

Spain: Socialist Party government arrests Catalan activists

By Alejandro López
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National Police under the direct control of Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE) government arrested 16 Catalan pro-independence activists last Wednesday in the city of Girona.

The arrests signal a further shift to the right by the PSOE. They were carried out following last month's shock result in elections in Andalusia, which saw the party ousted after 36 years of rule and came on the same day a Popular Party (PP)–Citizens coalition government, supported by the fascistic Vox party, was established in the region.

All three right-wing parties had been demanding tougher action against Catalan separatists, including banning the main nationalist parties—the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the much smaller Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP).

They condemned Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez for talking with the Catalan government and told him to take direct control of the region, as Mariano Rajoy's PP government did in 2017 with Sánchez's backing, by again invoking Article 155 of Spain's 1978 constitution.

The illegal and anti-democratic arrests were designed to intimidate and isolate the more hard-line nationalists, who continue to agitate for Catalonia to break away from Spain. They are aimed at putting pressure on the two main nationalist parties to end all talk of resurrecting the independence process and settle for increased funding and greater autonomy for the region. Among those arrested during the police raids were a nephew of Catalan regional premier, Quim Torra, two CUP local mayors and members of the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDRs), Catalan National Assembly (ANC), La Forja (a secessionist youth organization linked to the CUP) and Student Union of the Catalan Countries (SEPC).

They were all arrested in relation to the events on

October 1, 2018, when some 400 people blocked AVE high-speed train lines in Girona for around two hours to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Catalan independence referendum.

The arrests were carried out on the initiative of the Information Brigade of the Spanish National Police. This was done without the necessary authority of the judge of the Criminal Court of Girona, who is investigating the alleged public disorder crimes that day, or the involvement of the regional Catalan police, the Mossos, which is the organization responsible for matters of public order.

Akin to an anti-terror operation, plainclothes police wearing balaclavas swooped in on the individuals and whisked them away in unmarked cars. CUP mayor, Ignacio Sabater, was transferred to a medical centre due to injury suffered during the arrest.

Those arrested were interrogated about their participation in the events and asked to identify individuals in photographs before being released.

Lawyer Benet Salellas, representing the two CUP mayors, told *La Directa* that “the operation does not seem justified because there have been no previous appointments [requested by the police], the crime is not serious enough and the detainees have known addresses.” Salellas was denied access to his clients “until they addressed the officers in Spanish,” a clear violation of the law.

An arrested photojournalist, Carles Palacio, who works for various pro-independence newspapers, explained to the police that he was clearly working in the photo he was shown, as was evident by his orange media armband and camera. Palacio was taken into custody after covering the arrests earlier in the day and as he was leaving a cafe alongside well-known fellow Catalan photojournalist and expert on far-right movements, Jordi Borràs.

The International Committee of the Fourth International

(ICFI) warned that the state mobilisation against the separatists was being utilised as a pretext to build a police-state regime, which would inevitably then target the rising militancy and strikes in the working class. The new year has been greeted by large corporations with the announcement of massive layoffs in the coming months, including Vodafone, Santander, CaixaBank, Naturgy, LiberBank, Bankinter, Unicaja, Ikea, H & M, Land Rover and Ford.

The PSOE and Sanchez are more than willing not only to accede to the demand for stepped-up repression in Catalonia, but to turn ruthlessly against the entire Spanish working class. After the Andalusian election, PSOE regional candidate Susana Díaz cynically blamed her defeat on the lack of “Catalan-bashing” during her campaign. PSOE regional premier of Castilla-La Mancha, Emiliano García-Page, raised the prospect of banning secessionist parties. Last week, a motion proposed by the PP in the regional parliament of Extremadura—calling for Catalan self-rule to be once again suspended and for a “firm” and “broad” application of Article 155—was passed with the support of the PSOE.

Brandishing the stick of arrests and prosecutions, Sánchez is also using the threat of possible PP-Citizens-Vox success in May’s European Union elections and the 2020 general election to cajole the Catalan nationalists into agreeing his 2019 draft budget. He has also offered a significant rise in spending for Catalonia as a carrot—over €2 billion from central government plus another €200 million for infrastructure.

If the nationalists fail to support the budget, Sánchez has threatened to call snap elections, which could bring into power a right-wing coalition government pledged to suspending Catalan autonomy. In such elections, the Catalan nationalists would be blamed by the PSOE for refusing to back a budget which includes limited increases in social expenditure.

To date PDeCAT and the ERC have refused to back the budget, citing the impending trial of 18 Catalan secessionist leaders charged with rebellion and sedition for their part in organising the Catalan independence referendum on October 1, 2017. Nine of the 18 Catalan political prisoners remain in jail, including former vice president of Catalonia, Oriol Junqueras, former foreign minister Raul Romeva, and ex-interior minister Joaquim Forn.

The public prosecutor has requested a joint total 177 years prison sentence, including 25 years for Junqueras, the highest individual proposed sentence. Last week,

Spain’s Supreme Court ordered the nine to be transferred from Catalan prisons to Madrid before the end of January.

However, despite their public intransigence over the fate of its former leaders the Catalan government’s vice premier, Pere Aragones, and spokeswoman, Elsa Artadi, met with Spain’s Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo in Madrid to pursue talks on the region’s future initiated by Sánchez. They agreed to maintain “an effective dialogue which will lead to a political proposal which has widespread support among Catalan society.”

That the moderate Catalan secessionist camp is ready to sacrifice its radical wing—CUP, CDRs and elements within the ANC—was shown by its muted response to the arrests. The Catalan government announced it would only “file a complaint against the police actions,” saying the detentions are illegal as they were not ordered by a court.

There is broad opposition to the rightward shift in Spanish politics and the attack on democratic rights, which has resulted in a deep polarisation in the country. But the left-wing opposition to the PSOE and the PP is suppressed by the reactionary role of Podemos in supporting the PSOE government and promoting Sánchez as a progressive figure. Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias makes no secret of his hopes for a permanent PSOE-Podemos alliance in government.

As the ICFI warned in its statement “Oppose the state crackdown on the Catalan independence referendum!” on the eve of the 2017 vote, “The Catalan crisis has yet again exposed the Podemos party’s reactionary role. ... Podemos is still calling for an alliance with the PSOE, even as the PSOE supports the PP’s onslaught in Catalonia.”

The ICFI warned that Podemos was “signalling the ruling class that it is also available to form an alternate government. ... Such a government, were it to be formed, would offer no alternative to the drive to dictatorship and austerity currently being prosecuted by the PP.”

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