

Spain's PSOE-Podemos government pardons Catalan-nationalist political prisoners

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The Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government has pardoned nine Catalan nationalists serving decade-long jail sentences over their role in the October 1, 2017, Catalan independence referendum. The decrees eliminate the remainder of the prison sentences, which were based on fraudulent convictions on charges of sedition and misuse of public funds. They maintain the prisoners' disqualification from holding public office for a decade, however.

Yesterday, they were released from jail.

The PSOE-Podemos pardons are not a recognition that the Catalan nationalists were jailed due to a far-right campaign using trumped-up charges and a show trial. In fact, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez made clear that he defends the Supreme Court's reactionary sentences and refuses to halt the prosecution of 3,000 Catalan-nationalist activists. Rather, it is a pragmatic decision dictated by the need to rapidly shower Spanish corporations and banks with billions of European Union (EU) bailout funds, while trying to defuse mounting working class anger over the pandemic and EU austerity measures.

The pardons have received the full blessings of powerful sections of the Spanish and European bourgeoisie. They come after Sánchez's speech last Friday titled "Re-encounter: A project for the future, for all of Spain" at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. Speaking in front of Catalan businessmen, Sánchez announced the pardons, calling them "a resounding message of the desire to live together in coexistence."

Antonio Garamendi, president of the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations (CEOE), which represents Spanish big business, told RTVE that "if this ends in things normalizing, it is welcome." Two days later, he said in another interview, "I would like companies to return to Catalonia, and normality is needed." An estimated 7,500 companies have left Catalonia since the 2017 independence referendum.

Javier Faus, president of the Cercle d'Economy, Catalonia's big-business association, founded during the 1950s by pro-Francoite Catalan businessmen, said: "We consider that political stability has an economic value in itself. Politics and economics are not unrelated. ... We need tranquility, calm and get to work on things."

Even the Catholic Church, a bastion of the 1936-1978 fascist Francoite regime and still one of Spain's largest landowners, posted a statement defending the pardons. It said, "dialogue must always be proposed as an effective way that responds to the hope of resolving divisions."

Spain's largest trade unions, the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Labor (UGT), which are negotiating wage cuts and sackings, and advising the government on austerity, posted a joint statement hailing the pardons as "a necessary—although certainly not a sufficient—condition to overcome past episodes."

Outside of Spain, major factions of the European bourgeoisie supported the pardons. The Council of Europe, a human rights body headquartered in Strasbourg, the seat of the EU parliament, passed a resolution defending the pardons. It also demanded the withdrawal of Spanish extradition requests for exiled Catalan nationalists facing charges in Spain.

London's *Financial Times* posted an editorial, "Catalan pardons offer a chance of reconciliation," calling the pardons a "commendable attempt to try to open a route to reconciliation and coexistence within Catalonia."

Workers and youth must be warned. The WSWWS has always opposed the incarceration of the Catalan nationalists and called for their release, but Spanish big business, the Catholic Church and the European bourgeoisie are not trying to defend democracy. Indeed, barely three months ago, the PSOE was busily seeking extraditions of Catalan nationalist lawmakers charged with sedition sitting in the European parliament. The

question raised by the pardons is: what has changed?

The pardons are part of back-door negotiations between factions of the ruling class in Madrid, spearheaded by the PSOE-Podemos government, and in Barcelona, led by the Catalan nationalists, over the disbursement of billions of euros in EU bailout funds.

In coming years, Spain is set to take in €140 billion from the EU's €750-billion recovery fund. The bailout mechanisms were approved by all 27 EU countries last month. In Spain, they were approved earlier this year, in January, thanks to parliamentary support from the fascistic Vox party. Sánchez has hailed the EU bailouts as the "most ambitious and transcendental of Spain's recent history."

Leading sections of the European and Spanish bourgeoisie aim to scale back the nationalist, anti-Catalan campaign that Madrid launched after the 2017 independence referendum, in order to secure agreement on the disbursement and spending of these funds. Spain's regions will play a prominent role. They are to manage around 54 percent of Madrid's allocated bailout for 2021, around €18.7 billion. Catalonia is to receive the second-highest payoff on the list.

The bailouts were a major part of the phone call between Sánchez and Catalan regional premier Pere Aragonès earlier this month. They are set to meet next Tuesday; the bailout will again be on the agenda.

The Catalan bourgeoisie expects to be one of the main beneficiaries. The Catalan government has already selected 27 projects for the fund valued at €41 billion. Major transnationals, such as ICL, Celsa, Aigües de Barcelona, Telefónica or Cellnez are set to benefit. The largest budget is allocated for a "carbon recovery" project, involving large companies such as Suez, La Farga, Nedgia Naturgy, Holaluz, Factor Energia and Serradora Boix.

The bailout is sealed in blood, however, amid the catastrophic loss of life to the pandemic. Claiming there was no money to implement a scientific policy to combat the virus, including to end non-essential work and subsidize small businesses, the EU instead funneled €750 billion to the super-rich. There was also a €1.25 trillion European Central Bank "quantitative easing" plan and a seven-year €1 trillion EU budget.

So far, it has cost the lives of over 1.1 million people across Europe. Now, as mass COVID-19 deaths are expected from the Delta variant's spread, the ruling classes demand that nothing impede their orgy of self-enrichment.

The agreement also involves the Catalan nationalists supporting the PSOE-Podemos minority government to implement draconian social cuts dictated by the EU. These include a new labor reform and measures to "flexibilise" the workforce, raise the retirement age, cut pensions and increase taxes.

Pledges of unity, concord and coexistence made by Spanish and Catalan politicians and businessmen, will prove utterly empty, and sooner rather than later. The coming together of Spain's ruling factions will not produce the economic stability they predict. Instead, it will be accompanied by mounting attacks on the working class amid an international upsurge of the class struggle.

Recent months have seen a series of significant strikes by workers across the United States, including the Volvo strike. Major struggles have also been waged by educators, health care workers and Amazon workers across the US and Europe. In Spain, not a week has passed by without one major strike since the beginning of 2021. This includes bus, metro and tram workers; health workers opposed to redundancies and cuts; Airbus workers struggling against plant closures; bank workers opposed to 18,000 redundancies in the banking sector.

The pardons agreement vindicates the analysis made by the WSWS of the reactionary character of both Catalan nationalism, which promoted itself as an alternative to the "authoritarian, anti-democratic Madrid," and the pseudo-left forces like Podemos. While the Catalan nationalists are endorsed by the CEOE and the Catholic Church, Podemos oversees reactionary policies in government.

The pardon agreement shows that fighting the turn by the ruling classes toward dictatorship, austerity and fascism requires a break with the PSOE, "Left Populist" Podemos and the pro-austerity Catalan nationalists, and a fight to build a socialist movement in the international working class.



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