

Protests mount against Socialist Party-Podemos persecution of Spanish rapper Pablo Hasél

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The Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government is escalating the persecution of rapper Pablo Hasél and repression of protests in his defence. It is part of broader campaign by the European ruling class on free speech and democratic rights, intensified with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Tuesday morning, Catalan regional police seized Hasél at the University of Lleida, where he had barricaded himself with his supporters, and jailed him. He has been sentenced to nine-month prison sentence for insulting the Spanish state and the Bourbon monarchy, becoming the first musician imprisoned in Spain since 1978 and the fall of the fascist regime led by Francisco Franco.

Three days later, the Lleida High Court provocatively upheld another conviction, adding an additional two-and-a-half years to Hasél's sentence, for allegedly obstructing justice and threatening a witness. Hasél had denounced a person on social media for having falsely testified in favour of police who had beaten up a 16-year-old protestor during the 2017 Catalan referendum. The witness then confronted Hasél, and a fight broke out.

Hasél's incarceration triggered mass protests in his defence, coming days after 300 actors, musicians and artists signed a manifesto to demand his freedom, "and to oppose these types of crimes that not only curtail the right of freedom of expression, but also ideological and artistic freedom."

For four consecutive evenings, thousands of protestors have demonstrated in major cities across Spain calling for Hasél's immediate release—including Barcelona, Madrid, Bilbao, Valencia, and Tarragona and Lleida, among others. Violent clashes broke out in many cities after the police charged protesters without reason. Hundreds of protesters have been injured or arrested. During a stand-off in Barcelona, a 19-year-old teenager lost an eye after

police fired a foam bullet at her face.

Many of these protestors are young, under 25. This is a generation that has only witnessed austerity, mass unemployment, relentless media propaganda in favour of the fascistic Vox party and attacks on democratic rights, under both the right-wing Popular Party and the PSOE and Podemos. They view police with contempt, having witnessed how they routinely use violence against protestors, workers and migrants, while treating far-right protests in affluent areas with kid gloves. They recall how 10,000 militarised police attacked thousands of peaceful voters in the 2017 Catalan referendum.

This generation's main political experience has been with what the ruling class passes off as the "left", that is, the "Left Populist" Podemos party, and the treachery, cynicism and hypocrisy of the trade unions, which act as para-statal organisations enforcing the ruling class re-opening of the economy and schools amid the pandemic.

This was once again on display this week. Podemos parliamentary spokesperson Pablo Echenique tweeted: "All my support to the young anti-fascists who are calling for justice and freedom of expression in the streets."

But Podemos has passed a digital gag law to carefully monitor social media, sent police to attack protestors opposed to its criminal herd immunity policy, and threatened to deploy the army.

As for its "anti-fascist" pretensions, the PSOE-Podemos government is increasingly adopting the programme of the far-right in its relentless persecution of migrants, while downplaying coup threats from sections of the military and Vox which call for the murder of "26 million" leftists. In fact, the PSOE and Podemos managed to pass a law to shower banks and corporations with 140 billion euros in bailout funds thanks to the votes from Vox in parliament.

Podemos has now submitted a proposed “pardon” for Hasél in parliament, aware that if the PSOE opposes the move, nothing will come out of it. Over the past two years, it has always claimed that its seats in parliament are never enough to bring about significant changes. Podemos could easily bring the government to its knees by threatening to leave the ruling coalition and bring down the government, but it refuses to do this because—as its record in government makes clear—it supports policies of austerity, police-state repression and “herd immunity” against the workers.

In Catalonia, the main pseudo-left party, the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), criticised the “unjustified charges, truncheon blows above the waist, punches to the face and body, blows to the face, vans ramming protesters, vans speeding past the protesters, foam bullets directly to the body and the face and a person mutilated.”

The CUP talks as if its votes had not been key in supporting two pro-austerity regional governments and with it, their regional police whose anti-riot units are notorious for their brutality—and in fact were the ones sent to arrest Hasél. The CUP is now negotiating its support for a third Catalan regional government.

The ruling class is increasingly terrified at growing social opposition. The pro-PSOE daily *El País* objected that the protests “had not been communicated beforehand to the authorities,” as required by the law, instead they were “responding to generic calls made on social networks ‘for the freedom of the rapper’ and freedom of expression.”

El País complained that the protests were not being organised and controlled by the established political parties. Significantly, the newspaper, which was notorious for its endorsement of the fascistic anti-Catalan campaign, was concerned that the Catalan separatists were not organising these protests in Catalonia, unlike the 2017-2019 separatist demonstrations.

The protests, it wrote, “are different from those of recent years. No flags or *esteladas* [the Catalan independence flag], no banners and a lot of dark clothing. ‘We are here for freedom of expression and Hasél,’ they repeat when participants are asked. There is no more speech or organization. And in Madrid they also chant: ‘Here are the antifascists.’”

Terrified that the struggle to defend democratic rights will intersect with the struggle against “herd immunity” policies and bank bailouts, the bourgeois press and the political establishment are branding the protestors as

thugs, violent Catalan secessionists, and terrorists. Hasél’s private life is being turned upside down for any “crime.” His tweets and songs, especially the more confused or distasteful ones reflecting Hasél’s Stalinist politics, are being obnoxiously repeated.

However, Hasél has been jailed in a desperate attempt to silence a figure who has given voice to widely felt anger at the political criminality of Spanish capitalism and the cowardice and treachery of pseudo-left groups like Podemos, whom Hasél has repeatedly denounced.

The politics of the ruling establishment’s attacks on Hasél were unveiled this week in its treatment of neo-Nazi leader Isabel Medina Peralta. On Sunday, as Hasél was barricading himself in Lleida university, Peralta marched with 300 neo-Nazis through the streets of Madrid to pay tribute to the Blue Division, the 45,000-strong Spanish fascist unit that fought alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in World War II.

Unabashedly appealing to anti-Semitism and the traditions of Spanish fascism, Peralta declared: “It is our supreme obligation to fight for Spain ... The enemy will always be the same, although with different masks: the Jew The Jew is the culprit, and the Blue Division fought it.”

She was immediately provided with a platform, interviewed by three major newspapers. *El Mundo* titled its interview “Isabel Peralta, the new face of Spanish fascism.” *20 Minutos* had its piece, “Who is Isabel Peralta, the young Falangist who considers the Jews ‘an enemy’.” While *El Español* led its piece with “The young anti-Semite paying homage to the Blue Division: ‘I’m a fascist and a socialist’.”

The Spanish bourgeoisie’s attempt to give a false “socialist” colouration to its fascistic politics, hiding the historic opposition between fascism and the socialist workers movement, is utterly reactionary. The task of every socialist is to defend democratic rights against the fascist onslaught of the Spanish bourgeoisie and call for the Hasél’s immediate liberation.



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