

The Spanish elections: Podemos/Sumar and the return of Francoism

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It is likely that Sunday's snap national elections will bring the overtly Francoite Vox into government in Spain as junior coalition partner of its co-thinkers in the Popular Party (PP).

Forty-five years ago, the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE) prevented a revolutionary reckoning with the Spanish bourgeoisie by the working class after the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco. The 1978 Constitution, they promised, would be the birth of a parliamentary democracy under the aegis of the European Union and NATO.

Decades later, the promises of democracy have been shattered by the social and economic collapse across Europe since the global financial crisis in 2008 and the ongoing financial storms, the imposition of deep, unpopular austerity measures, and the war frenzy provoked by NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine.

Most polls show that Franco's political heirs, the Popular Party (PP), founded by seven Francoite ministers, and the neo-fascist Vox, led by former PP member Santiago Abascal, will win the election. The PP is well ahead of the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE), but will require the support of Vox to command a majority. Vox has stated it will only accept being part of a PP-led government and no other arrangement.

The PSOE-Podemos coalition government called the election six months before scheduled after having been hammered in May's local and regional elections and as a growing strike wave swept across Spain and Europe, involving millions of workers. Terrified by the rising social opposition, the PSOE and Podemos are deliberately handing the initiative to the right in the hopes that a far-right government will be able to successfully crush rising social opposition at home and oversee the escalation of war abroad.

Vox is a party, composed of former judges, police and generals, that stands in the unbroken historical continuity of Francoism. Franco's victory during the Spanish Civil War was sealed with the mass murder of 200,000 political oppositionists and left-wing workers. Over the next four decades, thousands were arrested, tortured or murdered by the secret police. Strikes, political parties and trade unions were banned and democratic rights suppressed. Newspapers and books were censored, and higher education and good healthcare were only available to the privileged. The regime only fell in the 1970s, amid mass working class strikes and protests.

Vox seeks to escalate war abroad and at home by hiking military and police budgets to recentralise Spain, criminalise separatist

parties, imprison striking workers and promote Spanish chauvinism, while clamping down on Basque and Catalan linguistic rights and scapegoating migrants. It opposes abortion and LGBTI rights and denies climate change. For the rich, it seeks to abolish taxes on income, wealth, capital gains and inheritance. In all essentials this programme is shared by the PP, which shies away from Vox's more extreme rhetoric only to lend a veneer of respectability to its own class war and militarist agenda.

There is nothing peculiar about Vox's rise. Across Europe, a dangerous pattern has been seen time and again when a mass leftward shift has prompted the formation of "broad left" parties, only to see them betray and hand the initiative to the far right.

In Greece, right-wing New Democracy was sworn in last month after defeating the opposition Syriza, which imposed savage austerity from 2015 to 2019 after promising to oppose it. The new parliament has now three far-right parties, in what one analyst described as "the most conservative parliament since the restoration of Greece's democracy in 1974."

In Italy, 78 years after fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was shot by partisans, his political heirs, the Brothers of Italy, are back in power under Giorgia Meloni for the first time since the end of World War II.

In Germany, 90 years after Hitler seized power, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), teeming with racists, antisemites and militant neo-Nazis who repeatedly minimise the crimes of the Third Reich, is the second strongest party in the opinion polls, ahead of the ruling Social Democrats and behind the conservative CDU. In the East, it is the strongest party, with over 30 percent.

In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally, historically tied to Pétain's Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II, has been the main contender in runoff presidential elections since 2017. According to recent polls, if elections were held today, Le Pen would defeat President Emmanuel Macron.

In Portugal, the neo-Salazarist Chega (Enough) grew from one seat to 12 in last year's national elections. It is projected to be Portugal's third political force with 13.2 percent. According to recent polls, if the ruling Socialist Party were to call snap elections, Chega could rule with the right-wing Social Democratic Party. That would mark the first time the far right entered power since the collapse of the fascist Estado Novo regime amid the 1974 Carnation Revolution.

Political tendencies that should have been thrown into historical oblivion are making a comeback. How is this possible on a

continent that suffered the brutal horrors of fascism? Above all, amid the largest strike wave since the 1970s across the continent, how is it possible that the chief political beneficiaries of deepening opposition across Europe and internationally to the entire capitalist elite's agenda of imperialist war abroad and class war at home are the far right?

The answer lies not in these political forces, which, unlike the 1930s, do not command the support of a mass movement. In each instance, it is the pseudo-left—whether Syriza in Greece, the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, the Left Party in Germany, the Left Bloc in Portugal or remnants of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy—that has acted as the midwife of the far right.

Both in opposition and in government, these forces have deepened austerity, supported imperialist war and sought to demobilise and betray workers and youth who once looked to them for leadership. They do not represent the working class, but rather the wealthy strata of the middle class, who have benefited from the upward redistribution of social wealth presided over by the financial oligarchy. Confronted with escalating class struggles, they are dropping their social pretensions and moving sharply to the right to defend their social privileges.

In Spain, Podemos was founded in 2014 by Pabloite Anticapitalistas and various Stalinist professors, led by Pablo Iglesias. It emerged directly out of the Indignados M-15 anti-austerity protests in 2011-2012, which unfolded during the tumultuous events of the “Arab Spring” and the fall of Egypt's military junta, and after a period of major strikes and struggles by the European working class following the 2008 global capitalist crisis.

Drawing on the political connections between Iglesias and his Stalinist associates and the bourgeois nationalist regimes of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, in alliance with the Pabloite United Secretariat, Podemos set itself in opposition to the building of a revolutionary leadership of the working class. It proclaimed an end to traditional “top-down” leadership in a new era of “broad left” popular formations, promising to oppose the European Union from the left and usher in a new era of popular democracy, finally completing the unfulfilled democratic tasks of the transition to democracy after Franco. It sought constantly to drag the working class back behind the social democratic PSOE, the leading party of bourgeois rule since the 1980s, and the trade union apparatus.

In 2018, amid mounting popular opposition to the PP and its repressive policies in Catalonia, Podemos organised a parliamentary maneuver, ousting the PP and replacing it with a minority PSOE government. The Podemos-backed PSOE government continued the PP's austerity budget, showered the army with billions of euros, attacked migrants, and continued the right wing's repressive campaign against Catalan nationalism, even as its various pseudo-left satellites endorsed the divisive, pro-capitalist agenda of the separatists.

2018 also saw Vox successfully capitalizing on the whipping up of Spanish chauvinist sentiment, winning 12 parliamentary seats in the Andalusian regional election and entering a regional parliament for the first time. Two years later, in the 2019 elections, Vox rose to 15 percent of the national vote and 52 lawmakers,

making it the third largest political force, overtaking Podemos.

That same year, Podemos joined a PSOE-led government. For the following four years, it championed the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, slashed pensions and wages, pursued a profits-over-lives policy in the COVID-19 pandemic, and massively hiked the military budget along with bailouts for major banks and corporations. It savagely attacked striking truck drivers and metal workers, imposed draconian minimum services on air crews, and let migrants drown at sea.

While the pro-Podemos media presents the electoral collapse of the ruling parties as the result of the right-wing media, fake news and an anti-feminist “patriarchal” wave, the truth is that after four years of the PSOE-Podemos government, workers have lost 8 percent of their purchasing power, mortgages and rents have risen by 50 percent, and large Spanish corporations are reaping record profits.

As Podemos lawmaker and then-Secretary of State Enrique Santiago, who was at the time and still is the general secretary of the Communist Party of Spain, boasted: “[I]n the history of Spain there has not been such a large transfer of resources from the state to private companies as the one carried out by this government.”

The role of Podemos, now rebranded as Sumar, in the electoral platform of 15 parties for tomorrow's elections marks another bitter experience of the working class with the “broad left” parties created and championed by the pseudo-left groups and Stalinists.

Workers have been completely disenfranchised. Who can they vote for to oppose Spain's participation in NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to escalate into a nuclear war? Or the 140 billion-euro bailout fund for the banks and corporations paid for through savage austerity? Or to seek a political reckoning for the prioritization of profits over lives during the COVID-19 pandemic that led to 160,000 deaths in Spain and 12 million infections?

Sumar has made clear that it supports NATO's war against Russia and wants to continue sending hundreds of millions of euros in weaponry. It has promised Brussels 24 billion euros in cuts and tax hikes in 2024 to pay for the bailouts. It is led by Acting Deputy Prime Minister and Labour Minister Yolanda Díaz, who imposed labour reforms that have expanded low salaries, and who played a key role in reopening non-essential workplaces during the pandemic, leading to mass death. On each burning issue facing workers, Sumar has the same basic position as Vox.

Workers and youth must draw the necessary political conclusions. The return of the Francoites vindicates the International Committee of the Fourth International's insistence that the struggle against austerity, authoritarianism, fascism and war requires the struggle against their cause, capitalism, and against all parties defending this bankrupt system. This requires the building of sections of the ICFI in Spain and internationally as the Trotskyist alternative, leading the struggle for socialism.



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