A pseudo-left defense of Spanish imperialism

Podemos blames Morocco for Ceuta migrant deaths

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On July 30-31, some 70,000 people entered into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta from Morocco, with an estimated 140 dying by drowning along the way. Most of those who entered were rapidly expelled by Spanish army and police deployed by Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Sumar government. The approximately 13,000 people remaining in Ceuta, including 2,500 minors, face miserable conditions, without adequate housing, food or healthcare, and exposed to attacks by fascist mobs.

The Spanish right and far right, led by the Popular Party and Vox, have seized upon the Ceuta migrant crisis to escalate their racist campaign against immigration, calling to reinforce the military and police in particular along the border.

Pseudo-left parties like Podemos, the PSOE's former government coalition partner, have responded by fanning the flames of Spanish chauvinism, blaming the crisis on Morocco. Podemos has denounced the crisis as deliberately provoked by Morocco against Spain, attacked Morocco as a "dictatorship," accused it of acting in alliance with Washington and Israel, and demanded a more forceful policy against Rabat.

Podemos Secretary General Ione Belarra plays a central role. She accused the government of acting out of "fear" of Morocco and of letting Morocco use migration to pressure Spain. She blamed the government for turning Ceuta "into a huge open-air prison" and "digging its own grave" out of "fear" of Morocco. Belarra also attacked Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, claiming he "tried to portray himself as the opposition to Trump and will end his term as what he is, a president who has surrendered to Morocco and its allies, the US and Israel."

In successive statements, Belarra called for a break with Rabat, effectively threatening Morocco with war. "Diplomatic relations with Morocco must be severed," she declared. She subsequently argued that "it is unacceptable for Morocco to get off scot-free over this crisis."

She went so far as to state that "the only one that had an interest in this happening was Morocco," again calling for a rupture in relations. In another intervention, she denounced Morocco as "the main ally of the United States and Israel in Africa," accusing Sánchez of "protecting" Rabat.

Podemos Organisation Secretary Pablo Fernández described the migrant influx as a "hostile act of hybrid warfare" by Morocco against Spain, demanding a harsher response. He later stated: "All relations with the Moroccan dictatorship must be severed until it stops using people as as political weapons and as instruments of pressure."

These statements lay bare the pro-imperialist character of Podemos. The party that presented itself to Spanish workers and youth in 2014 as a force for "radical democracy" has confirmed what the WSWS has explained for years: It is a petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left party, fully integrated into the Spanish capitalist state. It denounces the imperialism of Washington, but demands a more forceful response from Spanish imperialism against Morocco.

Under Trump, Washington is working with the Spanish far right to try to unseat Sánchez, and Washington seeks to use the Moroccan monarchy as a tool of its foreign policy. But this does not legitimize Podemos' defense of Spanish imperialism, or turn this into an anti-fascist policy or a defense of democratic rights. On the contrary, the first question that must be asked is: What did Podemos do when it was in government?

In June 2022, the PSOE-Podemos government presided over one of the deadliest massacres of refugees at a European border in recent history, when Spanish and Moroccan border forces attacked thousands of people attempting to reach Spain, leaving at least 100 dead. Podemos was not an external critic of this policy. It was in government and shared responsibility for the mass killing of migrants. After the Melilla massacre, Podemos joined the PSOE, PP and Vox in blocking a parliamentary investigation.

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Today Podemos denounces Morocco as a “dictatorship,” describes events in Ceuta as “hybrid warfare” against Spain and calls for the defense of “Spanish sovereignty.” But in government, it did not hesitate to collaborate with US imperialism and with the Moroccan monarchy. Indeed, the 2022 Melilla massacre came only days after the PSOE-Podemos government had lobbied the entire NATO alliance, at a 2022 summit in Madrid, to define migration from Africa as a form of “hybrid warfare” demanding a military response.

When Podemos officials speak of defending “Spanish borders” in Africa, they defend the Spanish state’s territorial presence in North Africa as well as the history of conquest, military occupation and colonial rule that preceded it. Spain was and remains an imperialist power in North Africa.

The Spanish Protectorate in Morocco, established in 1912 as a result of the Franco-Spanish colonial partition of Moroccan territory, formed part of the process of European imperialist expansion that divided Africa among the great powers.

The defence of this protectorate was marked by extreme brutality. During the intermittent wars against the Rif tribes between 1909 and 1927, Madrid’s “pacification” campaigns massacred civilians, bombed markets and settlements, and used incendiary bombs to set fire to undefended villages and farmland. Madrid employed rape and poison gas attacks as weapons of war against the civilian population.

These wars trained a generation of colonial officers, including General Francisco Franco, who subsequently applied their skills for mass murder against the Spanish working class in the fascist July 1936 coup, the ensuing Civil War and four decades of Francoist dictatorship.

Morocco’s independence in 1956 did not end Spain’s colonial presence in North Africa. Spain retained not only Ceuta and Melilla, but also the territory of Ifni, on the Atlantic coast, as well as so-called Spanish West Africa, which included what became Western Sahara. Morocco’s claim to these territories led to the so-called Ifni War, in 1957-1958, when the Moroccan Army of Liberation attacked Spanish positions in Ifni and the Sahara.

With military support from France, which was then waging a bloody war in neighboring Algeria to defend its colonial rule, Madrid responded in Ifni with aerial bombardment, the use of napalm and indiscriminate attacks of civilians. Spain only ceded Ifni to Morocco in 1969, and it maintained control over Western Sahara until 1975. That year, amid the terminal crisis of the Francoist dictatorship, it transferred the administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania without consulting the population.

The opposition of African workers and oppressed masses to Spanish imperialism and the disintegration of Spanish colonial rule played a major role in encouraging a political offensive of the working class in Spain against the Francoist dictatorship. The withdrawal of Spain from the Sahara in 1975-1976 encouraged the wave of militant strikes in Spain that ultimately led to the downfall of Francoism.

The 1978 Transition to parliamentary rule in Spain was not a socialist revolution. Instead, the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party worked to stabilize capitalist rule on the basis of parliamentary institutions. The struggles of the working class in the 1970s, however significant, did not overthrow Spanish imperialism.

In 2002, Spain and Morocco nearly came into military conflict in a border dispute over a small island, Parsley or Leila island, off the Moroccan coast.

The defence by Podemos of “Spanish sovereignty” over Ceuta and Melilla and its threats against Morocco are not democratic. Podemos is seeking to tie workers and youth to a pro-imperialist opposition to government policy, cut them off from traditions of revolutionary struggle, and defend capitalist rule in Spain.

There is no solution to the crisis that has caused the deaths of migrants in Ceuta and Melilla inside the capitalist nation-state system. The poverty that forces tens of thousands of people to leave Africa and the austerity that impoverishes workers in Spain are not separate national problems, but expressions of the crisis of world capitalism. Only the international unification of the working class, through the struggle for political power and the socialist reorganisation of society, can put an end to imperialism, social crises and war.

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