

Spanish officers plot fascist coup to impose “herd immunity” COVID-19 policy

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The stream of revelations of fascist sympathies and calls for mass murder in the Spanish army constitute a warning to the Spanish and international working class. Broad sections of the Spanish political establishment have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic by planning for a dictatorship. While ostensibly targeting the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, which has tried to lull workers to sleep by denying the mounting evidence that officers are plotting a coup, the coup is in fact aimed at working class opposition to the ruling elite’s murderous “herd immunity” policy.

These revelations are all the more significant in that they come amid a generalized, international breakdown of democratic forms of rule. After attempting to order US military units to attack protests against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis this spring, US President Donald Trump has repeatedly indicated his willingness to defy the results of the 2020 US presidential elections. In Germany, moreover, far-right operatives who participated in the murder of politician Walter Lübcke were released as details emerged of widespread neo-Nazi networks in the army.

This month, retired Spanish Air Force Lieutenant Colonel José Ignacio Domínguez spoke to the press after hundreds of retired officers sent letters pledging to support King Felipe VI against the PSOE-Podemos government. Domínguez knows the signatories of the letters personally. He was in WhatsApp chat groups where officers called to murder “26 million” people and imitate General Francisco Franco’s fascist coup that launched the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War. The members of these chat groups received friendly messages of support from the fascist Vox party.

In radio interviews, Domínguez traced the coup threats to “the radicalization of Vox” in March: “It coincides with what they called Operation Albatross, that is to create a government of National Salvation. They wanted the Minister of Defence [Margarita Robles] to be prime minister ... They started to mobilise other groups of officers of the air force and army ... As they gave up on meeting the king, they agreed on the letters and mobilized the others.”

He added that “there has been and there exists a movement for a pronunciamiento,” that is, an attempt to shift politics to the right by threatening a coup. Speaking of the chat participants, he said: “They are not monarchists or constitutionalists, they are Francoites and they defend dictatorship. I’m not only talking about the past ones, but the future ones. They aspire to a dictatorship.”

The timing is significant: discussion of Operation Albatross began in March, as a wave of wildcat strikes spread across Europe against the European Union’s (EU) herd immunity policy. It was amid the initial upsurge of COVID-19 in Europe, which killed nearly 50,000 people and infected over half a million in Spain alone. The wildcat strikes forced the PSOE-Podemos government to implement a shelter-at-home policy, in line with several other EU governments, including France and Italy, a policy that Vox and the right-wing Popular Party (PP) denounced as a move towards “dictatorship.”

Behind Vox’s calls for a dictatorship and the army’s calls for coups and mass murder were powerful sections of the bourgeoisie not only in Spain but across the EU and internationally. They were determined to impose a back-to-work policy, leading to millions of new infections concentrated, above all in the working class, so as to shovel trillions of euros in European Union (EU) bank bailouts and corporate profits into the pockets of the financial aristocracy.

Vox was soon openly appealing to the army to oppose the PSOE-Podemos government. On April 19, Vox lawmaker Rocío de Meer—the granddaughter of Carlos de Meer, a military governor under Franco who after the Transition to parliamentary rule in 1978 was accused of plotting to topple a PSOE government in 1986—tweeted: “Today more than ever it is time to remind the armed forces that the nation is not the same as the state. And they pledged loyalty to the first.”

The first public mention of Operation Albatross came on April 21, when far-right news site *Mil21* published an article titled “Operation Albatross Arises to Reroute the Political and Economic Situation.” It includes a photograph of a file whose cover reads: “Operation Albatross. Simulation and stages for its urgent implementation given the socio-political and economic gravity that is expected in the next ten years in Spain. ... Do not send through computer networks.”

The article’s author, Joaquín Abad, linked Operation Albatross to the political and stock market crisis caused by the pandemic. He claimed the report aimed to “redirect the disastrous economic, social and political situation currently being experienced in Spain. Aggravated, of course, by the pandemic whose effects are estimated to last a decade.” Operation Albatross, Abad added, aims “to neutralize [Prime Minister] Pedro Sánchez and [Podemos leader and Deputy Prime Minister] Pablo Iglesias.”

Significantly, Abad was the chief of reporters of daily *El Alcázar*, a far-right newspaper published from 1936 to 1988. During the Transition from Francoite to parliamentary rule, *El Alcázar* played a leading role in the army’s coup plots between 1977 and 1982. It regularly published articles in favour of coups—including one shortly before the February 23, 1981 coup attempt, when Antonio Tejero led 200 armed Civil Guard officers into the parliament during the vote to elect a Prime Minister.

Soon after, further reports began circulating on Operation Albatross. Former Lieutenant Colonel Fernando Reinlein reported, in a May 20 *Infolibre* article titled “The coup plotters warm up the engines,” that the right-wing press was campaigning for a coup. He wrote that “a certain number of pamphlets and so-called reports, such as the one on Operation Albatross, are ‘discreetly’ circulating among the [press] offices and corporate boardrooms.”

At that time, Vox was backing small, far-right protests against the lockdown in affluent districts of Madrid, denouncing the PSOE and Podemos as a “social-communist” government.

Significantly, the PSOE-Podemos government reacted to the coup threats by doubling down on the “herd immunity” and austerity policies

demanding by the army brass, and which it was in any case already trying to implement. While making no effort to establish an effective track-and-trace system after the premature end of the lockdown, the PSOE and Podemos enthusiastically backed EU bank bailouts. At the same time, having already ordered riot police to assault steelworkers striking for the right to shelter at home, they intensified mass Internet spying on the population.

Iglesias had joined the Intelligence Affairs Commission, which supervises the National Intelligence Centre (CNI), in February. Soon after, the CNI was actively carrying out mass online surveillance using ELISA cyber-security software. As the WSWS reported, this was then followed in May with the police's "Delta Papa Order 21/20" to use mass surveillance against the "high probability" of growing social unrest while the government de-escalated COVID-19 measures.

While the principal target of PSOE-Podemos surveillance was the working class, they also monitored far-right coup plotting and calls for anti-government uprisings on hundreds of far-right web sites. Thus the Interior Ministry has recently approved new guidelines for the Permanent Centre for Information and Coordination. Leaked by *El Confidencial Digital*, the guidelines show that one of the main targets of monitoring are "involucionista" groups. This term is typically used by the intelligence services to designate military forces opposed to the Transition from Francoism to parliamentary rule.

The PSOE and Podemos were, however, deafeningly silent on the danger of a fascist coup, even though they were well aware of the coup plots hatched by Vox and the officer corps. This underlay the comments of Pablo Iglesias to Vox parliamentary spokesman Iván Espinosa de los Monteros in May; while cryptic, they made clear that Iglesias was well aware of the "Operation Albatross" plans.

Iglesias said he was "willing to talk with anyone," including Vox, "even if it seems that they are closer to wanting to carry out a coup d'état than to protect democracy." When Espinosa demanded a rectification, Iglesias replied: "I'm going to be even more precise. I believe that you would like to carry out a coup, but that you don't dare. Because for that, in addition to wanting it and asking for it, you have to dare."

In June of this year, the PSOE-Podemos government suddenly dismissed Civil Guard Colonel Diego Pérez de los Cobos, who until then had enjoyed the unanimous support of the Spanish political establishment for his role in leading the brutal police repression of the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. The official reason given was a "loss of trust" in Pérez de los Cobos. Interior Ministry sources soon stated he was behind a court case against the PSOE-Podemos government, suing it for allowing a March 8 feminist demonstration in Madrid despite the pandemic.

A political storm ensued when Vox, PP and the right-wing media came to Cobos' defence. It got to the point that Defence Minister Margarita Robles was asked on *Onda Cero* radio if there was a coup danger. She said, "forthrightly no," adding: "No one has the right to capitalize on our armed forces or our flag. ... I firmly believe that there is no danger of a coup by the armed forces."

Significantly, the dismissal of Pérez de los Cobos came amid a wave of mass, multiracial protests across the United States, Europe and internationally after the police murder of George Floyd. Spanish far-right circles were hysterical over both the dismissal and the global protests against police violence.

Abascal, who had traveled to Washington in February to hear Trump speak at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), hailed Trump as he tried to illegally mobilize the military against the protests. Abascal tweeted: "The progressive European and American mafia are trying to impose a spring of rage on the United States. The same progressive millionaires and their media started the Arab Spring which caused wars and immigration. Our support goes to President Trump and North American institutions."

The PSOE-Podemos government's denials of the coup threats have only aided the conspirators. In November, a political crisis erupted amid revelations of widespread calls for a fascist coup in the officer corps. Hundreds of former officers sent three different letters to King Felipe VI, pressing him to launch a coup against the PSOE-Podemos government, stressing their "oath to defend the integrity of Spain and the constitutional order, giving our lives if necessary."

In December, a manifesto signed by nearly 500 former military personnel attacked the PSOE-Podemos government, a few days after it emerged that a group of retired air force officers had used a WhatsApp group to talk about "shooting 26 million sons of bitches," and describing Franco as the "irreplaceable one." Vox openly endorsed the signatories of the letters, saying "Of course they are our people" in parliament. The PP endorsed them as "concerned citizens."

The PSOE-Podemos government is continuing to furiously insist that nothing of any significance is occurring. Defence Minister Robles stressed her loyalty to Sánchez, telling *La Vanguardia* editorialist Enric Juliana she "had no news of that supposed operation. I had other things to attend to. [...] I consider myself a serious, rigorous person, who has a strong commitment to the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez. I am going to continue with that commitment. These maneuvers are the furthest thing from me and the vast majority of citizens."

Iglesias was sent out to downplay the fascist danger after the publication of the fascist WhatsApp chats, giving a prime-time television interview to brazenly insist that nothing important had been revealed. He said, "What these gentlemen say, at their age and already retired, in a chat with a few too many drinks, does not pose any threat." His mission was to dampen mounting outrage among workers and youth that was pouring out on social media.

This has since been exposed as a fraud. *La Marea* leaked videos showing soldiers chanting and dancing to neo-Nazi songs while making the fascist salute, and *Público* leaked fascistic WhatsApp chats from soldiers. Iglesias has remained silent on these revelations.

These events vindicate the assessment made by the WSWS: the pandemic is a trigger event in world history. Before the pandemic, faced with mounting working class anger at unsustainable levels of social inequality, the bourgeoisie across Europe was rehabilitating fascism and integrating neo-fascist parties into official life. The rise of Vox, like that of the far-right Alternative for Germany and the brutal police crackdown on the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, all pointed to this.

The staggering death toll of over 530,000 Europeans and 1.8 million worldwide has vastly intensified these antagonisms. EU propaganda that the Transition from Francoism to parliamentary rule and Spain's integration into the EU had ended the era of fascism and violent military conspiracy stands exposed. In reality, the same objective contradictions of capitalism that led Franco to launch his coup in the 20th century and the Spanish bourgeoisie to rally behind him are driving a turn towards authoritarian forms of rule to impose the banks' "herd immunity" diktat in the 21st.

Public threats of a neo-Francoite coup in Spain and the treacherous response of Podemos constitute a warning: the lessons of the 1930s must be learned. There is no "progressive" faction of the capitalist establishment, including the "left populists" of Podemos, which the working class can try to pressure to obtain a less callous and repressive policy. Podemos has responded to protests with a vicious policy of "herd immunity" and austerity, while covering up plans for militarized repression. They will respond to a broader movement by shifting further to the right.

The task is to build safety committees in workplaces and schools, independent of the union bureaucracies and parliamentary parties, to impose a scientifically-based struggle against the pandemic, and to build a political movement to transfer state power to such bodies across Europe

and internationally. This means constructing sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in Spain and across Europe against the petty-bourgeois treachery of parties like Podemos.



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