

Explosive social conditions in Spain behind moves toward police state

By Vicky Short
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The arrest and detention of former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont in Germany, on the request of Spanish authorities, represents a sinister attack on political opposition. It marks another step toward police-state rule in Europe.

Behind this development lie economic, political and social tensions now finding expression in a growing movement of the European working class. This is especially the case in Spain, which in the last weeks has seen strikes by Amazon workers and mass demonstrations by pensioners to demand decent pensions and social security.

Despite the boast by the ruling right-wing Popular Party (PP) government and the European Union (EU) that Spain's economy has survived the 2008 economic crisis that crippled the country for almost a decade and is well on the road to recovery, working people—whether Catalan, Basque or Spanish-speaking—confront appalling and worsening social conditions.

Nearly three and a half million Spanish people are unemployed. Although the headline figure of 16.5 percent unemployed is down from 26.3 percent in 2013, this is small comfort, as a high number are in temporary, low-paid employment. According to official statistics, 21.5 million contracts were signed in 2017, of which 90 percent were temporary.

Oxfam Intercom ranks Spain as having experienced the third-highest growth of inequality in the EU since 2007. The organisation notes that the richest 1 percent of the Spanish population accounts for a quarter of the national wealth. It reports that 7,000 new millionaires were created in 2017. The fortunes of Spain's top three richest people are equivalent to the wealth of the poorest 30 percent, i.e., over 14 million people.

Meanwhile, the exploitation of the Spanish working

class has intensified. While hourly productivity has increased by 6 percent since 2012, wage costs have only increased by 0.6 percent. A recent survey revealed that 68 percent of Spanish people think that it is difficult or impossible for the average worker to increase their savings, no matter how hard they work.

Ten and a quarter million people live below the official poverty line. This is a poverty rate of 22.3 percent, the third highest in the EU. An estimated 27.9 percent of the population—nearly 13 million—are at risk of poverty and social exclusion; 22.3 percent, or 9 million families, are living on less than €684 [\$US841] per month and more than 1 million subsist on barely €342.

The European Network against Poverty and Social Exclusion's 7th Report ("The State of Poverty Following the Risk Indicator of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Spain--2008-2016"), reveals that a significant portion of the Spanish poor consists of adults with a medium or high level of education, working and with small children in their charge.

Up to 27 percent of poor Spaniards live in homes without lighting, with water leaks, rot on walls and floors and dirty surroundings.

The number of food banks, particularly in the big cities, is on the increase, where people using them include not only the homeless but a large number of the working poor. One of every three children in Spain today is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

After coming to power in 2011, the PP's government imposed tough austerity measures and was strongly criticised for raiding a €66.8 billion pension reserve fund.

This latter development explains the mass demonstrations by retirees last month. Tens of thousands rallied in Madrid, as well as Barcelona,

Bilbao, Seville and Granada, to denounce the government's 0.25 percent increase in pensions as inadequate.

"The 0.25 percent increase is shameful," said former waiter Jose Maria Elias, 66, to the AFP news agency. He was one of the thousands demonstrating in Madrid. "Let all the corrupt people return what they stole and put it in the pension fund," he said, referring to the numerous corruption scandals of affecting the ruling PP. "They have demolished our public pension system," said Josefa Albala, 77, who added that she uses her retirement money to help feed her unemployed daughter.

In the Basque region in northern Spain, where nationalism has been heavily promoted in an attempt to divide the Spanish working class, tens of thousands took to the streets without national flags. Many of those protesting have a militant history of struggle in major working class battles, including the Bilbao shipyards and Bizkaia steel mills, decimated by the Socialist Party government in the 1980s.

Young people are hit hardest by unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The jobless rate for those between the ages of 16 and 19 is as high as 60 percent. It is more than 40 percent for those aged between 20 and 24, and 25.6 percent for those between 25 and 29.

Tens of thousands of young people have left Spain, seeking work elsewhere. A recent report from the Consejo de la Juventud de España (Council of Spanish Youth) portrays a generation marked by unemployment, precariousness and emigration.

Since 2012, over 1 million well-educated young adults have left the country. "We do not go voluntarily, they throw us out," is their slogan. Many of them are nurses, doctors and scientists. Where they are able to find employment it is usually at lower rates of pay. Those less fortunate eke out a living in restaurants, cafes and hotels on low wages.

Those who remain in Spain are either dependent on family members, on very small welfare benefits when they can get them, or move from temporary job to temporary job. These contracts do not include paid leave or sick pay and offer little protection for workers, who can be fired without explanation or notice.

Most are unable to afford their own accommodation and so must continue to live with parents or family. The average age at which Spaniards leave the family

home is now 29.

If the ruling class has been able to implement these levels of misery and poverty, it is due above all to the role of pseudo-left political forces.

This year marks the seventh anniversary of the 15-M Movement or Indignados ("angry ones"), which arose against unemployment, economic hardship and the austerity measures imposed by the widely despised 2004-2011 Socialist Party government. The main leaders and spokespersons of the movement then made careers out of these protests, emerging as the new leaders of the pseudo-left parties and "social movements."

Alberto Garzón, for example, once a spokesperson for the Indignados in Malaga, is now general coordinator of the United Left. Ada Colau, the former leader of the anti-evictions platform PAH, is now mayor of Barcelona, busy breaking strikes and persecuting migrant street vendors. The once angry university professors, Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Erejón, now lead the pseudo-left Podemos, whose main role is to block the development of an independent programme, perspective and political leadership in opposition to capitalism.

Such is the rotten role of these forces that since Podemos' founding the number of demonstrations, rallies and other spontaneous actions has plummeted. Now, a movement of the working class and youth is starting to re-emerge once again after having experienced first-hand the austerity imposed by Podemos-led local and regional governments and their close relations with the Socialist Party.

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