

Catalan nationalists back social-democratic police state regime in Catalonia

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Last week, Catalonia's parliament confirmed Salvador Illa of the Socialist Party (PSOE) as the Catalan regional premier, ending more than a decade of rule by separatist Catalan nationalist parties. The PSOE, the Catalan-nationalist Catalan Republican Left (ERC), and Comuns, the Catalan affiliate of the pseudo left Sumar party all voted to install Illa in power.

The installation of Illa comes after the PSOE and the pro-secessionist ERC reached an agreement. The PSOE came first in May's regional election but fell short of a majority. Under the agreement, Catalonia, the second richest autonomous region in the country, will control the taxes generated in the region, except for a percentage used to pay for state services and a solidarity fund with the rest of Spain's regions, the amount yet to be defined.

The agreement again exposes the reactionary character of Catalan nationalism and all those pseudo-left forces which for decades have provided a progressive veneer, asserting that a Catalan "right to self-determination" would provide a basis for a struggle against Spanish imperialism. In reality, the Catalan nationalists are now backing a coalition government with the PSOE, the leading governing party of the Spanish bourgeoisie. This is because the Catalan nationalists articulate the interests of social forces bitterly hostile to the working class.

For over a decade, especially since the October 2017 Catalan independence referendum, the Catalan nationalists have sought to divide workers along national lines in the Iberian peninsula. They thus worked to disarm the proletariat in the face of austerity, the rehabilitation of the far right, the bourgeoisie's policy of mass death in the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the NATO-led war in Ukraine against Russia. Now, in exchange for cash for the Catalan capitalists, ERC is backing a regional government led by PSOE, which has been in national government since 2018.

The PSOE, with the support of its pseudo left partners—first Podemos from 2019 to November 2023 and then Sumar—has implemented austerity, an anti-working class labor law that enshrined precariousness and a pension reform raising the retirement age to 67 and imposing cuts for future retirees. It brutally repressed strikes and armed the far-right Ukrainian regime in Kiev and the Zionist regime in its genocide against Palestinians. This agenda will now proceed with the support of the ERC.

Illa was the PSOE-Podemos government's Minister of Health from January 2020 to January 2021, in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. He prioritised profits over lives, rejecting the implementation of public health measures required to eliminate COVID-19 and adopting policies that allowed the virus to spread throughout the population. This included ensuring workers returned to

their jobs and children and students back to schools in unsafe conditions. These policies resulted in over 160,000 excess deaths in Spain, according to *The Lancet* medical journal.

Illa and the Catalan nationalists are preparing for a showdown with the working class. Illa has placed ERC representatives in key ministries, including Labor and Justice. He has promised an increase in the Catalan police force from 18,000 to 22,000 officers by 2030.

The PSOE-ERC agreement comes amid a deep crisis of the Catalan nationalist parties, ERC and Junts (previously, Democratic Convergence of Catalonia) who face mounting popular disaffection. In the last regional elections, they suffered their worst results since 1980, preventing them from forming a pro-separatist government.

While the Catalan bourgeoisie in Barcelona had flirted with demands for separation ever since the fall of the fascistic Francoist regime in 1978, it was tacitly agreed in the ruling class that the Catalan bourgeoisie would not seek independence, and that Madrid would not aggressively attack Catalan nationalist sentiment. This changed after the 2008 Wall Street crash.

Administrations in Barcelona and in Madrid both worked to slash jobs and social spending and enrich the banks and the financial aristocracy. The trade union bureaucracies let millions of workers be laid off, sold out strikes, and supported labor reforms. At the same time, the Catalan nationalist parties engaged in bitter budget battles with the Spanish central government and promoted secessionist sentiment in an attempt to disorient growing social anger and divide the workers along national lines.

Over the past decade, Catalan nationalist leaders have presided over anti-worker regional governments in Barcelona, implementing harsh austerity measures and suppressing strikes by train drivers and airport workers while stoking the flames of separatism. They advanced the lie that if Catalonia were independent, these cuts would have been unnecessary. This strategy buried the socio-economic concerns of workers and youth beneath a wave of nationalist rhetoric.

Former Catalan Minister for Business, Santi Vila, underscored this in a meeting with politicians and businessmen, asking rhetorically that if Catalonia "had not promoted a nationalist discourse, how would it have managed to impose adjustments of over €6 billion?"

After years of back-and-forth, the nationalists launched a pseudo-independence referendum in 2017 that was seized on by the Spanish ruling class to install a police state and rehabilitate Francoism. Backed by today's Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, then the leader of the opposition, the right-wing Popular Party deployed 10,000 paramilitary police to crack down on the Catalan referendum and throw out the Catalan regional government. The crackdown left over 1,000 peaceful protesters injured. Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont

fled to Belgium to avoid prosecution.

Once the PSOE came to power in 2018, Sánchez oversaw the imposition of decade-long jail sentences to nine Catalan nationalist leaders in a show trial over their role in the independence referendum. When streets of cities across Catalonia were filled with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators against the sentence, Sánchez violently suppressed them. Deputy Prime Minister and leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, infamously declared, “Everyone must abide by the law and accept the verdict.”

The objective of the PSOE and PP was to shift politics to the right and neutralise the mounting opposition against austerity and social inequality while justifying the establishment of a police state, not only in Catalonia but throughout Spain to attack workers’ struggles and opposition to war.

The PSOE-Podemos government repeatedly attacked strikes in close collaboration with the union bureaucracy. 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 draconian minimum service requirements as a pretext to break strikes.

Only when the PSOE and its pseudo-left and Stalinist partners Podemos and Sumar needed the support of Catalan nationalist parties to form a government in Madrid did they agree to pardon the nationalist prisoners and later grant an amnesty that would allow the return of the exiles.

Return of Puigdemont

On the day Illa was being elected as the new Catalan regional premier in parliament, Puigdemont, the leader of Junts and former Catalan premier during the 2017 independence referendum, made a brief return to Spain after seven years in exile. He delivered a short speech to several thousand supporters in Barcelona before fleeing once again, successfully evading a police operation ostensibly intended to arrest him.

The Spanish parliament passed an amnesty law in May pardoning those involved in the failed 2017 secession bid. However, the judges of the Supreme Court, linked to the right-wing PP and the far right Vox party, upheld arrest warrants for Puigdemont on charges of embezzlement, ruling that the amnesty law does not apply to him. If convicted, Puigdemont could face a sentence of up to 12 years in prison.

The far-right’s objective is to destabilise the PSOE-Sumar government, particularly after their defeat in last year’s elections. They aim to undermine the government by stripping it of the support of Puigdemont’s Junts party, whose seven lawmakers in the Spanish parliament are crucial for passing next year’s budget. Failure to approve the budget, given that the current one is already extended, could lead to the government’s collapse.

The PSOE and Sumar likely recognised that arresting and imprisoning Puigdemont could have sparked renewed unrest in Catalonia and potentially brought down their own government. Instead, Puigdemont, who had announced his intention to return to Barcelona days earlier, arrived two days before Illa’s investiture. He

calmly walked down an empty street to the stage, where he addressed approximately 3,500 supporters, before leaving in a vehicle and disappearing—all without any interference from the police.

Three Catalan police officers have been arrested for allegedly aiding Puigdemont in his recent escape, yet the Spanish National Intelligence Center, which has been monitoring Puigdemont since he went into exile, failed to provide any information on his movements. The Spanish Interior Ministry has admitted that it only activated its surveillance services after Puigdemont had already fled.

Puigdemont’s speech lasted six minutes, during which he referenced the fierce repression unleashed in Catalonia since 2017. Puigdemont said, “Seven years ago, they initiated a harsh repression that led us to prison and exile, affecting the lives of thousands and thousands of people just for being pro-independence. Sometimes, just for speaking Catalan. And they have turned being Catalan into something suspicious. In these seven years, repression has caused much damage and will continue to do so.”

He added that “the right to self-determination belongs to the people, to the people who live there, and therefore no one in politics has the right to renounce a right that is collective.”

While it is true that Catalan nationalist forces have faced repression and fundamental democratic rights have been denied, Puigdemont remains a deeply reactionary figure. The advocate of the “right to self-determination” for Catalonia is a fervent Zionist whose party has supported Israel’s genocide against Palestinians. Recently, Junts abstained in a Barcelona City Council vote to recognise the Palestinian state and aligned with the PP and Vox, in voting against ending arms trade with Israel.

Puigdemont has hailed the Zionist project of creating an ethnically exclusive state, stating “it has a national and cultural project very similar to Catalonia’s” and that “two nations are persecuted for protecting their language and fighting against empires that want to neutralise it.”

The reactionary nature of Puigdemont and Junts is evident in their racist refusal to provide shelter in Catalonia for unaccompanied migrant minors fleeing poverty and war, who arrive in makeshift boats to the Canary Islands. As a condition for their support of the Spanish government, Junts is demanding control over immigration policy in Catalonia.

Junts regularly engages in talks with the PP and often aligns with the Spanish right in parliamentary votes.

All the parties of the bourgeoisie are united in defending austerity, eroding democratic rights, enriching the financial elite, implementing anti-immigrant policies, and upholding imperialist war and Zionism.

The unification in revolutionary struggle of the working class in the Iberian peninsula and internationally is the way forward to stop imperialist war, genocide, austerity and police-state rule. This requires building a Trotskyist vanguard in the working class, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in Spain and countries around the world, waging a struggle for socialist revolution against pseudo-left and nationalist parties.



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