

The far-right election victory in Madrid: A warning to the working class

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7 May 2021

The outcome of Tuesday's Madrid regional elections is a warning to the working class in Spain and internationally. Eighty-five years since a fascist coup launched the Spanish Civil War in 1936, defenders of that coup are taking office in Madrid.

The election campaign was a degraded spectacle, marked by fascistic violence. Incumbent right-wing Popular Party (PP) governor Isabel Diaz Ayuso campaigned on the slogan "Communism or Liberty," opposing COVID-19 lockdowns as "communist" and calling for the defense of "liberty" by ending social distancing and allowing mass infections. She allied with the far-right Vox party, which publicly praises Franco's coup.

Fascistic death threats with bullets taken from the Spanish state armories were mailed to officials of the big-business Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the lead Madrid regional candidate of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias.

Nonetheless, even after European Union (EU) COVID-19 policies led to over 100,000 deaths in Spain, the PP-Vox alliance won 54 percent of the vote. Significantly, the PP extended its support beyond its traditional base in Madrid's wealthier northern districts. It came in first in 175 of the region's 179 localities, including the city's southern working-class suburbs—traditionally known as the "red belt" for voting for the PSOE or its allies and for opposing Francoism.

It was a debacle for the PSOE-Podemos national government, and personally for Iglesias, who claims he is retiring from politics. It is above all a warning. By ruthlessly prosecuting the interests of Spanish and European capital, including by implementing EU reopening policies amid the pandemic, pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class like Podemos are strengthening fascistic forces.

One million people have died of COVID-19 in Europe, and the virus still is circulating massively. Yesterday,

Spain recorded 7,960 new infections and 160 deaths, with 2,074 infections and 19 deaths in Madrid. Yet the PSOE and Podemos are ending Spain's "state of alarm," which let them implement measures like lockdowns, curfews and mask-wearing. Ayuso plans to end curfews, reopen restaurants, bullfights, houses of worship, casinos and other venues this weekend in Madrid.

As the EU seeks to end social distancing despite a surge of the virus, in order to boost the profits of banks and businesses, the ruling elite is discussing giving greater power to the far right. In France, where neo-fascist Marine Le Pen threatens to potentially unseat Emmanuel Macron in next year's presidential elections, army officers are also threatening a coup. Italian neo-fascist Matteo Salvini, an admirer of Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, enthusiastically told Spain's social-democratic daily *El Pais*: "I have many affinities with Ayuso's Popular Party."

On Thursday, former PP Prime Minister José María Aznar called on the PP to form a "union of forces" with the Vox party. This gives the lie to Ayuso's attempts to pass herself off as a democratic woman of the people, like her Tweet: "Red belt, purple belt? No! Free people of the 21st century! Self-employed, businesspeople, youth, adults, men and women who are moving their families and their businesses forward. That is the south of Madrid."

In reality, Ayuso pursues a health policy of "social murder" and is closely tied to pro-Francoite forces in the officer corps planning a coup. Ayuso provoked protests last autumn by demanding a back-to-school policy despite heavy circulation of the virus, saying: "It is likely that practically all children, one way or another, will be infected with coronavirus." She also faces lawsuits against her government's decision to deny hospital admissions to COVID-positive rest home patients, 5,000 of whom died.

Ayuso also defends her ties to Vox, claiming that criticisms of her fascist alliances prove she is “on the right side of history.” This comes after revelations last December that Vox officials are in talks with retired generals who have proclaimed their loyalty to fascism and who called for the killing of “26 million” Spaniards after strikes and walkouts by workers demanded a shelter-at-home policy against COVID-19 in March 2020.

Responsibility for Ayuso’s victory lies squarely with Podemos, whose reactionary policies enrage and confuse the working class. Like other pseudo-left parties across Europe, Podemos worked with the unions to isolate strikes demanding a shelter-at-home policy last spring, even sending police to attack striking steelworkers. Forced to agree to a strict lockdown last spring, Podemos thereafter only implemented partial “lockdowns,” keeping workers in nonessential jobs and youth at school over the last year, even as the virus infected millions.

Moreover, Iglesias personally led the operation to downplay coup threats made by Vox and retired Spanish generals. As anger erupted across social media when these reports surfaced in December, the PSOE-Podemos government sent him on public television to lull the public to sleep, claiming: “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 decision to enter the Madrid elections, supposedly to wage an all-out struggle for “democracy against fascism,” was a cynical electoral maneuver. When Vox supporters marched through the working-class Madrid suburb of Vallecas, his government sent riot police to protect them and called on Vallecas residents not to hold counterdemonstrations. Iglesias was not leading a struggle to defend democracy, but defending the Spanish capitalist state and its far-right henchmen by demobilizing the working class.

This rotten record sent Podemos down to defeat, even against Ayuso. Facing only the prospect of endless partial “lockdowns” that did not halt mass deaths, workers were unmoved by its empty rhetoric. With broad layers of workers and small businesses receiving little or no income, Ayuso’s lying, anticommunist rhetoric about “liberty” and a return to normal carried the day.

One might add that similar conditions, which could produce similar election outcomes, exist in virtually every European country.

After over 100,000 deaths in Spain and the arrival of the PP and Vox in power in Madrid, one thing is clear, however: the threat of mass COVID-19 deaths and of far-

right authoritarian rule is very real. This election is a devastating exposure of the anti-Marxist perspectives and postmodernist theoretical foundations of Podemos and similar so-called “left populist” parties internationally.

In her 2018 pamphlet *For a Left Populism*, the main academic writer of Podemos, Chantal Mouffe, denounced those who “attribute an ontological privilege to the working class, presented as the vehicle for socialist revolution.” Like Iglesias this year, she rejected a struggle for socialism and instead called to fight for democracy. She laid out the basis for what was in Spain the alliance between the big-business PSOE, Podemos and various middle-class feminist or nationalist groups, based on identity politics:

“What is urgently needed is a left populist strategy aimed at the construction of a ‘people,’ combining the variety of democratic resistances against post-democracy in order to establish a more democratic hegemonic formation. ... I contend that it does not require a ‘revolutionary’ break with the liberal democratic regime.”

The Madrid elections are a searing exposure of the reactionary role of Podemos. The lessons of the 1930s must urgently be learned. Podemos is largely duplicating the role played in the 1930s by the Stalinists and social democrats, who allied with a layer of the Spanish bourgeoisie in a Popular Front and ruled out revolutionary policies in the war against Franco. The result was the crushing of the socialist revolution and Franco’s victory.

Today, the fight against “herd immunity” policies and the drive to authoritarian rule requires the independent organization and revolutionary political mobilization of the working class. As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) advances the call to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to mobilize the international working class independently of bankrupt national trade unions, a critical task is building sections of the ICFI in Spain and around the world, as the revolutionary socialist opposition to the pseudo-left.



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