

Spanish government moves to ban Basque separatist party

By Vicky Short
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The Basque separatist group, ETA, has threatened reprisals against Spanish MPs who vote to ban Herri Batasuna, the organisation's political wing. The proposal to declare Herri Batasuna illegal comes after a series of terrorist outrages.

A bomb killed two people on August 4 in Santa Pola in the southeastern Spanish province of Alicante. Santa Pola is a tourist town of 20,000 inhabitants that increases to 200,000 during the summer months. The dead were a 57-year-old man and a six-year-old girl. The explosion took place next to the Civil Guards barracks at a busy crossroads, near a bus stop.

A Ford Escort thought to contain about 40 kilos of dynamite was parked on a road annexed to the barracks, which are located in a working class area. There was no warning. Over 34 people were injured and damage to adjacent buildings was extensive. About 250 dwellings were affected and hundreds of people had to be evacuated and given shelter in neighbouring halls.

The six-year-old girl was the daughter of one of the Civil Guards, who was playing in a room inside the barracks. Thousands of people demonstrated their opposition to the bombing during the funeral of the two victims.

A further explosion took place on August 9 at 2.00pm in a hamburger restaurant in the tourist town of Torrevieja in the same area and another bomb is being sought in Santa Pola, after an anonymous caller telephoned a newspaper informing that bombs were buried in the sand on the beach. The Torrevieja explosion did not cause injuries, but extensive damage to buildings.

ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) has conducted a campaign to disrupt tourism during the summer holidays in the last few years. The

direct beneficiaries of such actions are the right wing People's Party (PP) government of Jose Maria Aznar. Since passing the new *Ley de Partidos* (Law of Parties), which allows for the banning of any party that directly or indirectly condones terrorism or sympathises with a terrorist organisation, the Aznar government has been actively pursuing the criminalisation of Herri Batasuna (People's Unity). The recent bombings have given Aznar the ammunition to mobilise support for the banning and silencing of those who have expressed concern about the extent and vagueness of the new legislation, as well as the way in which it became law. The implementation of the new law in the case of Batasuna will open the gates for what is one of the most far-reaching attacks on democratic rights since the end of the Franco era.

As soon as the first bomb in Santa Pola went off, the government insisted on Batasuna's unconditional condemnation of ETA. Together with the Basque socialists (PSE) and the Socialist Party (PSOE), the government demanded that resolutions be debated in every council in the Basque Country so that "note could be taken" of Batasuna's vote. After Batasuna abstained or absented itself from these debates, the PP stated that not to condemn the bombing was a "clear" reason for imposing a ban. After doubts had been expressed as to the wisdom of applying the law so blatantly, Minister Mariano Rajoy announced that the government had asked the Ministry of Justice for "judicial reports" to determine if Batasuna's non-condemnation would be sufficient reason to request the party's illegalisation. Later it was announced, after an agreement between the PP and the PSOE, that the Congress of Deputies would break the holiday recess to vote on the banning of Batasuna at a debate on August 26.

This is not the first attempt to ban a legal political party. The most recent was in December 1997, when the Spanish Supreme Court declared that all 23 members of the National Board of Batasuna's predecessor were guilty of collaborating with an armed terrorist group. This was because they distributed a video that showed members of ETA discussing a peace proposal. They were sentenced to seven years in prison. Their newspaper was closed and the organisation disbanded.

Batasuna is not the only target of the new law, which states the reason for banning a party in the vaguest of terms—to “justify or exonerate the outrages” or to give “express or tacit support to terrorism” and to “exonerate or minimise its significance”.

Mounting discontent with the government among the Spanish people is developing over unemployment, casual and temporary work, falling wages and conditions, cuts in social services, reforms to undermine health and education services, price increases resulting from the conversion to the euro, corporate and government corruption, militarism and the drive to war. ETA is indifferent to such issues, however. The indiscriminate bombings and killings of innocent people, which are an attempt to force the government to negotiate better terms for the Basque bourgeoisie, only serve to unite the Spanish working class with its own enemies.

The funeral for the two victims killed in Santa Pola became a show of force for the rightwing and a demonstration of the collusion between the government, the social democrats, the nationalists, the church and the police. The funeral procession was headed by Aznar, accompanied by the ministers of the interior, labour and defence, the president of the Valencia Generalitat and members of its autonomous government. Three members of the federal leadership of the PSOE, as well as the secretary general of the Valencia PSOE attended the function. The Basque government sent two of its representatives from the health and justice ministries.

The Bishop of Orihuela-Alicante, Victorio Oliver, spoke and read out a message from the Pope. The king, queen and prince also sent messages of condolence. Thousands of ordinary people opposed to the killing of innocent people joined in demanding “justice” from the prime minister. More demonstrations were held in

other parts of Spain.

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