

The dissolution of ETA: A political balance sheet of Basque nationalism—Part one

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Last month, the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) publicly announced its dissolution.

A 378-word “final statement from ETA to the Basque Country” was delivered by its historic leader, Josu Urrutikoetxea, better known as “Josu Ternera,” who remains in hiding.

He proclaimed the end of “ETA’s 60-year historical cycle,” adding that the armed group has “completely dismantled all of its structures” and “has put an end to all its political activity.”

Former members of ETA will “continue the struggle for a reunited, independent, socialist, Basque-speaking and non-patriarchal Basque Country wherever they see fit ...” Urrutikoetxea insisted.

The dissolution of ETA comes seven years after it announced an end to the armed struggle in 2011. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, “in an attempt to integrate themselves into the state apparatus, ETA, Batasuna and other nationalist and middle class ex-left organisations calling themselves the ‘Basque Radical Left’ are looking to the ‘success’ of the ‘peace process’ involving the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland.”

Since then Sinn Fein has become a responsible party of capitalist government, seeking to ensure the political stability necessary to attract investment capital. It has ruled in coalition with the bigots of the Democratic Unionist Party, imposing one austerity measure after another on the working class.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams attended ETA’s symbolic “International Meeting to advance the resolution of the Basque conflict” in southern France on May 4. Alongside him were other key figures involved in the Northern Ireland “peace process,” including former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern and

former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s chief of staff, Jonathan Powell.

Also in attendance were Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) President Andoni Ortuzar and Arnaldo Otegi, former ETA member, leader of ETA’s banned political wing Batasuna and its successor, Sortu. Otegi also leads Euskal Herria Bildu (E.H. Bildu), an electoral coalition of the Basque Radical Left, formed after the Supreme Court of Spain’s 2011 ruling barring Sortu from electoral participation.

E.H. Bildu has already integrated into official politics, acquiring state positions, influence and money. It has two deputies in the Spanish Congress, 18 out of 75 seats in the Basque parliament and 11,195 town councillors. For its national representation, E.H. Bildu obtains €379,174.

For these aspiring upper-middle-class layers, ETA has been an obstacle to their further progress. Its dissolution opens the door to participating more fully in the exploitation of the region’s working class.

Otegi relishes in the prospect of becoming the Basque Gerry Adams. He declared the dissolution of ETA was “a new situation” which “opens many windows of opportunity.” He appealed to the PNV to ally with E.H. Bildu and Elkarrekin Podemos (the Basque section of Podemos) to reach a new legal and political status for the Basque country.

Like its Catalan counterparts, the Basque ruling elite is seeking to extract more concessions from the central Spanish state to maintain and develop the region as a base for global capital and prevent its revenues subsidising poorer regions of the country.

The Basque Country already ranks first in Spain in terms of per capita income, some 30 percent higher than Spain’s average. It also has a unique tax system (with Navarre), which allows it to collect its own taxes

and retain a percentage greater than its share of population or GDP.

At the same time, the Basque Country is a social powder keg. Workers have lost an average of €642 in purchasing power, the worst of all regions in the past year. It is also the region with the highest percentage of labour conflicts, 68.9 per 100,000 companies (up 7.7 percent in the last year) and a 140 percent increase in the number of workers participating.

On the struggle for a decent pension, *El País* questioned, “Why Bilbao has become the capital of the rebellion of pensioners?” It pointed out, “In many cases they [the pensioners] share a common past in the struggles in the Bilbao shipyards or in the large public steel mills of Bizkaia that were closed in the ’70s and ’80s during the great industrial reconversions.”

The PNV dresses up its grubby manoeuvres for more concessions from Madrid with high-minded talk about national identity and self-determination. This was proved to be a fraud when it reneged on a promise to vote against the PP’s budget, so long as the PP continued to rule Catalonia from Madrid after deposing the Catalan government last year, when it voted for independence. Instead, in a sordid deal, the PNV gave its five casting votes to the PP government, allowing the budget to pass in return for over €500 million in investments.

Within days, the PNV then ditched the PP, providing its five votes (along with E.H. Bildu’s two votes) for the PSOE no-confidence motion that ushered in a PSOE government committed to the PP’s budget and the €500 million plus for the Basques. In return for its support, Basque PNV regional premier, Iñigo Urkullu, declared that he expected new Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to uphold Basque autonomy inscribed in the 1979 Statute of Gernika and to further “facilitate progress in Basque self-government.”

Basque nationalism and ETA’s foundation

Decades of ETA terror activity that left 829 people dead (including 340 civilians) and over 1,000 injured, unleashed massive repression by the Spanish state. This sowed immense confusion in the working class and progressive sections of the middle class. It stirred up sectarian divisions throughout Spain and especially in one of its most militant regions. It provided the state with a pretext to strengthen its repressive apparatus.

An historical assessment of the history, programme and class character of ETA, therefore, is essential in restoring a socialist outlook in the working class in Spain and internationally.

Both Basque and Catalan nationalism developed at the turn of the 19th century, in large measure as a reactionary response to the rise of the workers movement. Emerging predominantly within the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, the Basque nationalists sought support in the peasantry against the predations of big capital and the state bureaucracy.

The father of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana, founded the PNV in 1895. He hated the working class, especially those who migrated to the Basque country from elsewhere in Spain. Arana declared, “A great number of them seem to be undeniable testimony of Darwin’s theory, since rather than men they resemble apes, rather less beastly than gorillas: do not search in their faces for the expression of human intelligence nor of any virtue; their eyes only reveal idiocy and brutishness.”

When the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera in Spain fell in 1931, heralding the start of the Spanish Revolution, the PNV declared its objective was “stopping the workers movement and the possibility of a revolution.” It demanded of its members “absolute abstention from participation in any class movement ...”

To be continued

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