

Podemos' call for dialogue on Catalonia: A political trap with deadly consequences

By Paul Mitchell
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On Tuesday evening, Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont reaffirmed the right of Catalonia, following the October 1 referendum, to independence from Spain. The move would not be implemented for several weeks, he added, to allow for negotiations with the Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid.

Wednesday saw Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy reject talks and demand “clarity” from Puigdemont over whether or not he has declared independence. His was an ultimatum aimed at justifying the action of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, suspending Catalonia’s autonomy and laying the basis for imposing direct rule from Madrid through military intervention.

Millions of workers and youth in Spain are appalled at the descent into fratricidal conflict and the risk of civil war. Many who may politically oppose Catalan secession are far more concerned with taking a stand against the savage repression being prepared by the PP government.

In these conditions, the pseudo-left party Podemos has set itself the task of demobilising all opposition to the PP by corraling workers and youth behind a policy of putting pressure on Madrid and Barcelona to begin negotiations.

As the PP and Socialist Party (PSOE) are engaged in discussions over plans to launch a massive state crackdown in Catalonia, Podemos is seeking to sow illusions that it is somehow possible to defend democratic rights within the framework of the capitalist system. In so doing, they are disarming the Spanish and Catalan working class in the face of a massive state build-up that will be used against not just Catalan separatism, but all efforts at social resistance.

Last Saturday, even as troop deployments to Catalonia and surrounding areas were proceeding, Podemos was helping stage demonstrations throughout Spain under the slogan, in Spanish and Catalan, “Hablemos/Parlem” (Let’s Talk). Tens of thousands of people, dressed in white and refusing to carry Spanish or Catalan flags, took to the streets of Madrid and regional capitals including Barcelona, Seville, Granada, Bilbao, Pamplona and Valladolid.

In Barcelona’s Sant Jaume square, thousands of Catalans gathered proclaiming “The Catalan people do not want division,” and “We want to talk”. In Madrid, Cibeles Square was filled with white flags and protestors chanting, “Let’s Talk, Let’s Talk, Spain is diverse,” and “This country already made war once, never again!”

For many in attendance, the sentiment expressed was genuine. José Luis told *El Periódico*, “I am not for independence, but nobody believes that I am a Spanish nationalist or that I agree with a repressive state.” Clara added, “We are here to try to reach an agreement and to declare that violence is not the way, it has to be dialogue, we have to listen to each other.”

25-year-old Barcelona publicist Reyes Rodriguez explained to the *New York Times*, “I don’t believe in flags or nationalism because it makes hate and wars... So I’m here to call for dialogue.”

These “White” demonstrations have been promoted as a spontaneous grassroots initiative spreading virally through social media. They have been compared to the indignados (15-M) movement, which began in 2011 in opposition to the bank bailouts and austerity measures carried out by the PSOE government. However, the 15-M movement ultimately failed because of the “no politics” perspective imposed by the movement’s leadership, who wanted to prevent the emergence of a genuine political challenge to the PSOE.

Many of those same leaders went on to help create the pseudo-left party Podemos, which continues to spread a message, directed above all to the middle class, urging “popular”, “moral” and “unifying” protest as an alternative to the “divisive” politics of class struggle.

The instigator of the “White” protests and its main spokesperson is Guillermo Fernandez, a researcher at the Complutense University in Madrid, where Podemos was born as the brainchild of Stalinist-influenced academics such as party leader Pablo Iglesias.

Fernandez duly claimed in the days before the demonstrations that the idea came from discussions with a

group of friends that he then “shared with his 15-M matrix in civil society.” But newspapers opposed to any vacillation over Catalonia were quick to point out that Fernandez was previously a speechwriter and campaign adviser for Podemos. They suggest that “Let’s Talk” is a Podemos conspiracy aimed at undermining Rajoy and the PP.

The manifesto for Saturday’s “White” demonstrations was wrapped in the language of patriotism—as an appeal (framed by Podemos) for it to be recognised as a potential saviour of Spain at a time of acute crisis.

“The time has come to say that Spain is a greater country than her rulers,” the manifesto stated.

An unnamed “They” are accused of spreading “hatred, they pit us against each other and divide us. If we don’t intervene as a society they are going to turn this country into a difficult place to live.”

The method of doing so is “by dialogue and coexistence.”

The manifesto’s rosy depiction of Spanish society and the repressive machinery of the state is politically grotesque. “Coexistence is created through dialogue, and laws should serve that dialogue. Laws cannot be used as an obstacle, and much less as a means to generate a civil conflict,” the manifesto intones, before once again appealing for national unity.

“We need to say enough is enough to this spiral, we need to stop, sit down, and think about our country. It is through democracy, listening, and dialogue that we will reach solid and lasting social agreements,” it concluded.

Echoing the manifesto word for word, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias tweeted, “People are better than their rulers. I feel pride and hope seeing Madrid like this right now.”

Iglesias applauded Puigdemont’s decision on Tuesday evening to suspend independence and pleaded with Rajoy to take up his offer of negotiations, claiming “Spain is pluri-national and the Catalan people deserve to be listened to.”

Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau, head of the Podemos-supported Barcelona en Común coalition, joined Saturday’s protest and tweeted, “Thousands of people send a message of peace to their leaders: what is brave today is to listen and sit and talk... We mustn’t resign ourselves to polarisation, bellicose language and the competitive logic that only seeks the defeat of the adversary.”

The co-spokesperson for Podemos’ executive, Noelia Vera, made it clear the party’s role in “Let’s Talk”, saying, “We are deeply proud of this... We feel very identified with this proposal, in which many officials of Podemos can participate anonymously.”

“Anyone who asks for dialogue to avoid the train crash will find our support and our participation, as anyone who is for democracy,” Vera added.

The Organisation Secretary of Podemos, Pablo Echenique, was yet more effusive, leaping on the attendance, (in a personal capacity), of leaders of the PSOE Catalan section, the PSC, in the Barcelona “white” demonstration and the presence of the “Let’s Talk” slogan at the press conference—held at the PSC headquarters by PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez and PSC leader Miquel Iceta.

In a transparent and cynical attempt to conceal his party’s support for the PP’s planned repression, Sánchez tweeted, “Dialogue and coexistence. The street asks us. We are up to it.”

At the same time as Sánchez was professing solidarity with the “White” protests, *El País* revealed the “leaders at the highest level of the PSOE have spent days debating how to implement Article 155” with Rajoy. Yesterday Sanchez said that the PSOE and PP are backing Rajoy in pursuing “clarification” from Puigdemont over whether he has declared independence and that he needs to put it in “black and white” what his plans are.

Workers and young people genuinely seeking to oppose the repression being prepared by the PP cannot do so under the leadership of the PSOE or its shadow, Podemos, or under a white flag of impartiality.

It is not a question of “rescuing” the Spanish state from “reaction,” or setting up a Catalan mini-state as an alternative. The drive towards authoritarian forms of rule is rooted in the escalating class antagonisms Podemos seeks to conceal. Waging trade and military war demands that the ruling elites in Spain and throughout Europe impose by brute force the destruction of workers livelihoods and the essential services on which they depend. This demands a unified counter-offensive carried out under the red flag of socialism in order to defeat the Francoist police-military repression being prepared against Catalonia.

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