

Spain: Podemos support plummets after rightward lurch

By Paul Mitchell
24 February 2018

Four years ago, in January 2014, the pseudo-left Podemos party was founded in Spain on an anti-austerity programme. It declared itself to be an “electoral war machine” aimed at the “caste” of corrupt Spanish politicians. By the end of that year Podemos was regularly polling around 30 percent of the vote to become the country’s number one party.

Since then support for Podemos has plummeted. In all the polls this year Unidos-Podemos (the alliance between Podemos and the United Left) lies in fourth place (16.5 percent) behind the Popular Party (PP), the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Citizens, which are neck and neck on around 25 percent. Of the 5 million people who voted for the party in the 2016 general election only a half say they will do so again. Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias is considered the worst party leader.

Together with its ongoing programmatic lurch to the right, a major factor in the decline of Podemos has been the experience made by workers and middle-class people with the party in numerous town halls and city halls.

In June 2015 the Podemos-led coalition Now Madrid (Ahora Madrid), led by Manuela Carmena, gained power in the capital ending 24 years of PP rule. Similar victories occurred in other major cities including Barcelona, Valencia and Zaragoza—leading to them being dubbed “municipalities of change” or “rebel councils.” There was talk of a “municipalist front” by various Podemos officials that would use “citizen debt audits” to stop the payment of “illegitimate” debts. Many councils, for example, were paying interest on loans of around 6 percent to banks that were getting money from the European Central Bank at 0.25 percent.

The head of finance at Madrid city council, Carlos Sanchez Mato, a leader of the Pabloite Anticapitalistas

faction in Podemos, declared, “The way to fulfil our obligations is to cast aside the spending rule battling until the last stand”—a reference to the European Union requirement, incorporated into Spanish law in 2012, that eurozone members limit their debt to GDP at 60 percent and cap budget deficits at no more than 3 percent.

There was little battling, however, when the stand-off came, and the PP government sought to roll back the limited increase in social spending and investment the Carmena administration had carried out. (At the same time Madrid city council was also shelling out huge amounts to pay off the Madrid debt—some €357 million in just one year, 2016—knowing it, or at least a good chunk of it, was “illegitimate”). Last year PP Finance Minister Cristobal Montoro invoked the Budget Stability Law to demand the council cut €238 million (or 7 percent) from its 2017 budget. Montoro added that until the council complied, the Ministry of Finance would take control of its finances.

Carmena duly capitulated. In November, she announced the first cuts of around €173 million and in December that a new Economic and Financial Plan for the capital that had been passed in the Madrid Assembly with the support of PP councillors had been sent to Montoro.

Carmena revealed that there were people in her own administration “that greatly regret what we’ve done by application of the spending rule,” but made it clear that the council would always toe the line demanded of it by the PP: “I would say that we all regret it and we insist that our interpretation of the spending rule is different, but I think we all know that we have to comply with the norm and that we have to fulfil it ...”

To ensure there was no doubt this was official party policy, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias declared that it

“is logical that the municipalities have to comply” and that the Madrid council will remain a “strong” institution that “will continue to be the benchmark for Madrid and Spain.” He assured everyone that Carmena would be the candidate for mayor again in the next election.

Following Iglesias’s endorsement of Carmena, Anticapitalistas Madrid Assembly member Isabel Serra complained, “To think that we won Madrid only for Carmena is wrong,” warning that “Over the years Podemos has become normalised for a good part of the population, because they consider us to be part of the political class.” Serra then declared, “I believe that, in the face of this, a debate is now taking place not only in the city of Madrid, but also in the whole of the state, which has to do with whether Podemos is part of the restoration of the regime, or if Podemos is positioned outside of the restoration.”

Serra’s attempt to cover for Podemos’ betrayal in Madrid—leaving it as an open question as to whether the party supports the state “regime”—is a graphic example of the role Pabloism has played in blocking the revolutionary upsurge of the working class. Time after time, it has apologised for every shift to the right by Podemos even when its own members are attacked.

During the Catalan referendum crisis last November, the Podemos leadership purged the local Podemos organisation where the Anticapitalistas were the majority current. Podemos had supported the “new Catalan Republic” declared by the Catalan separatists in October in opposition to the official party line endorsing a unified Spain and a “negotiated referendum” on independence. Iglesias said of the Anticapitalistas, “They are politically outside of Podemos.”

Despite all this, the Anticapitalistas continue to peddle the illusion that Podemos can be “reinvigorated” by “social mobilisation” along the lines of the Indignados movement protesting austerity measures in 2011—of which Podemos, set up by a group of Stalinist academics led by Iglesias—was hailed as the ultimate political expression by the Pabloites. A fresh mobilisation “on the streets,” they now insist, would put pressure on the leadership to return to the party’s founding document (largely written by the Anticapitalistas) and all its words about debt cancellation, nationalisation, and membership

control—promises Iglesias and his associates had no intention of ever delivering.

Far from encouraging “social mobilisation,” Iglesias has made it clear Podemos is in the business of supposedly capturing the “institutions”—that is, continuing its integration into the political establishment on the basis of Spanish nationalism. He appeals to the ruling elite to adopt a “new plurinational patriotism,” which Podemos would spearhead, to prevent regional conflict and Spain’s disintegration.

Above all, the invocation of patriotism is aimed at preventing the development of any independent working class movement in response to the crisis of Spanish and global capitalism, expressed in the breakdown of Spain’s two-party system. Iglesias insists: “Podemos’ model implies dropping certain complexes and assumptions of the historic left. In particular, our symbols and narrative cannot be based on left-wing revenge for past defeats. For some of us, who are the grandchildren of those who lost the civil war and the children of anti-Franco militants, this can be painful. But it is something we need to recognize.”

In line with its rightward lurch, Podemos has joined forces with the right-wing Citizens party, which has been the main beneficiary of the Catalan crisis, to press for electoral reform. Just last year Iglesias labelled Citizens the new Falange—a reference to the fascist party that operated under the Francoist dictatorship. Now both parties will take part in “constant dialogue” to change the type of proportional representation system used in Spanish elections that is skewed in favour of larger parties, rural voters and the regions.

Under the proposed system the PP would lose 20 seats and the PSOE five, Podemos would increase its 71 seats to 77 and Ciudadanos from 32 seats to 44. Podemos’ secretary of organisation, Pablo Echenique, insisted that Podemos will not “impose any type of red line” that could prevent electoral reform.

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