

Spain: Popular Party attempts to wreck ETA ceasefire

By Paul Mitchell
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Spain's right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP) is attempting to wreck the ceasefire announced on March 24, 2006, by the Basque separatist group Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom—ETA). The ceasefire was accompanied by a declaration of a permanent end to its 38-year military campaign of bombings and shootings that resulted in the death of 800 people.

The Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government led by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero declared formal talks could begin within months provided that the organisation honoured its ceasefire, put a stop to street violence and ended its “revolutionary tax” on businesses.

However, on November 13, PP Secretary General Ángel Acebes claimed that recent events showed that the situation in the Basque Country was deteriorating and ETA “is not determined to give up violence.” Acebes referred to an alleged ETA raid on an arms warehouse in France on October 26 and the stealing of 350 handguns, as well as Spain's most serious incident of street violence since the ceasefire began—the dousing of two policemen with petrol following a riot in Bilbao on November 10, which he described as a “terrorist attack.”

Acebes demanded the PSOE “take up again the strategy to bring down ETA through police action” and immediately end its meetings with ETA. He called for a ban on any demonstrations or meetings that could “constitute collaborating with the aims of the terrorist group” and a ban on ETA's alleged political wing Batasuna standing in the 2007 municipal elections.

He insisted that Zapatero hold an urgent meeting with the Victims of Terrorism Association (AVT), an organisation closely aligned with the PP. He also called on the PSOE to “publicly disclaim the international view of what is a nonexistent conflict between Spain and the Basque Country...and never again consult international authorities on how to tackle it”—a reference to the support given by the European Parliament on October 27 to “the peace initiative...undertaken by the Spanish democratic institutions.” There was a narrow vote for a PSOE resolution—321 in favour, 311 opposed, with 24 abstentions—after the chamber officially rejected a text submitted by the PP opposing the peace initiative.

The raid on the arms warehouse in France took place on the day before the vote. French prosecutor Robert Gelli quickly stated, “Everything leads us to believe that it was ETA” because of “the mode of operation, the presence of a woman, the foreign accent of the individuals...and of course, the nature of the objects stolen.” Although Zapatero agreed that it was probably ETA and that “it is a grave and serious matter that will, eventually, bring consequences,” he added that “we are not going to act precipitously.”

Following the announcement of ETA's ceasefire, leaders of the PSOE looked to the PP for support, citing the “blank cheque” Zapatero had given José María Aznar's PP government when he was the leader of the opposition. “We supported every initiative by the PP government,” said Juan López Aguilar, the justice minister, adding, “the idea was that ETA would have no advantage depending on who was in power.” Zapatero pointed out that a previous PP government had agreed to a nine-day truce in 1996 and transferred 36 prisoners to Basque prisons and to an indefinite truce two years later when it transferred 130 prisoners.

However, PP leaders condemned Zapatero's decision to initiate talks. Acebes accused him of “sharing the same project as ETA” and PP President Mariano Rajoy of being “in the hands of ETA.” When Patxi López, leader of the PSE, the Basque wing of the PSOE, said he would hold local preliminary talks with Batasuna shortly after the ceasefire was announced the PP immediately withdrew all its support from the peace process. López is currently being investigated by the police following a lawsuit by the PP.

A month after ETA declared its ceasefire, the PP was instrumental in getting the High Court to lay charges against Batasuna leader Analdo Otegi of glorifying terrorism during a speech at a memorial service in 2003. He was accused of praising the dead ETA leader José Miguel Beñaran Ordeñana, who was suspected of organising the assassination in 1973 of Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, the chosen successor of dictator General Franco. (Ordeñana was given an amnesty in 1977 during the “transition to democracy.” He was murdered just one year later.)

Otegi was sentenced to 15 months in prison and banned from standing for political office or voting for seven years. He was

later released on bail.

In June, the High Court blocked the release of ETA terrorist leader José Ignacio De Juana Chaos, who had completed his 18-year sentence in full in October 2004, accused of murdering 25 people. Lawyers from the AVT had appealed an earlier decision to release De Juana, agreed with by Justice Minister López Aguilar who said, “We will study the possibility of building a new court case based on [his] membership of an armed gang, threats, or some kind of continued terrorist activity from jail.”

Subsequently, De Juana was charged with issuing threats in two letters published in the Basque daily paper *Gara* in 2004 and 2005, prompting State General Prosecutor Cándido Conde Pumpido to call for a 96-year prison sentence. (The articles can be read here.)

On November 8, De Juana was sentenced to a fresh term of nearly 13 years in prison—an action that precipitated the Bilbao riot and a large (peaceful) demonstration in the city the following day called by Basque nationalist organisations hoping to boost “the process of resolution of the conflict, which is in a complicated situation.”

As many commentators, such as Josep Ramoneda writing in the PSOE-aligned *El Pais*, have noted, “In all honesty, I cannot understand how somebody can be sentenced to prison for 12 years and seven months on the basis that such comments constitute such a threat” bearing in mind “that these kind of comments are published all the time in Spain.”

Otegi called De Juana’s sentence “the last straw that broke the camel’s back.” But he added, “Despite all of this, we will carry on working. Channels are still open,” and vowed “to go from town to town” to end the violence that had erupted. ETA’s internal magazine *Zutabe* added that it was prepared to make “a new effort in negotiations with the Spanish government.”

The police have broken up ETA’s cells and disrupted its financial network, and hundreds of its leading members are in jail. In November 2005, the largest trial in Spanish history began with the prosecution of 56 people, accused of being the “stomach, the heart and the head of ETA.” The trial was the culmination of seven years of unprecedented state repression directed against Basque-separatist organisations that has provided the pretext to overturn fundamental democratic freedoms (the presumption of innocence and the right to free speech and free association) established after the fall of the Franco dictatorship.

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks and the Madrid bombings in March 2004, support for ETA haemorrhaged. The PP government and its PSOE successor pushed through draconian legislation under the auspices of the “war on terror,” which led to the banning of Batasuna—an organisation that had existed legally for 24 years, and had seven deputies in the Basque parliament and hundreds of local councillors.

Opposition to state repression does not mean lending political

support to ETA’s separatist programme.

ETA’s ceasefire signalled that its leaders hope that the organisation will be able to secure greater autonomy for the Basque region and its own positions in the state apparatus through a power-sharing arrangement, similar to that reached with Sinn Fein and former members of the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. A section of Batasuna has expressed support for the plan for a “self-governing” Basque region in “free association” with Spain drawn up by Juan José Ibarretxe, the leader of the largest Basque nationalist party, the PNV, which has dominated the regional government for the last 25 years.

The Ibarretxe plan aims to establish a niche for the Basque bourgeoisie within the global marketplace, upholding as it does “the right to private property and a respect for the freedom of enterprise within the framework of the market economy.” The proposals aim not at protecting the rights of Basque working people, but at offering them as a cheap labour force to the European bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations.

Zapatero and the PSOE are seeking to preserve the general interests of the Spanish bourgeoisie. But while they are making what they consider to be unavoidable concessions to regional interests, there are serious limitations on how far they can go in seeking to appease the separatists without antagonising the powerful sections of the national bourgeoisie represented by the PP.

The PP has used the ETA issue to mobilise far-right forces such as the AVT and elements within the military and judiciary in a campaign to destabilise the PSOE government. It accuses Zapatero of coming to power illegitimately, referring to the mass movement that brought down Aznar’s PP government after it attempted to blame ETA for the March 11, 2004, terror bombings in Madrid, even though all evidence pointed to it being the work of Islamic fundamentalists.

The solution to the Basque conflict and all national divisions is the struggle for the unity of the Spanish, European and international working class. The crisis of the nation state must find a progressive solution not in the break-up into smaller and less viable entities based on the reactionary concept of ethnicity, but in its replacement by a more rational and universal form of economic and social organisation that corresponds more directly with the economic realities of globalised production—the United Socialist States of Europe.

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