

Spanish Congress rejects Catalan independence referendum

By Alejandro López
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The Spanish Popular Party (PP) government and the main opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) have rejected the request by the Catalan regional parliament to hold an independence referendum on November 9, 2014.

PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy declared in the debate, “one part cannot decide over the whole. There is not one constitution in the world that says this. Neither does ours...This chamber cannot accept transferring the power of referendum to those whose objective it is to destroy the constitution.” Rajoy warned that Catalonia would not automatically become a member of the European Union, the euro zone and other international treaties if it left Spain.

Rajoy concluded by stating, “There is an open door that goes hand-in-hand with those who are not comfortable with the current state of affairs, and that is to start the initiative for constitutional reform”.

PSOE leader Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba also said his party encouraged the Catalan parties to push for constitutional reform and was opposed to a referendum being held without Congressional approval—a fact nigh on impossible, given that the Spanish Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the PP-PSOE dominated chamber.

Rosa Diez, leader of Spain’s fourth largest party, Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD), which calls for regional powers to be handed back to the central state, an argument which even the PP is wary of, accused the Catalan parties of being “Spanishphobes”. She also accused Catalonia of “oppressing” its “non-nationalist citizens” who “cannot occupy public functions because they are not in the politically correct discourse.”

In the debate, the Catalan separatist parties claimed to defend “the will of the Catalan people”.

Jordi Turull of *Convèrgencia i Unió* (CiU), the ruling

party in the Catalan regional parliament, declared, “The people of Catalonia ... are on a road of no return” and that the referendum would still be held regardless of the Congress vote. The Catalan Republican Left (ERC), which is supporting the CiU minority Catalan government, took a similar position and the ICV-EUiA—a coalition between the Initiative for Catalonia Greens and the United Left in Catalonia—accused Rajoy of “ripping apart” Spain because he did not “recognize the region’s right to choose”.

The whole debate in Congress was a sham. Workers should oppose the claims that any of these parties are defending the “will” of the people. All are implicated in a cover-up of the real issues facing the vast majority of the population—27 percent unemployment, wage cuts, poverty and cuts to public health care, education and pensions.

Both the PSOE government (2008-2011) and the current PP government have imposed one austerity measure after another, including spending cuts of €7.3 billion (16 percent) since 2010, three labour reforms and two pensions reforms.

At regional government level, the PP and PSOE regional parties have been joined by the separatist parties in imposing savage cuts. In June 2010, the “Coalition of Progress” governing Catalonia that included the PSC (the Catalan sister party of the PSOE), the ERC and the ICV-EUiA passed an austerity plan that included cuts totalling €1.6 billion. The following year the ERC declared it would work with the new CiU government, which approved unprecedented cuts, including €3.4 billion in health care, €2.5 billion in education, €758 million in social welfare, and €433 million in other services.

Last December, the ERC agreed to support the CiU’s

2014 budget, which includes further austerity measures in exchange for the referendum being held this November.

This makes clear that neither side of this so-called “debate” represent the interests of the working class and its democratic and social rights. It involves a struggle between competing layers of the upper middle class and the bourgeoisie as to how best to gain access to the global markets and step up the exploitation of working people.

Recent polls show that independence is favoured by up to 57 percent of the Catalan population, compared to 34 percent in 1996 with those against ranging between 18 and 30 percent, and those undecided 10 to 25 percent.

The growth in separatist sentiment is entirely the result of the betrayals of the trade unions and the pseudo-left parties. The trade unions have repeatedly diverted opposition to austerity into token protests before acceding to wage cuts and attacks on labour and pension rights.

While acting as the cheerleaders for the trade union bureaucracy, the pseudo-left groups champion Catalan nationalism and the referendum. They promote the break-up of Spain as progressive and in this way work to divide the working class and subordinate it to one or another wing of the bourgeoisie.

En Lucha, affiliated to the International Socialist Tendency, states that “we have to force an institutional disobedience—it is expected that the institutions should obey the will of the population—whether it be the government, the Parliament or the local governments—so that the referendum will be carried out...”

In the same vein, the Spanish section of the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International, Izquierda Anticapitalista, claims that the separatist movement is “a new collective and plural actor which is opening up a fissure against the regime which we have to use outside Catalonia in order to deepen the cracks.” The referendum is seen as a chance for “us to strike all together against the government and the regime.”

A very dangerous situation is being created. The Rajoy government insists that the referendum will not be held but is at a loss to explain how it will be prevented. A military or police intervention is a real possibility. The president of the Spanish Military

Association, the largest organisation of military and Civil Guard personnel, retired colonel Leopoldo Muñoz, has called for the prosecution of separatists by a military court for “crimes of high treason”.

He declared that the army could intervene on the basis of Article 8 of the Spanish Constitution, which states: “The mission of the Armed Forces, comprising the Army, the Navy and the Air Force, is to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain and to defend its territorial integrity and the constitutional order”.

Other political forces have also called for intervention in Catalonia. The UpyD is calling for the suspension of Catalan region autonomy and former Member of the European Parliament, Alejo Vidal-Quadras, who quit the PP for the extreme right-wing Vox party, has demanded that the Civil Guard be prepared for November.

After the defeat in Congress, Catalan President Artur Mas asked Rajoy to “set a day and a time” to start talking about a negotiated settlement. At the same time he insisted that the referendum will carry on regardless and that “alternative legal frameworks” will be used, including “plebiscite-style” elections in 2016 if the Spanish government tries to stop the referendum taking place. If parties in favour of independence win that election it would be deemed a vote for separation.

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