

Catalan nationalists negotiate over support for PSOE-led Spanish government

By Alejandro López
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As Madrid continues its anti-Catalan campaign, the separatist parties, Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and Together for Catalonia (JxCat) are negotiating with acting prime minister Pedro Sánchez of the Socialist Party (PSOE), who is seeking to get confirmed in the post after the November 10 election.

The PSOE obtained 120 of the 350 seats in the last elections. The social democrats have reached a pre-accord with pseudo-left Podemos (with 35 seats), to form a minority coalition government committed to austerity and crack down on the Catalan nationalists under the code words of defending “fiscal justice and balanced budgets” and “guaranteeing social peace in Catalonia”. However, their combined seats 155 are still far from the 176 seats needed for a majority.

Sánchez is now seeking the Catalan ERC and JxCat’s support, whether through abstention or voting favourably to install him in power. The PSOE has already received the endorsements of other small regionalist and nationalist parties, but the ERC’s 13 lawmakers are essential.

Tomorrow the PSOE is set to talk with the secessionist JxCat on the formation of the next Spanish government. On the same day a second meeting between the PSOE and ERC is scheduled.

These meetings follow the first encounter which took place last week between the ERC and the PSOE’s negotiating teams. It came after an internal vote of the ERC’s members asking them whether they would reject supporting Sánchez’s bid to be voted in, unless talks between the Madrid and Barcelona governments “were previously agreed to be launched in order to resolve the political crisis in Catalonia through dialogue and negotiation”. About 95 percent backed the move in a ballot.

The ERC’s ambiguous appeals to Sánchez to solve the “political crisis” were spelled out by leading ERC official

and current deputy Catalan regional premier Pere Aragonès in *La Vanguardia*. The main four points are: 1) talks over the political crisis must be held between the Spanish and Catalan governments and not just between political parties; 2) the ability to propose anything to the talks without limits – the ERC will propose an independence referendum and amnesty for the nine jailed Catalan leaders, aware that Madrid will never give in to such demands; 3) a meeting between Madrid and Barcelona before the investiture vote on Sánchez; and 4) that whatever agreement the talks reach needs to be voted on by Catalans, and a clear calendar set.

After the first meeting, the ERC announced it would still maintain its “no” vote, while leaving the door open, stating that “Both sides have established a common starting point in confirming the need to tackle politically a conflict which is, basically, political in nature.”

The PSOE said of the meeting that there were “differences, but also points of agreement and, in any case, a shared wish for dialogue which may allow for unblocking the formation of a government and ensure the political stability needed to tackle” some of the issues facing Spain.

The negotiations are once again revealing the bankruptcy of Catalan nationalism and separatism. These forces represent the interests not of left-wing forces struggling against Spain’s financial aristocracy, but of factions of the ruling class advancing their interests against both the working class and the central government in Madrid.

Traditionally, the Catalan and Basque nationalists have become a key pillar in Spain’s political establishment. In the post-Transition regime that emerged after the end of the fascist dictatorship of general Francisco Franco, the nationalists worked with Madrid to defend the interests of the Spanish ruling class, supporting Madrid’s move to join the European Union, the Euro currency, NATO and

its imperialist wars abroad. Domestically, they defended draconian anti-working class measures, including austerity, de-industrialisation policies and labour and pensions reforms.

After the outbreak of the world capitalist crisis in 2008, the Catalan nationalists reacted by imposing savage austerity, while promoting the idea that Catalonia would not need these measures if it were to become independent. The former Catalan councillor in charge of business, Santi Vila, cynically remarked in a meeting of politicians and businessmen that if Catalonia “had not put forward a discourse based on nationalism, how would it have weathered adjustments of over €6 billion?”

In 2017 this culminated with the nationalists’ organisation of a referendum on independence, that was outlawed by Madrid. The referendum helped the ruling class by burying socio-economic concerns of workers and youth, both Spanish and Catalan, under a torrent of nationalist rhetoric. At the same time, Madrid seized this to shift the agenda to the right, using the Catalan crisis to escalate police state measures and attacks on democratic rights.

The attempt of ERC to allow the PSOE to posture as a defender of political dialogue is a fraud. Under the PSOE, nine Catalan leaders have been jailed for their participation in the peaceful protests and independence referendum that took place in October 2017, but was savagely repressed by the government. Another 33 businessmen, civil servants and senior officials in the former Catalan regional government, including the directors of the Catalan public television and radio, TV3 and Catalunya Ràdio, are also currently being prosecuted in connection with these events.

The current Catalan regional premier, Quim Torra, is being prosecuted for failing to comply with an order from the Electoral Board Commission to remove symbols from the front of the government building in Barcelona denouncing the jailing of secessionist leaders. He is the first sitting Catalan regional premier in the dock since Lluís Companys was tried and executed in 1940 by the Franco regime following the Spanish Civil War.

Tsunami Democràtic, the pro-independence group behind protests against the jailing of the nine Catalan leaders, is being investigated by Spain’s National Court on alleged terrorism charges. Spain’s Guardia Civil police has also closed down websites associated with the protest network, on the orders of the Spanish court. The charges are similar to those brought against seven activists accused of terrorism by the Committees for the

Defense of the Republic (CDR).

Outside the judicial clampdown, the media establishment has continued with its sensationalist campaign to whip up anti-Catalan sentiment, even as polls have repeatedly shown seven in ten Spaniards want to resolve the Catalan crisis through dialogue, not police repression.

Last week, the acting parliament, with the abstention of Podemos, ratified the executive internet censorship law, the so-called “Digital Security Law”, passed by the acting PSOE government days ahead of the elections. The law allows the government to close or directly manage electronic communications networks and services using the broad pretexts of “public order, public safety or national security.”

The law, while making no mention of Catalonia explicitly, cites “recent and serious events” in Spain, taken as a veiled reference to the protests and disturbances following the sentencing of Catalan independence leaders to jail terms of between 9 and 13 years.

While the ERC voted against the law, they have made no attempt to put it as one of its pre-conditions to remove this law in its negotiations with the PSOE. The fact is, the ERC and JxCat share the same class interests as the PSOE, Podemos and the rest of the political establishment in Madrid. Above all, they are terrified of growing social opposition internationally and in Spain. Last November, both the ERC and JxCat, the ruling parties of the Catalan regional government, worked with Madrid to crush the protests in defence of the freedom of the Catalan prisoners using the region’s police.

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