The Spanish election crisis and the role of Podemos

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In Sunday’s Spanish elections, a dangerous recurring pattern in European politics emerged. As with the National Front in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, and the Alternative for Germany, the extreme right is emerging as the beneficiary of the disintegration of discredited social-democratic parties.

Spain’s fascistic Vox party, who had less than 1 percent of the vote and no parliamentarians last year, has risen to 15 percent and doubled its number of legislators, to 52, since the last elections in April. Its officials openly hail the 1936 coup and the resulting civil war and mass murder carried out by fascist dictator Francisco Franco, whose regime held power from 1939 to 1978. Despite broad opposition in the working class to Francoism, however, it is surging. How is this to be explained?

The key factor in the growth of European neofascism is the malignant level of social inequality. In Spain, after the 2008 Wall Street crash, unemployment surged to a quarter of the workforce and half the youth, even as Spain’s 26 billionaires amassed vast fortunes. Anger at social inequality is the basic force driving mass protests in dozens of countries, including those against police repression of the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Masses of workers and youth are striving to find a left-wing, socialist alternative to capitalism.

What the ruling class passes off for the “left” of the political establishment, however, are pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class that support capitalism and oppose revolution. Promises they make prove to be empty demagogy that disillusions and embitters the workers, letting the far right pose as forces of opposition and protest. There can be no clearer illustration than the response of Spain’s “left populist” Podemos (“We can”) party to this election.

Less than 48 hours after the election, Podemos leapt into a “pre-accord” to form a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). The PSOE and Podemos are seeking more coalition partners among Catalan or Basque nationalist parties, to get a parliamentary majority for what media outlets call a “progressive” or even “far left” government. However, their “pre-accord” commits them to European Union (EU) austerity, and to continuing the PSOE’s military spending increases and its police crackdown to impose “social peace” on Catalonia.

Podemos, like its cousin Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) in Greece, is based on fraudulent theories of “left populism” rejecting the working class, class struggle, and socialist revolution.

Chantal Mouffe, the postmodernist writer and associate of both Syriza and Podemos, explained this in her 2018 pamphlet For a Left Populism, writing: “What is urgently needed is a left populist strategy aimed at the construction of a ‘people,’ combining the variety of democratic resistances against post-democracy in order to establish a more democratic hegemonic formation… I contend that it does not require a ‘revolutionary’ break with the liberal democratic regime.”

Even as Mouffe’s book appeared, her political charlatanry had been exposed by Syriza’s record. While Syriza promised voters to end EU austerity, it rejected revolutionary measures and an appeal to European workers for support against the EU; its “more democratic hegemonic formation” was a government coalition formed in 2015 with the far-right Independent Greeks. In the end, Syriza betrayed its election promises, imposing tens of billions in EU social cuts and imprisoning tens of thousands of refugees in detention camps in the Greek islands.

After the Syriza disaster, it is now the turn of Podemos to assemble a “more democratic hegemonic
formation.” This would prove as hostile to workers in Spain as in Greece. Since it negotiated with the fascist Francoite regime a Transition to parliamentary rule in 1978, the PSOE has been the Spanish bourgeoisie’s main instrument to impose EU austerity and wage imperialist war, from Libya to Afghanistan. Podemos is now endorsing the reactionary policies the PSOE will pursue.

It is useless to appeal to the affluent university professors, state officials, army officers and union bureaucracy making up Podemos to pursue a less regressive policy. They oppose any initiative by the working class that in any way impinges on their wealth and privileges. As Syriza showed, they would prefer instead allying with the far right.

Mouffe justifies this by a conscious rejection of Marxism, writing: “It is to be expected that this left populist strategy will be denounced by the sectors of the left who keep reducing politics to the contradiction of capital/labor and attribute an ontological privilege to the working class, presented as the vehicle for socialist revolution. They will of course see this as a capitulation to ‘bourgeois ideology.’ There is no point answering these criticisms, that proceed from the very conception of politics against which I have been arguing.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is politically at war with these anti-Marxist populists. The way forward for the working class is a revolutionary assault on capitalist property, expropriating the financial aristocracy, and building a socialist society across Europe and internationally. This requires a ruthless struggle against Podemos and other “left populists.”

The ICFI’s characterization of these parties as pseudo-left is not an epithet: they are not left-wing, nor are they based in the working class. They continue the essential element of the Stalinist Popular Front policy that led to Franco’s victory over the working class during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War: opposing any revolutionary initiative by the workers and tying them to the bourgeoisie. In his 2005 book The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left, David North offered a definition of contemporary pseudo-left politics:

- The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies, which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class. ...
- The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society. It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic. 
- The pseudo-left promotes ‘identity politics,’ fixating on issues related to nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in order to acquire greater influence in corporations, the colleges and universities, the higher-paying professions, the trade unions and in government and state institutions, to effect a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population. The pseudo-left seeks greater access to, rather than the destruction of, social privilege.

As a resurgence of mass protest and class struggle unfolds from Spain and Algeria to Iraq, Hong Kong, Chile, and America, the decisive question now is building sections of the ICFI in Spain and internationally, to arm developing working-class opposition with a revolutionary, socialist program and perspective.

As for Podemos, there is no need for a crystal ball to know what its PSOE alliance will produce. If its members answered honestly the question of whether they can betray, they would say: “We can.”

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