the affluent middle class and based on the identity politics of race and gender, these parties are entirely oriented to protecting the privileges they derive from the capitalist system.



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