

EU summit endorses Spain's threat of police-military occupation of Catalonia

By Alex Lantier
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The two-day European Union (EU) summit of heads of state that ended yesterday in Brussels unambiguously endorsed Madrid's plans to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish constitution, imposing a new Catalan regional government backed by Spanish police and army units.

The Catalan crisis was not formally on the summit agenda. Nonetheless, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was allowed to give an address to justify invoking Article 155, the so-called "nuclear option," after the vicious police crackdown on the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. Rajoy's brief for the occupation of Catalonia, based on a systematic falsification of the crisis in Spain, received the enthusiastic support of the EU's major powers.

"Article 155 will be applied tomorrow," Rajoy declared, effectively ruling out further talks with the Catalan government of premier Carles Puigdemont. Rajoy nonetheless proceeded to place full blame for the crisis on the supposed obstinacy of the Catalan government and of so-called "radicals" in Catalonia: "They are the ones responsible for what is happening today. Frankly, the government of Catalonia defended its positions badly, despite the assistance they were given."

Rajoy continued, "We have been very cautious, we tried not to create a difficult situation, but it is hard when people liquidate the law and the rule of law ... when laws are ignored and referendums are held without guarantees. We have arrived at a borderline situation. If you accept the demands of the radicals, what occurs is what is happening right now."

Rajoy's arguments are a pack of bald-faced lies, concocted to justify an aggressive military-police intervention in Catalonia. Madrid and the EU overwhelmingly bear responsibility for provoking this crisis, and the EU powers are backing Rajoy's drive for a crackdown and a turn to deal with growing political opposition in the population with authoritarian measures.

The crisis provoked by the October 1 referendum is the outcome of the deep crisis of European capitalism, after nearly a decade of savage EU austerity devastated social conditions and left tens of millions of workers unemployed across the continent.

The referendum was called amid a growing conflict between Madrid and Barcelona over how to implement social cuts that the EU had negotiated with Madrid since the 2008 financial crisis. While similar Catalan referendums had been held peacefully before, as recently as November 2014, Madrid reacted violently this year. It seized ballots, tried to arrest hundreds of mayors as well as other officials, and launched a campaign of political intimidation to crush the October 1 vote.

When, on October 1, 16,000 *Guardia Civil* were stunned by a mass mobilization of the Catalan population to defend polling places, they responded with a brutal assault on peaceful voters. Millions of people worldwide were shocked and appalled by videos of *Guardia Civil* breaking into schools, kicking people sitting on the ground waiting to vote, and even attacking elderly women in a brutal onslaught that sent over 800 people to the hospital.

Despite the 90 percent vote for independence, Puigdemont suspended a declaration of independence in a speech on October 10 and has, since then, been appealing for dialogue with Madrid, to no avail. Madrid, on the other hand, has escalated the situation—shutting down Catalan web sites, arresting Catalan nationalist politicians, and threatening to impose emergency rule. This has provoked mass protests by hundreds of thousands of people in the Catalan capital, Barcelona.

Speaking in Brussels yesterday, Rajoy tried to downplay the dictatorial character of his policy and counteract entirely justified fears of an even bloodier crackdown to come. "Using Article 155 does not presuppose the use of force," he claimed, adding that his

government would decide on measures to be taken in joint talks with the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the right-wing Citizens party, as well as Rajoy's own Popular Party (PP).

Rajoy made clear that, however, the Madrid ruling establishment is in fact contemplating mass repression against the Catalan population. Asked if he feared violence as on October 1, Rajoy refused to comment but handed a blank check to the police for more violence, saying: "The security forces have the full support of Spain and its prime minister."

Applying Article 155 entails launching a confrontation with Catalan workers and youth unprecedented since 1978 and the collapse—amid mass struggles of the working class—of the Spanish fascist regime set up by Francisco Franco. It means suspending Catalonia's elected government and forcibly installing a new one dictated by Madrid, backed by *Guardia Civil* and army units. Some of the army units to be mobilized in a crackdown—motorized infantry battalions in Barcelona and Sant Climent Sescebes—have already been named in Spanish media.

With mass protests already erupting in Barcelona, Spanish media are discussing a dictatorial agenda for Madrid's un-elected regime in Catalonia that would provoke even more opposition: austerity, shutting down Catalan public television, and removing Catalan-language items from the schools. In the Spanish security and armed forces, repression even bloodier than the October 1 crackdown is doubtless being actively planned and prepared. Madrid is also discussing invoking Article 116 and setting up a state of emergency across Spain.

A crisis with revolutionary implications is emerging in Catalonia, and in Spain and all of Europe. There is deep, historically-rooted opposition in the European working class to a return to dictatorship, and an attempt by Madrid to maintain an illegitimate stooge regime in Barcelona by mass repression would provoke enormous anger across Europe. The only way to oppose Madrid's drive to impose dictatorial rule in Catalonia and throughout Spain is the mobilization of the working class across Europe in a politically independent, revolutionary struggle against the EU and the crackdown in Catalonia.

Arguments advanced by forces like Spain's Podemos party, that the population can wait for the EU to intervene and peacefully resolve the conflict between Madrid and Barcelona, are false and must be rejected. In a statement for *Público*, the secretary of Podemos for the Madrid region, Ramón Espinar hailed "broad international

consensus ... on the need for mediation and dialogue" that he saw as key to resolving the crisis.

Such illusions serve no other purpose than to lull masses of people to sleep. The EU—consisting of bankrupt regimes in which the police and army play enormous roles after nearly two decades of the "war on terror" and a decade of deep austerity—is itself rapidly moving to abrogate basic democratic rights, with regimes such as the French state of emergency. It is signaling its support for the attack on the Catalan population, because it is preparing similar attacks on the working class across Europe.

The major European heads of state at the Brussels summit all backed Rajoy's dictatorial agenda. "We back the position of the Spanish government," declared German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who later on echoed Rajoy's calls for an outcome of the crisis "on the grounds of the Spanish constitution."

Similarly, British Prime Minister Theresa May said yesterday, "I have spoken to Mariano Rajoy this morning as I did earlier this week and made clear that the United Kingdom's position is very clear. We believe that people should be abiding by the rule of law and uphold the Spanish constitution."

While Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte called the Catalan crisis "an internal Spanish matter," French President Emmanuel Macron held a private meeting with Rajoy after declaring on Thursday that EU leaders would "send a message of unity around Spain."

In an extraordinary gesture of support to Madrid, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, EU Council President Donald Tusk, and European Parliament President Antonio Tajani all traveled to Oviedo in Spain yesterday after the summit, to attend as Spanish King Felipe VI awarded the EU a Princess of Asturias prize. They listened as the king declared that Catalonia was an "essential part" of Spain—a remark that provoked sustained applause from the audience.

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