

Ten years of Spain's pseudo-left Podemos party

Alejandro López
26 May 2024

This weekend marked ten years since the electoral breakthrough of Spain's pseudo-left Podemos party in the May 2014 European elections. Podemos, founded months before by the Pabloite Anticapitalistas party and Stalinist academics from Madrid's Complutense University led by 36-year-old professor and TV pundit Pablo Iglesias, won 8 percent of the vote and five seats in the European Parliament.

Over the next decade, Podemos would rise to become a ruling party of Spanish capitalism before falling from power. Last December, after its vote collapsed in Spain's 2023 elections due to its unpopular austerity policies, it left the coalition government it had formed with the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in 2020. One faction of Podemos, named Sumar, remains in government.

Podemos collapsed amid an unprecedented crisis of capitalism, as Spain and other NATO countries back Israel's genocidal war on Gaza and arm Ukraine in a war with Russia. Mass protests erupted not only in Spain, but in the United States, across Europe and internationally against the Gaza genocide. The world is teetering on the brink of nuclear war, as the NATO imperialist powers pledge to escalate the war with Russia. There is a growing sense among a new generation of workers and youth internationally that a way forward against a corrupt social order must be found.

This way forward is the building of an international, socialist movement against imperialist war and genocide, based in the working class. Such a movement can only develop based on a revolutionary perspective, based on Trotskyist opposition both to capitalism and to Stalinism. As such, it requires a historical re-evaluation and political break, in a decisive layer of workers and youth, with the type of pro-capitalist populist politics promoted for decades by forces such as Podemos.

In 2014, Podemos claimed to represent "progressive" politics, to "recover democracy" from "the caste" ruling Spain. Its 2014 electoral manifesto, "Making a move," called for "new ways of relating to politics entailing a real threat to the two-party regime of the [right-wing Popular Party] PP and PSOE and those who have taken our democracy hostage." It claimed that Podemos "rejects military interventions, stands for an exit from NATO and firmly defends solidarity between peoples."

Podemos' Greek sister party, SYRIZA ("Coalition of the Radical Left"), entered government in 2015 and soon established its name as a byword for political betrayal. It had been elected based on mass working class opposition to European Union (EU) austerity policies after the 2008 Wall Street crash. Yet in power, Syriza imposed the single largest EU austerity package yet and built a vast network of EU detention camps for refugees. Having left power in disgrace in 2019, Syriza is now led, fittingly, by a former Goldman Sachs banker, Stefanos Kasselakis.

Podemos betrayed its election promises as thoroughly as Syriza had before it. Going into government with the social-democratic Socialist Party (PSOE), it supervised a policy of mass infection with COVID-19 while handing out billions of euros in EU bailout funds to the banks and impoverishing workers as inflation surged across the world economy. It

armed both the Ukrainian and the Israeli regimes for war with Russia and with the Palestinian people.

The PSOE-Podemos government proved violently hostile to working class struggles. As inflation impoverished workers, it brutally attacked wage struggles that erupted across Spain. It sent police squads to assault striking metalworkers in the southern Spanish city of Cádiz and mobilized tens of thousands of cops to crack down on a nationwide truckers strike in 2022.

These policies flow from the anti-Marxist politics of layers of the middle class built on Stalinist and Pabloite traditions. In 2015, as Syriza took office, the ICFI defined this milieu as not the left, but the pseudo-left. Explaining this term in his work *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, David North wrote:

"The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class. Examples of such parties and tendencies include Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, and numerous offshoots of ex-Trotskyist (i.e., Pabloite) and state capitalist organizations ...

"The pseudo-left is anti-Marxist. It rejects historical materialism, embracing instead various forms of subjective idealism and philosophical irrationalism associated with existentialism, the Frankfurt School and contemporary postmodernism.

"The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society. It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic."

Podemos' record has vindicated this definition and the warning to the working class it contained. Like the international allies of Podemos—the Democratic Socialists of America, Germany's Left Party, former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his political satellites in Britain, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France—Podemos is not left-wing, but pseudo-left. In Spain's national government, it had nothing to offer workers on the great issues of war, pandemics, climate change, or social inequality, which are all international questions.

The way forward is through a conscious struggle for a genuinely revolutionary policy. It requires a direct assault on the capitalist class, the confiscation of their wealth, the seizure of the major banks and productive forces internationally to place them under the democratic control of working people, and the creation of workers states across Europe and the

world pursuing socialist policies.

The academics, capitalist political operatives, and union bureaucrats that lead Podemos consciously oppose such policies and Marxism. To the extent that it is compatible with the capitalist media's false promotion of them as the "left," they proclaim their hostility to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, Trotsky's founding of the Fourth International in 1938, and the lessons he drew from the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War.

To build the revolutionary leadership that the working class needs, critical political conclusions on the pseudo-left's counterrevolutionary role must be drawn. The struggle for socialism can be waged only by building an international Trotskyist revolutionary leadership, irreconcilably opposed to pseudo-left parties like Podemos. The basis for this is the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) defense of Trotskyism against Stalinism and Pabloism, and the struggle to build sections of the ICFI in Spain and internationally.

The Pabloite Roots of Podemos

The integration of Podemos into the Spanish capitalist state emerging from the fall of the far-right Francoite regime, amid mass strikes and protests in the 1970s, is the product of their reactionary defense of the material interests of affluent layers of the middle class. This orientation is rooted in the anti-Marxist traditions of the Pabloite tendency that emerged in the Fourth International and broke with Trotskyism after World War II. The Pabloites called to liquidate the Trotskyist movement into existing mass organizations, whatever their political and class orientation.

The ICFI, which today publishes the WSWS, was established in 1953 to defend Trotskyism against this tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which rejected Leon Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy as a counterrevolutionary force. Pabloism abandoned the struggle to build independent revolutionary parties in favour of acting as a pressure group on existing mass Stalinist or bourgeois-nationalist parties, while promoting anti-Marxist ideologies within the working class.

In Spain, Mandel was the chief theoretician of the Revolutionary Communist League (Liga Comunista Revolucionaria, LCR), the predecessor of Anticapitalistas that went on to build Podemos. The LCR was founded in 1971, amid the radicalization of youth and workers following the May 1968 general strike in France, and as class struggles mounted amid the economic crisis of capitalism in the 1970s. The LCR oriented to the Basque nationalist group ETA, which used terrorist attacks to pressure the Francoite state, and to both the Catalan nationalists and the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE).

The orientation to the PCE amounted to an endorsement of its counterrevolutionary record against the working class. During the Spanish Civil War launched by General Francisco Franco's fascist coup against the bourgeois Second Republic in 1936, the PCE murdered Trotskyists and helped the Republic crush the 1937 workers uprising in Barcelona. After Franco's victory and World War II, when Spain was ruled by a fascist dictatorship, the PCE called for "National Reconciliation" to build with the Francoites a parliamentary capitalist regime.

In 1976, amid the largest strike wave in Spain since the 1930s against the Francoite regime, the Pabloites redoubled their efforts to promote Stalinism. They hailed the Stalinist PCE, which was preparing to betray the strike wave and help draft a new constitution for a Transition to parliamentary rule, which was adopted in 1978. Speaking to the Stalinist publication *Viejo Topo*, Mandel promoted illusions that the PCE would reform itself. He wrote:

The French extreme left — despite its limitations, its weakness, its organisational division — has today a real political weight and has the potential capacity to impose a revolutionary turn to the reformist leadership of the CP.

The comrades leading the (Spanish) Communist Party, especially its working-class cadres, must take it up and solve it, and I hope and trust they will prove capable of positively resolving it, in the sense that they will return to the path of revolutionary Marxism.

[...] It will also be difficult — I will not say impossible, but it is difficult — for the Spanish CP to adopt a clear strikebreaking attitude, as have the Italian CP and the Spanish CP itself at certain times of their existence. This is so because the balance of power in the Spanish worker's movement is very different.

Mandel's perspective was diametrically opposed to the revolutionary Marxist perspective of Trotskyism. Trotsky had explained during the Spanish Civil War that the struggle against fascism required a revolutionary struggle of the working class for a socialist revolution against capitalism. The PCE and its allies, on the other hand, were working with the fascistic Francoite regime to draft a new legal basis for capitalist rule.

As Mandel argued to support Spain's 1978 Transition to parliamentary rule, he reasserted the fundamental conception of Pabloism: that Trotskyist parties should not be built. Instead, he argued for the conception of building a "broad left party" which was the basis of Podemos and similar parties across Europe. Mandel said: "In my opinion the future of the revolutionary movement is in the kind of groups which are broader than those which call themselves Trotskyist. Groupings which, however, unite with sections of the Fourth International."

While he fraudulently continued to call his organization the "Fourth International," Mandel made very clear he did not support Trotskyism and would be willing to publicly repudiate any element of Trotsky's programme in 24 hours in order to make alliances with Stalinism. In another interview in the same period, Mandel explained that he intended to build an organisation without any links to Trotskyism:

the real debate is not over the label, the organizational framework, the statutes, the human relations or references to a fellow with a beard named Leon Trotsky What difference do labels make? If we should find in the political arena forces which agree with our strategic and tactical orientation, and which were only put off by the historical reference and the name, we would get rid of the latter within 24 hours. (*Politique Hebdo*, 10-16 June 1976).

The Spanish Pabloite LCR put this policy into practice over the ensuing decades. It worked with the Stalinist PCE in the United Left (IU) coalition, and took up posts in the bureaucracies of the Stalinist-led Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and the PSOE-led UGT (General Union of Workers) unions.

The 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union moved parties like the LCR and its affiliates far to the right. As the professors, union bureaucrats and professionals in the Pabloite groups lost the income that had come to them earlier on from the Soviet bureaucracy, their sympathies swung ever more directly towards the imperialist state and army. The Pabloites' French section, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), gave perhaps the clearest statement of its repudiation of Trotskyism and of any link to Marxism. In its 2009 founding statement, it declared:

The NPA does not claim a specific relation to Trotskyism, but continuity with those who, over the last two centuries, have confronted the system all the way. The NPA is a pluralistic and democratic party. [There has been] participation of comrades from various components of the social movement, of the anti-globalization left, of political ecology, of comrades from the PS [the Socialist Party, a party of bourgeois government] and the PCF [the French Communist Party, its main coalition partner], from the anarchist movement, from the revolutionary left. Without becoming bland, the NPA has everything to win by opening itself even further.

For the NPA, Trotskyism was only an obstacle to necessary alliances with social democratic and Stalinist parties that supported the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. At the same time, the Pabloites aimed to widen their appeal in the middle class by embracing feminism, gay liberation, and other identity issues, while distancing themselves from their past formal avowal of class politics. This did not, of course, mean breaking their alliance with the union bureaucracy, whose policing of the class struggle they supported.

The NPA and Anticapitalistas would soon back the imperialist interventions in Libya, Syria and Ukraine as part of a supposed “democratic revolution.” In 2022, they backed NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine. These wars have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and devastated entire societies. These were the thoroughly rotten political foundations upon which a collection of professional middle-class activists of Anticapitalistas, media operatives, political science professors and union bureaucrats built Podemos, as a political trap for the working class.

From the Indignados to Podemos

Podemos was founded out of the indignados protests in Spain that broke out in 2011, after working class uprisings toppled dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt.

These revolutions objectively refuted the “End of History” pro-capitalist triumphalism that followed the Stalinist bureaucracy’s liquidation of the USSR in 1991. It confirmed in deeds the Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the international working class rejected by the pseudo-left. After President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali fled mass strikes and protests across Tunisia triggered by uprisings against police in Tunisian mining towns, the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo set off a general strike in Egypt that brought down President Hosni Mubarak.

The revolutionary offensive of the working class in North Africa won the political sympathies of workers and youth in Spain and internationally. Imitating the occupation of Tahrir Square, thousands of youth occupied squares in Madrid, Barcelona, and cities across Spain. This socially heterogeneous movement, called 15-M (for the May 15, 2011 protest that began it) or *indignados*, expressed opposition very broadly felt in Spain to draconian EU austerity and mass unemployment after the 2008 capitalist crash.

If Podemos was the party that emerged from this movement, it is above all because the main political forces that were present to intervene in it were the Pabloites. The 15-M movement was launched with protests at the Puerta del Sol in Madrid on May 15, 2011, called by associations like Real Democracy Now and Youth Without Future, which worked closely with Anticapitalistas.

Within this movement, the middle class was politically dominant. Anticapitalistas intervened into the movement, advancing demands for

“no-politics,” “no leadership” and a “horizontal” structure. They employed slogans such as defending the 99 percent against the top 1 percent of the distribution of income and wealth.

This meant no challenge to the PSOE, the Stalinist United Left (IU) or the union bureaucracy; no opposition to their implementation of EU austerity and war; and no developing of a revolutionary leadership against the post-Francoite capitalist establishment. These slogans were compatible with a struggle by the top 10 percent against the top 1 percent for wealth and power within the existing capitalist society.

Without an orientation to the working class, these gatherings ended in empty discussions dominated by forces like Anticapitalistas, fencing off radicalised youth from workers’ struggles.

Over the next years, across Europe, a strike wave erupted against austerity measures demanded by the European Union and the banks. The British *Independent* newspaper warned that the eruption of strikes and protests heralded the biggest mobilization “experienced on the continent since the revolutionary upheavals of 1968.”

In Spain, strikes and protests rose to levels not seen since the 1970s. According to official statistics, in 2012-2013 there were an average of 123 daily protests, and 25 percent of the population reported participating in them. Under mounting pressure, the union bureaucracy called two nationwide protest strikes in 2012—the last time they would do so. Tens of thousands in Madrid went to welcome a delegation of striking Asturias miners, whose struggles in 1934, 1936 and 1962 had been repressed by Franco.

Well aware of the rising danger from the working class on their left, Anticapitalistas decided to launch Podemos, to corral and politically control working class anger against the PSOE and its decades-long record of austerity and war, as well as against the PSOE’s main ally, the Stalinist-led United Left (IU).

In an internal bulletin of Anticapitalistas drafted before the founding of Podemos, the Pabloites bemoaned “the rightward shift of IU, which is ever more openly preparing a ‘left’ government with the PSOE.” The Pabloites proposed “the presence of a series of personalities with a media presence as the public face of the [Podemos] project, who make it possible to connect with sections of the left-wing population dissatisfied with the traditional organizations.”

In Pablo Iglesias, Anticapitalistas chose a leader for its operation—a Stalinist professor influenced by the “left populist” theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Iglesias ran a local TV programme in *La Tuerka* and acted as the “left” pundit in debates on the far-right TV channel *Intereconomía*. Iglesias had also been part of the Centre for Social and Political Studies (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales - CEPS), a vehicle for Stalinist academics to receive pay checks from bourgeois-nationalist regimes in Venezuela and Ecuador for consulting services.

Iglesias was on a first-name basis with Santiago Carrillo, the long-time leader of the Stalinist PCE. In the Spanish Civil War, Carrillo participated in the Stalinist abduction and murder of Trotskyists and of Andreu Nin, the leader of the centrist Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). Carrillo co-wrote Spain’s 1978 Constitution with the Francoite authorities. Shortly before his death, Carrillo boasted that “in the 1930s, no communist militant asked to assassinate Trotsky would have refused to do so.” Iglesias responded with a sympathetic interview and then an obituary of Carrillo in *Público* after his death, writing: “Despite everything, Santiago was one of ours. Now and forever.”

To those in the political establishment who knew the history of the PCE and Carrillo, this was an unmistakable statement of the support of the future founder of Podemos for bloody suppression of opposition to revolution and the capitalist state. This paved the way for Podemos to sit in capitalist government less than ten years later, as riot police assaulted strikers and protesters.

The Stalinist and Pabloite roots of Podemos conditioned them to play a

reactionary role in the crisis that erupted after they founded their party in 2014. It vindicated the analysis of the WSWS, which warned in its initial article on Podemos weeks after it was founded, that it was aimed at “preventing a rebellion by the working class against the social democratic parties and the trade union bureaucracy and channelling discontent into supposedly radical, but pro-capitalist, formations.”

Spain’s post-Francoite two-party system collapses

In December 2015 elections, the two-party system of the PSOE and the right-wing Popular Party (PP) that had dominated Spanish electoral politics since the end of Francoism collapsed. No party won a governing majority. Each of the five elections in Spain since then, moreover, has resulted in a hung parliament. No party was able to muster a majority. Governments emerged as unstable coalitions between Podemos, the PSOE, various smaller regional-nationalist organizations, the right-wing PP and Citizens, and the far-right Vox.

This confirmed the breakdown of the parliamentary system established in 1978 by the Francoite fascists, the PSOE and the Spanish Stalinists.

The PCE, via its control of the Workers Commissions (CCOO), Spain’s largest trade union, had suppressed the largest strike wave since the 1930s to head off a revolutionary reckoning with the Spanish bourgeoisie by the working class. It cemented key agreements with the PSOE and the Francoites, including the 1977 Amnesty Law officially forgiving the crimes of fascism, and support for NATO. It agreed to back the PSOE in elections, to prevent an independent political movement developing in the working class to the left of the PSOE.

The PCE’s role in the 1970s to block workers struggles from developing into a socialist revolution against the Francoite dictatorship was understood in ruling circles. Between 1976 and 1978 the number of working days lost due to strikes rose to 13.2 million, with more than 5.7 million workers involved (60 percent of the working population).

The *Financial Times*, the authoritative voice of British finance capital, had written in December 1978 that the PCE, “which controls the majority trade union confederation CC.OO and the best organized political party in Spain,” had been “crucial” in the Transition. “The active moderation showed by the communists ... was decisive in order to avoid that Spain fall into an abyss of civil conflict,” the FT concluded.

Podemos sought to play the role the PCE had played in the 1970s but could no longer play in the 21st century, discredited as it was by the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union. Acting as an electoral prop of the PSOE, Podemos diverted growing working class anger back behind capitalist rule.

Ten years ago, in the May 2014 European elections, Podemos obtained 8 percent of the vote and five MEPs. A year later, it would grow to 5.2 million votes and 69 seats in Spain’s 350-seat parliament. It rallied 300,000 anti-austerity protestors in the streets of Madrid. By the end of that year, it was regularly polling around 30 percent of the vote, becoming for a time Spain’s most popular party.

Today, Iglesias and Podemos claim that it started losing electoral support after a police, media and judicial campaign orchestrated by the PP government, with the acquiescence of the PSOE. The truth is, it wasn’t capitalist propaganda but Podemos’ integration into the middle levels of the capitalist state that rapidly exposed them when it brought them ever more into conflict with the working class.

At one point, the party controlled major cities including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, Cádiz, and Santiago de Compostela, presiding over the lives of tens of millions. But its promises that these “municipalities of change” would end austerity and use “citizen debt

audits” to stop payment of “illegitimate” debts came to nothing. Instead, these cities paid off billions of euros to the banks, along the lines demanded by the EU.

Podemos also made very clear that it supported the NATO wars and interventions in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Ukraine. It recruited Chief of the Defence Staff General Julio Rodríguez Fernández, who led Spain’s participation in the 2011 NATO war in Libya that left 30,000 dead and the country in ruins, as a candidate in the 2015 general elections.

In Spain as across Europe, the ruling class responded to its political crisis by legitimizing the heritage of fascism, building up the far-right Vox party, and with coup plots in the army. There is deep, historically rooted opposition to fascism, to nationalism and to capitalism in the Spanish and European working class. However, Podemos was deeply hostile to mobilising such sentiments. They threatened to provoke a movement in the working class going far beyond the rotten framework of Podemos’ alliance with the PSOE, EU austerity, and NATO war.

The anti-Marxist, postmodernist theoretical foundations of Podemos

To be granted publicity in major capitalist media so it could win large votes in elections, Podemos had to give the bourgeoisie firm guarantees of its hostility to Marxism and revolution. Podemos sent these signals by indicating in cynical academic jargon that it grounded its activity in postmodernism, populism, and petty-bourgeois identity politics.

In 2015, “post-Marxist” academic Chantal Mouffe and Podemos co-founder Professor Iñigo Errejón, today’s spokesperson for Sumar in parliament, issued *Podemos in the Name of the People*, published in English by British Stalinist publishers Lawrence & Wishart. In the book, Mouffe and Errejón call their readers to abandon “nostalgia” for “the left,” and to instead build a “broad democratic front.” This “democratic front” was not to be based on the working class, however, but on lifestyle demands of layers of the affluent middle class, opposed to the needs of the working class.

Mouffe says her populism developed from her conviction, developed as a young academic and feminist activist in London in the period following the May 1968 French general strike, that Marxism and class politics had to be rejected:

“[T]raditional Marxism seemed incapable of understanding the specificity of the new movements that had developed since 1968, such as feminism, the environmental movement, anti-racist struggles, and against discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. ... And in discussing that lack of understanding, we realized that the problem was of a theoretical nature: these new fights could not be interpreted in terms of class.”

Mouffe and Errejón rejected not only the Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the working class, but the very existence of the working class. They argued that the working class was only a myth invented by Karl Marx to justify Marxism, just as right-wing myths of the essence of a race or nation leads to racist or nationalist politics. Marxism’s belief in the objective existence of the working class comprising all those who must sell their labor-power on the global labor market, Mouffe argued, blinded it to the necessity of reorienting to racial and gender politics:

“[F]or Marxism, this lack of understanding resulted from their essentialist conception of political identities, which saw them as preceding their discursive articulation. There were many forms of essentialism, and in the case of Marxism it was a ‘class essentialism’, which saw political identities as dependent on the social agent’s position in the relations of production, which determined their consciousness.”

On this basis, Mouffe welcomed the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, arguing that it discredited equality and revolution. The key events since her youth, Mouffe asserted, were

“the fall of the Berlin wall, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the crisis of the Communist model. All of these contributed to the expiry of the model they represented. ... There’s no doubt that the abandonment of the total rupture revolutionary model was a positive thing, as it was totally unsuitable for Europe; and it was necessary for the left to recognise the importance of pluralist democracy.”

Mouffe’s dismissal of “Soviet egalitarianism” goes in a diametrically opposite class direction to Trotsky’s critique of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky prophetically warned that the Stalinism would ultimately seek to restore capitalism and destroy the nationalized production relations created by the October 1917 revolution. He fought to rally the Soviet working class in a political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy, as an integral part of the struggle of the international working class for world socialist revolution.

Mouffe, orienting to alliances with Stalinism, attacks social rights enjoyed by workers in the Soviet Union—access to jobs and to public health care, education, and pensions—as “egalitarianism.” This was faithfully reflected in Podemos’ policy, once in power, of supporting all the PSOE’s austerity measures targeting workers’ living standards.

Podemos’ record in power has confirmed that Mouffe’s and Errejón’s praise for “pluralist democracy” does not mean support for democracy, but for the existing capitalist-imperialist police state. Errejón says “Left Populist” parties like Podemos seek to “defeat ... traditional forces of the regime and the oligarchic powers” in a “political battle, which, ultimately, doesn’t have definitive end.” Mouffe adds, “radical democracy, as we understood it, did not entail a total rupture with pluralist democracy.”

Errejón is if anything even more explicit in calling to tie working class opposition to capitalist institutions. Warning of “a dangerous form of skepticism and cynicism” in the population via-à-vis the existing institutions of the Spanish capitalist state, he says: “That is the reason why it’s important to channel these protest movements in a direction that seeks to engage with existing institutions in order to transform them.”

Humanity, Mouffe and Errejón state, is fated to endure a “never-ending dispute for establishing the distribution of collective assets and positions.” This pessimistic conviction, born of the rejection of Marx’s historical-materialist perspective, helped the affluent professors, union bureaucrats and political operatives of Podemos carry out reactionary policies while cynically posing as “Left Populist” friends of the people.

They defend the lifestyle interests of the affluent middle class, not the social needs of the vast majority of the working people. Mouffe, who began her political career as a feminist activist before marrying Argentine postmodernist theorist Ernesto Laclau, advocates the abandonment of the socialist revolution for social struggles, based on gender and ethnicity, that do not oppose capitalist exploitation of workers. Laclau and herself, Mouffe adds, sought

“to reformulate the ‘socialist project’ in terms of a radicalisation of democracy. That enabled us to break simultaneously both with the Jacobin tradition and with economic determinism; because you cannot speak about the radicalization of democracy without recognizing that there are different forms of subordination that might give rise to a variety of antagonisms, and that all these struggles cannot be viewed simply as the expression of capitalist exploitation.”

The fraudulent character of Mouffe’s “democratic” theories is underscored by the fact that, once in power, a party built upon them—Podemos—did not pursue a democratic policy. It supported the bourgeoisie’s broader policies of internet censorship, police-state crackdowns on strikes and protests, and the killing of migrants on Spain’s borders.

Mouffe denounced the Jacobins, whose leaders like Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton were associated with the struggle for equality in the radical phase of the 1789-1794 French revolution. In reality, however, it is primarily aimed at another target. Her target is the fight to build a Marxist leadership in the working class for a socialist revolution, like the Bolshevik Party that led the October 1917 revolution. She proposes instead a pro-capitalist, “Left Populist” party that exploits questions of gender or ethnicity to divide workers and tie them to the capitalist state.

Rejecting the scientific outlook of Marxism, Mouffe and Errejón proposed that parties like Podemos base their policies on myth, irrationalism, the promotion of charismatic leaders, and nationalism. Scolding the left, Mouffe stated: “the left tend to believe that the only response is to appeal to reason. Trying to awaken passions is something that the fascist right does.”

Calling to “crystallise politics into symbols, into a project for a new country, into leaderships, myths, popular expressions, songs, anniversaries and literature,” Errejón argued that the promotion of nationalism would block the growth of the far right. He said, “a serious mistake is to relinquish to them [the far-right] the battle for hegemony in the sphere of national identification. It is a mistake to hand over to the most reactionary forces the opportunity to put forward, uncontested, their own view of what the country stands for.” He called for “progressive and popular patriotism.”

The record of Podemos in government highlights the reactionary implications of this very ambiguous theoretical outlook, which claims to be “left” but admires fascism. Indeed, Errejón’s call for nationalist demagoguery coincided with the line of Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, who relentlessly promotes Spanish nationalism. In 2017, Iglesias boasted that he was more nationalist than the far right, declaring: “We will not allow them to say that they are more patriotic than we are.”

But there is no “progressive nationalism.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of scientific socialism, explained long ago that the working man has no country, and Leon Trotsky explained that the outbreak of World War I marked the end of era of national programs for the working class. But Podemos, oriented to entering into a Spanish national government, has nothing to offer to workers under conditions where every great issue—the control of world industry and finance, pandemics, war, social inequality, climate change—presents itself as a world problem.

The globalization of economy and the transnational organization of industrial production, unfolding over a half-century, has pulled the ground out from under Stalinist and Pabloite organizations, hostile to the international unification and mobilization of the working class. Based upon middle class layers and oriented to actions inside one country, they had nothing to offer when employers threatened to respond to strikes by

moving production overseas. Over decades, they aligned themselves completely with the ruling elites against the international working class and Marxism.

The 2017 Catalan Referendum and re-legitimisation of Francoism

The implications of Podemos' policies played themselves out in 2017, when the Catalan bourgeois nationalists organised a referendum on independence from Spain. Like separatist movements across Europe, the Catalan nationalists advanced a bankrupt, pro-capitalist response to globalization. Relying on the relative prosperity of Catalonia inside Spain, they sought more direct relations with global financial markets, transnational corporations based on exploiting workers in Catalonia.

The independence referendum was a reactionary manoeuvre by Catalan nationalist parties, who have a long record of supporting austerity, imperialist war, and the EU. If successful, it would have divided the working class on the Iberian peninsula. Ultimately, however, the Spanish bourgeoisie responded by triggering the deepest political crisis in Spain since the Transition to parliamentary democracy after the death of Franco and the fall of the Francoite regime.

Powerful forces within the ruling class seized upon the referendum to shift official politics far to the right. The PP, with the backing of the PSOE, sent tens of thousands of police to assault peaceful voters, leaving over 1,000 injured. It then suspended the Catalan regional government and arrested its leading officials, while the head of the Spanish army called Catalan nationalism the "greatest threat to our democracy." The major imperialist powers—the US, UK, Germany and France—all supported Madrid's repression.

This was accompanied by wall-to-wall media promotion of anti-Catalan hysteria and the integration of the neo-Francoite Vox party into mainstream Spanish bourgeois politics.

Underlying this response of the Spanish ruling class was the deepening crisis of world capitalism. After decades of deep EU austerity since the world economic crisis of 2008 and escalating imperialist wars across the Middle East and Eastern Europe since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991, European capitalism was rapidly collapsing. Facing mass unemployment, record social inequality, the bourgeoisie turned to fascistic, police-state rule.

The response of Podemos was not to oppose, but to accommodate the fascistic campaign. It refused to call out its voters for strikes and protests against police state repression in Catalonia, even as hundreds of thousands of people marched in protests in Catalonia, fearful that such a movement would trigger a mass movement in the working class that they would be unable to control.

In 2018, amid mounting popular opposition to the PP and its repressive policies in Catalonia, Podemos doubled down to promote the PSOE, Spain's main party of bourgeois rule, culminating in a parliamentary manoeuvre which ousted the PP and replaced it with a minority PSOE government. The Podemos-backed PSOE government continued the PP's austerity budget, showered the army with billions of euros and attacked migrants. It also continued the PP's anti-Catalan campaign.

When the PSOE government organised the show trial of Catalan secessionist leaders over their protests, grotesquely accusing them of violent sedition, Podemos aligned itself with the fascistic judicial frameup. Then-Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias pledged "full loyalty" to the PSOE on all state questions, including foreign policy and state repression in Catalonia, if it joined a PSOE-led government.

Months later, when a dozen Catalan leaders were fraudulently found guilty of sedition, Podemos intervened to call on the Spanish people to

accept their sentencing to lengthy prison terms. Iglesias infamously stated: "Everyone must abide by the law and accept the verdict." At the time, streets of cities across Catalonia were filled with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators.

That same year, Vox entered into a regional parliament for the first time. In the 2019 elections, Vox obtained 15 percent of the national vote and 52 lawmakers, making it the third-largest political force, overtaking Podemos. Composed of former judges, police, and generals, Vox openly defends the heritage of Franco. It calls for the escalation of war abroad and class war at home by hiking military and police budgets, criminalizing separatist parties, imprisoning striking workers, and promoting Spanish chauvinism, while clamping down on Basque and Catalan linguistic rights and scapegoating migrants.

The far-right resurgence exposed the bankruptcy of the Podemos. Its promotion of populism and Spanish nationalism provided political cover for the neo-Francoites.

The rehabilitation of fascism in Spain is part of a legitimisation of fascism by the entire European and North American ruling class. In Germany, right-wing extremist Professor Jörg Baberowski is paraded across German universities to blame the USSR for Nazi crimes and publicly rehabilitate Hitler as "not vicious." In France, President Emmanuel Macron hailed Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as a "great soldier" as he sent riot police to assault "yellow vest" protests against social inequality.

Since then, it has become ever clearer that the official promotion of the legacy of 20th century fascism by the European political establishment is bound up with a mortal crisis of the entire capitalist system. Faced with explosive international and class conflicts for which they have no progressive solution, the imperialist powers are staking everything on war and dictatorship. The genocide in Gaza and NATO's relentless escalation towards total war with Russia and China are only the most brutal manifestations of the descent of capitalist system into barbarism.

The legitimization of fascism is central to creating a reactionary political and cultural atmosphere in which the NATO imperialist bourgeoisies can wage global war. In Ukraine, fascists like Stepan Bandera are today glorified by the NATO-backed Kiev regime. In Canada, the entire Canadian parliament gave a standing ovation to Yaroslav Hunka, a Ukrainian former member of Adolf Hitler's Waffen SS, which played a leading role in the extermination of European Jewry during World War II.

In Spain, after the crackdown on the Catalan referendum, the Supreme Court ruled Franco was "head of state from 1 October 1936 until his death in November 1975." Traditionally, Franco was treated as the head of state starting on 1 April 1939, after his victory in the Spanish Civil War over the Spanish Republic. But Spain's highest court ruled that the proclamation with which he justified his fascist coup during the civil war made this coup legitimate. The Constitutional Court then ruled that Franco did not commit crimes against humanity during either the civil war or his bloody 40-year dictatorship.

Podemos sought to downplay these fascist threats. In 2020, Podemos joined the PSOE in a coalition government. After mass strikes in Spain against official inaction in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of high-ranking former officers wrote to Spanish King Felipe VI, appealing for him to launch a coup. Later, after the pandemic began, top retired Spanish officers linked to Vox discussed shooting "26 million" left-wing voters and their families.

Podemos incessantly covered up coup threats within the army. Working to lull workers to sleep, Iglesias was sent out to downplay the scandal in a prime-time TV interview, where he declared: "What these gentlemen say, at their age and already retired, in a chat with a few too many drinks, does not pose any threat."

Iglesias's lies were exposed weeks later, as videos emerged of Spanish soldiers singing neo-Nazi songs and making fascist salutes. Soon after,

WhatsApp chats revealed active-duty officers supporting the retired far-right generals' appeals to kill 26 million people. Podemos then appealed for the army to investigate its own fascist sympathies. Unsurprisingly, the PSOE-Podemos government's Ministry of Defence refused to disclose the results of this bogus investigation.

In this way, Podemos was continuing the central feature of the PCE's Stalinist policy. Even in the face of far-right dictatorship, it is resolutely hostile to revolutionary struggle by the working class.

Podemos in power

When Podemos joined the PSOE to form a government in 2020, its leader Pablo Iglesias became Deputy Prime Minister, making rhetorical promises to reverse a decade-long EU austerity, provide "feminist" foreign policy, stop the growth of neo-fascism and defend migrant rights. In reality, however, Podemos soon implemented policies that previously would have been unthinkable except under far-right regimes. Days after the PSOE-Podemos government was set up, the WSWS warned:

Despite the attempts of supporters of the PSOE and Podemos to promote the new government as "democratic," it will prove bitterly hostile to the social and democratic rights of the working class. The PSOE, the bourgeoisie's traditional party of government since the fascist Francoite regime fell in 1978, has a decades-long record as a party of imperialist war and European Union austerity. As for Podemos, it made its alliance with the PSOE last year while supporting the PSOE's pledges of billions in EU social cuts and its violent crackdown on protests in Catalonia.

Events soon proved the WSWS warnings correct. Barely had Podemos been in power a few months when it faced the COVID-19 pandemic. The PSOE-Podemos government proved utterly hostile to a scientifically guided policy to eliminate the pandemic and save lives. Like the ruling class across Europe, it placed corporate profits and the wealth of a super-rich elite above all else.

Downplaying the risks posed by the pandemic, leading figures of Podemos compared COVID-19 to the flu. After the premature end of the lockdown, the PSOE-Podemos government then made no effort to establish an effective track-and-trace system, prematurely reopened schools, ignored the surge of the virus in the fall of 2020 and then removed the remaining mitigation measures as new COVID-19 variants spread across Spain. Podemos proved itself to be a pliant tool of the ruling class, unwilling to accept the most minimal public health measures seen as impingements on profit-making.

Terrified at mass opposition to its "forever COVID" policy, the PSOE-Podemos government ordered riot police to assault steelworkers striking for the right to shelter at home and intensified mass Internet spying on the population. It then engineered EU's largest bank and corporate bailout in Spain's history with €140 billion to the financial aristocracy. Podemos leader and Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias hailed it as "a breath of fresh air for the European project", as Podemos took the role of overseeing the disbursement of the fund.

To pay for the EU bailout funds, the PSOE-Podemos government passed a reactionary anti-working class labor law that enshrined precariousness and a pension reform consolidating the retirement age at 67 and imposed cuts for future retirees. Austerity commitments have continued to date under the PSOE-Sumar government.

The results have been a colossal crime. Over the past four years, the virus caused over 20 million deaths globally and over 160,000 deaths in Spain measured in the more reliable excess-death statistics. Over 13 million people have been infected, and at least over a million have Long COVID.

In foreign policy, the PSOE and Podemos led Spain's most militarist and aggressive government since the end of the Franco dictatorship. Seizing on the US-NATO-instigated war against Russia in the Ukraine, Madrid increased defence spending by 26 percent with the aim of reaching the 2 percent of GDP required by NATO. It is now at 27 billion euros, or 75.7 million euros per day. Spain now participates in a record 17 imperialist interventions abroad.

Podemos then aggressively backed the war against Russia even though it threatens nuclear war, pumping in millions of euros in military aid to NATO's far-right Ukrainian proxy regime in Kiev. Much of this aid has been sent to the neo-Nazi Azov battalion. Through bilateral agreements, Spain gave Ukraine €524 million in financial aid, €338 million in military aid and €80 million in humanitarian aid, for a total of €942 million. This does not count the €9.8 billion paid to the humanitarian fund, the bulk of which goes to the far-right Kiev regime.

Podemos ended its tenure in government by acquiescing to Spain's backing for the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. After the October 7 Palestinian uprising, while it cynically called for an end to Israel's mass murder in Gaza and even criticized Israeli's actions as genocidal, the PSOE-Podemos government kept sending arms and ammunition to Israel. It also sent the Spanish frigate Méndez Núñez and military supply ship Patiño to join the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier deployed in the eastern Mediterranean to provide air cover for the Israeli war in Gaza.

War and militarism abroad went hand-in-hand with escalating attacks at home. The PSOE-Podemos government has repeatedly attacked strikes in close collaboration with the union bureaucracy. Not a year passed that they did not deploy the police to savagely break strikes.

In November 2021, it deployed armoured vehicles and riot police against striking metalworkers in Cadiz; in April 2022, it mobilised 23,000 police to crush a 75,000-strong truckers strike against rising fuel prices amid NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine. Against healthcare workers and aircrew strikes, the PSOE-Podemos used the draconian minimum services to break strikes.

On refugees, Podemos has implemented the policy advocated by Vox and the EU's fascistic "Fortress Europe" policy which has claimed thousands of lives. With the Spanish ruling elite effectively shutting off any legal migration route into Spain, the Canary Islands crossing is now the deadliest route in the world, surpassing Mediterranean crossings to Italy and Greece. Since Podemos joined the government, tens of thousands of migrants have drowned trying to reach the Canary Islands.

In 2023 alone, a total of 6,618 migrants, 18 people a day, died in 2023 trying to reach the Spanish coasts, the majority of them, 6,007, on the Canary Route. Those who reach the islands are interned in concentration camps built by the PSOE and Podemos, in which migrants are imprisoned in unsanitary, inhumane conditions pending deportation.

In 2021, the PSOE-Podemos government committed one of the worst massacres against refugees in modern European history. On June 24, Spanish border police fired tear gas canisters and rubber bullets to drive thousands of desperate refugees from the fences of Melilla. At least 100 refugees died. Podemos has since opposed a parliamentary inquiry into the massacre, joining the PSOE, PP and the neo-fascist Vox party to block any investigation.

The capitalist regime's turn to police-state rule, in Spain and internationally, flows from the need of the ruling class to suppress opposition to extreme levels of social inequality and the escalating war of US-NATO imperialism in Europe, the Middle East and internationally.

The record is clear. Podemos did not fight these reactionary developments but was complicit in them and in fact helped oversee policies that accelerated them while in office.

Podemos: an appraisal

The Podemos government in Spain, following the Syriza government in Greece, is another strategic experience for the international working class. It shows that voting “left populist” parties into capitalist government is a dead end. The working class can wage explosive struggles, but its struggles will be thwarted and thrown back to the extent that it is politically led, or rather strangled, by pseudo-left like Podemos that reject Marxist internationalism and socialist revolution.

Only the independent intervention of the working class can prevent humanity from living through a return in the 21st century, on an even wider scale, of the horrors of the 20th. NATO war with Russia, genocide in Gaza, pandemics and other ecological problems point to the mortal crisis of capitalism, a system riven—after decades of deep austerity and multi-trillion-euro bailouts—with levels of inequality incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

Podemos did not try to resolve these problems. Instead, it left its fingerprints on every great crime of the bourgeoisie. Events objectively refuted the illusions of anyone who thought that Podemos, because of its ties to the Communist Party or Anticapitalistas, would implement left, let alone communist or Trotskyist policies. The record of Podemos reflects the historic crimes of Stalinism and Pabloism, not a revolutionary struggle for communism or Trotskyism.

The ICFI’s defense of the continuity of Trotskyism against Pabloism is the only basis upon which to build a revolutionary movement in the working class for socialism against pseudo-left parties like Podemos. Since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Stalinist and social democratic parties have lost the mass base they had in the working class, and Podemos faces wide distrust among workers and youth. However, they cannot smash the reactionary obstacle posed by Podemos without building a Marxist-Trotskyist revolutionary leadership against the pseudo-left.

The international working class has the power to stop imperialist war and genocide, to implement policies necessary to resolve environmental problems like climate change and the spread of pandemics like COVID-19 and redistribute the world’s wealth to meet social need.

Today, the working class is larger, more interconnected and more technologically advanced than ever before. In 2024, roughly 56 percent of the world’s population (4.4 billion people) lives in urban areas. At least 770 million people are employed worldwide in the manufacturing sector, and the continuing migration of millions of oppressed rural people to the cities and factory employment is turning the working class into a majority of humanity.

Since the 2008 capitalist crash, the workers have repeatedly mounted mass struggles, and even revolutionary uprisings as in Egypt and Tunisia. Recent years have seen a vast growth in the number of workers engaged in strikes or protests against exploitation, wage cuts and attacks on democratic rights. Today, mass protests against the genocide in Gaza are sweeping the globe. The political situation objectively and urgently poses revolutionary tasks to the working class.

The lessons of the 1930s must be learned. The spontaneous development of the class struggle is not enough to break the decades-long suppression of the working class by the union bureaucracies, social democrats, Stalinists and allied forces. A political leadership must be built fighting for international socialist revolution, irreconcilably opposed not only to

the capitalist class but also to its petty bourgeois political allies, like Podemos. As Trotsky explained on the eve of the 1931 Spanish Revolution that toppled the Spanish monarchy:

“The semi-spontaneous spread of strikes, which have brought victims and defeats or have ended with nothing, is an absolutely unavoidable stage of the revolution, the period of the awakening of the masses, their mobilization and their entry into struggle. ... However, the spontaneity—which at the present stage constitutes the strength of the movement—may in the future become the source of its weakness. To assume that the movement also in the future will be left to itself without a clear programme, without its own leadership, would mean to assume a perspective of hopelessness. For the question involved is nothing less than the seizure of power. Even the most stormy strikes—all the more so the scattered ones—do not solve this problem.”

The final victory of the Francoite fascists in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, assisted by Hitler and Mussolini, was the product of the suppression of the class struggle by Stalinist, social democratic and centrist supporters of the capitalist Popular Front government. It was a devastating confirmation, in the negative, of the urgent necessity of revolutionary working class leadership. Trotsky wrote in the founding program of the Fourth International in 1938: “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.”

The Pabloites’ repudiation of this conception found consummate expression in Ernest Mandel’s declaration in 1969 that the European bourgeoisie would never again turn to policies of world war and far-right reaction. Less than a year after the 1968 French general strike, he wrote:

“Europe’s big bourgeoisie has once already burned its fingers severely with a fascist experiment. In some parts of the continent, as a result, it lost everything it had; in others, it was only able to salvage its class domination at the last minute. It is all the less likely to be led to repeat the adventure, since the experience also left deep traces among masses of people, and the sudden rising threat of a new fascism would certainly bring the sharpest reaction.”

Over the course of the first quarter of the 21st century, Mandel’s complacent assessment has been comprehensively refuted. The revolutionary leadership that must be built today will have to fight a capitalist system that is again plunging into fascistic political reaction and global war.

The ICFI is the only political organization that seeks to unify and lead the working class internationally in a struggle for socialist revolution against the immense dangers capitalism poses to the working class and to humanity. Its defense of Marxist principles, over the 100 years since the founding of the Trotskyist Left Opposition to Stalinism in 1923, the Fourth International in 1938 and the ICFI’s founding in 1953 embodies a colossal political experience.

This heritage provides workers and youth in Spain and in every country with the necessary political weapons to build a Trotskyist party fighting for the program of world socialist revolution. It is irreconcilably opposed to parties like Podemos, Anticapitalistas, and all petty-bourgeois tendencies that seek alliances with these reactionary parties. The decisive strategic question is the building of a new revolutionary

leadership—sections of the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement—in Spain and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact