

Separatist parties dominate Catalan election results

By Paul Mitchell
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The Catalan parliamentary election held November 25 resulted in a significant vote for parties calling for independence from Spain.

The snap election was announced on September 25 by the ruling conservative nationalist Catalan Convergence and Union Party (CiU) led by President Artur Mas, which had ruled the region since the 2010 election as a minority government forming occasional pacts with other parties. The result is likely to increase demands for the new government to hold a referendum on self-determination, which would spark a constitutional crisis. Separation is strongly opposed by the Popular Party (PP) national government headed by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and the main opposition Socialist Party (PSOE). They argue that only the Madrid government can legally call a referendum and that it would have to include the entire country.

The PP government has rejected a fiscal pact giving the region more control over taxation. A demonstration held on September 11 under the slogan, “Catalonia, new state of Europe” attracted 1.5 million people—a quarter of the population. There are fears within ruling circles that any move toward independence by Catalonia could be swiftly followed by similar action by the Basque Country and lead to the break-up of Spain.

Catalonia is by far the wealthiest of Spain’s 17 autonomous regions, accounting for some 20 percent of the national gross domestic product. The ruling class in the region has embraced the creation of a new capitalist mini-state in order to end what it complains is a subsidy to the poorer regions. It seeks to obtain a greater share in the exploitation of the working class by the transnational corporations, by cutting taxes on business and slashing social spending.

The CiU has dominated Catalan politics since the end

of the Francoist regime and transition to democracy in 1978. It only recently ditched its “policy of national and linguistic identity ... within the Spanish framework” in favour of threatening separation. Mas has indicated that he may hold a referendum in 2014 alongside a similar one due in Scotland. The CiU has whipped up nationalism in an attempt to divert attention from its massive €5 billion cuts in education, health care and social services, claiming that separation from Spain would mean such cuts would not be necessary. But it lost 12 seats in Sunday’s election, ending up with 50 seats in the 135-seat regional parliament, as voters punished it for its austerity measures.

Nevertheless, two-thirds of the electorate voted for parties that are in favour of calling an independence referendum, indicating that the claim that separation from Spain would lessen the need for austerity has found significant purchase despite hostility to the CiU. Mas told supporters after the election, “From this result we note that we are clearly the only force that can lead this government, but we cannot lead it alone. We need shared responsibility... The presidency must be taken up, but we will also have to reflect along with other forces”.

The “other forces” he cites are those parties that have made a better attempt to dress up the separatist agenda being pursued by the regional bourgeoisie and upper middle class layers in pseudo-progressive garb. The Catalan Republican Left (ERC) made the most gains—doubling its number of seats to 21 from 10 and its share of the popular vote from 7 percent to 13.7 percent. The two parties alone would have a working majority. There are also talks with the Socialist Party section in Catalonia (PSC).

The ERC advocates separatism on essentially the same terms as the CiU, arguing that Catalonia finances

the poor agricultural regions of southern Spain through taxation. In the 2003 regional elections, the ERC saw its share of the vote rise to 16.4 percent, almost doubling its seats to 23, and entered into a coalition government with the PSC. This also involved the ICV-EUiA—a coalition between the Initiative for Catalonia Greens and the United Left in Catalonia—ending 23 years of CiU control. The ERC's support plummeted in 2010 because it was part of a coalition responsible for the massive June 10, 2010 deficit reduction plan.

The PSC has continued its long-term decline, gaining only 20 seats and 14.4 percent of the vote compared to its high point in 1999 when it had 52 seats and 37.8 percent. Its traditional working class electorate has abandoned the social democrats, because it is seen as having no real differences with the right-wing parties.

The ICV-EUiA comprises middle class “lefts”, Greens and Stalinists, and styles itself as “ecologist”, “socialist” and “feminist”. It also campaigned in favour of the right to “self-determination”. Ignoring its own role in the austerity Catalan coalition and the budget cuts being implemented by its sister parties elsewhere in Spain, the ICV-EUiA campaigned on a manifesto to “defeat the dogmatic policies of austerity.” It recorded its biggest electoral success, increasing its seats by three to 13. The nationalism it promotes serves to politically demobilize workers and to prevent them from advancing their own independent interests in a unified struggle.

Hoping to secure their place in any new regional set-up are a number of other petty bourgeois nationalist groups masquerading as socialist or Marxist, including the separatist party Popular Unity Candidatures (CUP), which won three seats for the first time. Founded in 1986 out of the remnants of various splits from the ERC, the CUP describes itself as a Catalan “independentist”, socialist, green, non-patriarchal and localist movement. It calls for the unification of all the Catalan Countries, which includes the Balearic Islands, the region of Valencia and Pyrénées-Orientales in France and an alliance of the Mediterranean countries (Portugal, Italy and Greece).

Catalan separatism, a programme cast in the interests of a privileged elite, has gained wider popular acceptance by default, as a result of the betrayal by the trade unions and nominally “left” parties of the

repeated attempts by the working class to oppose austerity. The trade unions have staged token protests while agreeing to labour “reforms” with the government and employers, and isolated numerous strikes by workers in the public sector. In Catalonia, the unions supported calls for the fiscal pact and backed the September 11 demonstration.

But the lie that any of these parties would oppose austerity measures is exposed by their desperate efforts to secure a place for an independent Catalonia within the European Union, the main instrument through which the European bourgeoisie is presently enforcing its demands for savage cuts in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy. The only demand they really make is for the axe to fall more heavily on the population of these countries as opposed to Catalonia. When the demand for cuts is made nevertheless, within or outside of Spain, the cuts will be dutifully imposed by them all.

None of these fake left outfits make the essential demand for a united struggle of workers against the Spanish state, the European Union and its constituent governments. The unity of the working class presupposes political opposition to separatism. It is not new and smaller states that are needed, but the ending of all national divisions through the unification of the Spanish, European and international working class and the formation of the United Socialist States of Europe.

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