

The Basque national question: self-determination is the key issue

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By insisting that the Madrid bombs on 11 March this year were the work of the Basque separatist organisation, ETA, President Aznar tried to harness public outrage to his war against the militant Basque nationalist movement as a whole. The attempt to blame the 'terrorists' of ETA was thus not only an attempt to use the Madrid bomb to steal the election but also a continuation of the PP's campaign of repression against the Basque revolutionary nationalist movement. David Ellis examines the roots of Basque nationalism and the evolution of the nationalist movement and explains the denial of the right of self determination as the legacy of the Spanish bourgeois revolution.

The latest offensive against ETA and other Basque nationalist organisations started in mid-2002 and gathered pace when Aznar used 9-11 to bring the Spanish state's long war against ETA under the rubric of George Bush's 'war against terrorism'. It worked. In return for Aznar's support for Bush's war in Iraq in May 2003, the US State Department declared Batasuna and its predecessors Euskal Herritarrok and Herri Batasuna (HB) to be terrorist organisations. The following month, the European Union followed suit. This was on top of the significant diplomatic victory for the Spanish Government in December 2001, when the European Union declared ETA a terrorist organisation, the first time all 15 member governments had labelled ETA in this way.

Aznar's strategy has been to isolate ETA by weakening political movements either in solidarity with it or in favour of a militant nationalist strategy. This was not the first time the Spanish state had tried to criminalise these organisations. In December 1997, 23 leaders of Herri Batasuna were jailed for seven years for collaborating with ETA. The case centred on a video featuring armed and masked ETA guerrillas, which the party tried to show during a general election campaign. This was the first time any members of the party were jailed for co-operating with ETA.

Throughout the post-Franco years, including the long rule of the PSOE under Felipe Gonzales from the early 1980s, there has always been a degree of repression of opposition within the Basque areas. However, the PP government and its prime minister José Maria Aznar went even further in curtailing the democratic and national rights of the Basques. Measures included the banning of political organisations, preventing candidates from standing in elections, censorship and closure of both press and internet sites, seizure of assets and freezing of bank accounts, confiscation of the property and offices of Basque organisations and the use of State of Exception laws to prevent 'congregation', that is, freedom of assembly.

In February 2003, Euskaldunon Egunkaria, the sole remaining newspaper written entirely in the Basque language, was closed down, and 10 people associated with the paper were arrested and held incommunicado. Alongside this, the state routinely uses anti-terrorist laws, continues to harass members of militant Basque nationalist organisations and has even been taken to task by the European Committee for

the Prevention of Torture. The committee found solid evidence that the police and Guardia Civil regularly use beatings, suffocation and electric shock techniques on nationalist prisoners.# More recently Theo van Boven, a Dutch UN human rights specialist, said that, even if torture and ill treatment were 'not systematic' in Spain, such abuse was 'more than sporadic and incidental'. He concluded that detainees were subjected to beatings, asphyxiation, sleep deprivation and forced physical exercise, as well as insults and threats. He also reported that detainees were held incommunicado and that the impartiality of procedures for investigating victims' complaints was 'questionable'.³

To date, all the evidence suggests that the new PSOE government and prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero will continue with Aznar's policy of repression against the Basques. PSOE consistently voted for, and supported, the repressive measures taken by the PP government. The PSOE leadership has a shameful and bloody history in the Basque country with the government of Felipe Gonzales deeply implicated in the scandal surrounding the Spanish state's clandestine death squads, the GAL (Anti-terrorist liberation groups).

Despite this, it cannot be ruled out that the new PSOE government may take steps towards starting fresh peace negotiations. In the late 1990s, many believed there would be a negotiated resolution to the conflict along the lines of that in Northern Ireland. Herri Batasuna has strong links with Sinn Fein and discussed strategies used in the peace process. Five months after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, September 1998, ETA called an indefinite ceasefire. All the nationalist Basque parties made a pact to promote dialogue and reach a peaceful settlement. Contacts and negotiations were held between ETA and the Spanish government in Zurich in May 1999. Yet, by November 1999, ETA announced an end to its 14-month ceasefire, blaming the Spanish government for lack of progress in the talks.

Whether or not the election of the Zapatero government will lead to renewed talks, Aznar's attempt to manipulate the aftermath of the Madrid bombs and, even more, the public's refusal to be stampeded into support for further repression of the Basque nationalist movement, has once again emphasised the centrality of the Basque Question to Spanish politics. Yet, paradoxically, all the evidence suggests that, if the people of the Basque Country were allowed a free vote, for or against independence, a clear majority would oppose separation. The fact that they have never been allowed such a vote is clear proof of the denial of their democratic rights, but why has the Spanish state always reacted so ferociously against the demand for self-determination? To answer this, it is necessary to trace the development of the Basque national movement and its relationship to the Spanish state.

The development of the Basque provinces within Spain

The 'Basque Country' is made up of seven provinces, spanning parts of northern Spain and southern France.⁴ Within Spain, Guipuzcoa, Vizcaya and Alava make up the Basque Autonomous Community; and Navarra has its own separate status as an Autonomous Community.

The provinces within Spain came under the control of the Castilian monarchy at the end of the 14th century. To secure their allegiance, the kings of Castile had to swear to observe the fueros. local customs which were applied by the local assemblies. In Vizcaya, the ceremony of the royal oath took place in the city of Guernica beneath an oak tree that later became the symbol of Basque independence. The fueros embodied the customs of each of the provinces, including Navarra.

It was not until the Napoleonic invasion that liberals attempted to create a centralised state, abolishing all the feudal particularisms of the provinces. Although the Cortes of Cadiz adopted such a constitution in 1812, the subsequent restoration of the monarchy in 1814 left it a dead letter. Under the Bourbons, Spain returned to reactionary and clerical rule and the Spanish capitalist class remained weak. Although the

Basque people twice supported rebellions against the Castilian monarchy, in 1834 and 1872, this was in support of the Carlists, that is the supporters of Don Carlos who claimed to be the rightful Bourbon heir to the throne, rather than wars for national independence. Theirs was a federalist doctrine based on subordination to the monarchy and the Catholic Church. They were strongest in the province of Navarra. In 1876, following the second Carlist War, the *fueros* were abolished in the greater part of the Basque provinces but remained in Navarra.

The defeat of the Carlists further strengthened the conviction within the Spanish state that no concessions should ever be made to regionalism and, in the absence of effective constitutional controls, reinforced the power of the army and its role in enforcing Castilian rule. However, in imposing a greater degree of centralisation, by the removal of the *fueros*, Madrid gave an important boost to the development of Spanish capitalism in general and Basque capitalism in particular.

Previously, each region had decided on its own levels of taxation and tariffs. In fact, until 1876, the Spanish border for customs was the River Ebro, the southern border of the Basque provinces. The abolition of the *fueros* brought Basque industry within Spain's protective tariffs, which, by 1906 were the highest in Europe. More importantly, the *fueros* had prohibited any of the natural resources of Vizcaya being used outside of the Spanish kingdom. Because the Spanish market for iron and steel was itself minimal, the iron and steel industries were undeveloped. With this obstacle removed, British capital flooded in. Investments were made in iron, steel, shipbuilding and railway construction and most of this was concentrated in Vizcaya province.

The growth in production was dramatic. By 1900, Spain was producing 21.5 per cent of the world's iron ore and most of that was from Vizcaya. Between 1874 and 1914, of the 180 million tonnes of iron ore imported by Britain, 130 million came from the Iberian peninsula, again nearly all of that from Vizcaya. The ore was not just extracted and sent abroad. Vizcaya's own iron production also expanded with total iron ore production per year rising from 1 million in 1877 to 6.5 million in 1899 .

While Alava and Navarra remained largely agricultural, Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa changed dramatically, experiencing a rapid growth in the middle and working classes. The strongest classes in these provinces were now the proletariat and their Basque employers.

The new bourgeoisie, however, had very strong ties with the Madrid commercial centre. Its outlook tended to be international rather than nationalist. There was a triangle of trade and finance: Madrid ? Basque country ? London. The new high tariffs imposed by central government worked to the Basque capitalists' advantage so they had little desire to leave the Spanish state. In 1888, it was the shipyards in Vizcaya that won a massive contract from the Spanish Navy. Similarly, in 1892, the metallurgical industry received increased protection from the government. Unlike the Catalan bourgeoisie, only one major Basque industrialist supported the nationalists.

The Basque bourgeoisie at this time were realigning themselves with the Conservatives. They were not only becoming increasingly integrated with the Madrid state and Castilian capitalist class but were taking a leading role nationally. By 1900, 39 per cent of the Spanish merchant marine was Vizcayan and, within another decade, 30 per cent of Spanish banking investments were concentrated in the Basque area. Though Basque industry in absolute terms remained smaller than that of Catalonia, its growth was rapid and included modern branches of industry.

The outbreak of WW1 gave an enormous boost to manufacturers throughout Spain. Catalonia, Asturias and the Basque region benefited most. There were 58 joint stock companies in 1914. This rose to 92 in 1917 and reached 311 in 1918. The boom during the war enhanced the pro-Spanish sentiment of the Basque bourgeoisie and, by the end of the war, Basque industry had surpassed that of Catalonia.

The strength of Basque capitalism continued to grow. Despite the population of the area only making up 5 per cent of the Spanish total, its economic weight was far greater. In 1930, Basque capitalism accounted for the following percentages of Spanish capitalist production: banking capital 24 per cent, iron products 62 per cent, and shipbuilding 71 per cent.

The origins of Basque nationalism

The key founder and ideological leader of Basque nationalism was Sabino Arana (1865-1903). He came from a family of industrialists and Carlists. Although the Basque name for the country is Euskal Herria, Arana invented a new name Euskadi, translated as 'Basque Homeland' or 'State'. He designed the flag, the Ikurriña, based on the Union Flag of Britain, and centred his nationalist ideas on the ancient language, cultural practices, anthropological studies and even racial theories, sometimes basing these theories on blood, there is, reportedly, a high percentage of rhesus negative among Basques.

Nation states are a product of the bourgeois epoch. They were created in the centuries that capitalism established itself as the dominant mode of production. Nationalism, as an ideology and mass consciousness, is, equally, a modern creation. Yet, nearly all nationalisms seek to present the building of their own nation as the rebirth of an ancient nation. There had never actually been a Basque nation or state. The Bascons of Navarra are claimed as the ancestors of the Basque people, as the mountainous north of Navarra is still partly Basque-speaking, and the 11th century feudal kingdom of Navarra exercised political authority over all the territories claimed as Basque.

In 1895, an embryonic group was formed which was to become the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in 1898. Its main political slogan was God and the Old Laws. This was in contrast to the Carlist slogan of God, Fatherland and King. So, while the new nationalists were influenced by the idea of returning to the fueros, they approached it from a new perspective. Arana wrote of a 'war of conquest' against Euskadi, of 'Basque laws' rather than fueros, and of independence from Spain, rather than autonomy within the Castilian kingdom. Spain was described as a 'foreign power' from which it was necessary to be separated. Basque nationalists base this on a particular reading of the history of their region. In their view, the Basque country is distinct from Spain. They claim that the Basques were self-governing up to, and even beyond, 1200, when the provinces of Guipuzcoa, Vizcaya and Alvara were annexed by Castile, and have continuously fought to preserve their own forms of government. In 1897, Arana called for the establishment of a union of Basques 'for the salvation of the common fatherland and the race itself'. After Arana's death, there were divisions among the nationalists with some sections favouring autonomy within Spain while others adhered to Arana's original conception of an independent state.

Arana's theories were racist. In this, he was typical of most bourgeois thinkers of the period and, of course, the terrible consequences of pseudo-scientific racial theories had not yet been demonstrated by Hitler's Holocaust. Nevertheless, he believed the Spanish were an inferior race, especially the new Spanish working class immigrants. The influx of proletarians from non-Basque regions of Spain meant a change in the make up of the population. By 1900, more than one in four of the people in the Basque areas had been born outside them.

These Spanish immigrants brought with them their political and trade union organisations. There was a rapid growth of the Socialist Workers' Party of Spain (PSOE) and the General Workers' Union (UGT). Bilbao, in Vizcaya, became an important and militant centre for the PSOE. The Basque nationalists tried to challenge this by setting up their own union federation, Eusko Langileen Alkartasuna/Solidaridad de Trabajadores Vascos (ELA/STV) in 1911 but it won little support among blue collar workers and the PSOE remained dominant within the working class with the result that nationalism never really got a foothold until the 1950s. For Arana, the anti-Catholicism of the new working class was its worst characteristic. The

influence of Carlism was reflected in a strong Catholicism in the region and the PSOE and UGT were virulently anti-clerical.

By the time of the outbreak of the First World War, therefore, the Basque bourgeoisie generally turned to the Conservatives while the new proletariat remained loyal to its social democratic organisations. It was other sections of Basque society, those squeezed by the rapid process of industrialisation, which had begun to adhere to the nationalist cause.

Spanish capitalism enjoyed an economic boom during the First World War as it supplied goods to all the belligerent powers but the country was thrown into economic and political crisis when the war ended. The old monarchical regime with its huge estates, still ruled by semi-feudal landowners, was increasingly at odds with modern Spanish capitalist society. The workers' movement was on the march and the general strike of 1917 was the most serious nationwide upheaval of the period. Other sectors of society were also pushing for change, including the new layers of the capitalist class who began to espouse a radical and republican cause in opposition to the remnants of the rule of the monarchy and aristocracy. Even within the army, junior officers began to revolt, dissatisfied with the Castilian regime's block on progress. As part of this, the demand for greater autonomy for the various nationalities began to grow throughout Spain.

In 1918, the PNV made considerable progress in the elections, winning 7 of the 29 seats in the four provinces: five of six in Vizcaya, one of five in Guipuzcoa, one of seven in Navarra. By now, the PNV had established itself as a right-wing, conservative, and very Catholic, Christian Democratic party. It began to strike up agreements with conservative political organisations against the working class and the left during the years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. However, this strategy confronted one major problem. This period saw the Castilian right take an increasingly hard line in favour of the indissoluble nature of the Spanish state. It would not countenance any moves towards autonomy, let alone independence. The dictatorship banned regionalist activities and, therefore, nationalist activities had to be carried out using the disguise of cultural events.

Increasing numbers of middle class youth began to learn the Basque language and turned to the nationalists. Basque culture and language were published. Basque musical, theatrical and dance groups proliferated. A new generation of Basque writers and painters emerged and gained prominence. The Basque schools (Ikastolas) offering instruction in Basque opened for the first time. By the dawn of the Second Republic, the Basque nationalists had created an institutional infrastructure. Basques had their own schools, clergy, press, theatre, labour and women's organisations, youth groups, academics' and farmers' associations.

The Second Republic and the Civil War

The start of the Spanish Revolution, with the fall of the dictatorship and monarchy, and the establishment of the Second Republic, caused the repositioning of the PNV and Basque nationalists. While the PNV wanted to bloc with the right, this proved untenable. It was the republicans and the left who spoke in favour of self-determination and granting autonomy to the historic regions of the Basque country, Catalonia and Galicia. The new constitution, proclaimed by the Spanish parliament (Cortes) in 1931, provided for the organisation of autonomous regions within the Spanish state out of provinces 'with common history, culture, and economy'. In 1931, the PNV suffered a split with its left-wing wanting to make alliances with the Republicans and Socialists. In 1932, the Republican-Socialist government granted autonomy to Catalonia, but not to the Basque country.

Under the leadership of Jose Antonio Aguirre, a young lawyer from Vizcaya, a new dynamism emerged in the PNV. On June 15, 1931, a Basque-Navarra alliance of mayors from the four Basque territories in

Spain, met in the town of Lizarra in Navarra and approved a project for autonomy, the Statute of Lizarra/Estella. The Republican government rejected the Basque project and the Basque-Navarra alliance was broken off. In 1932, the PNV accepted an autonomy statute for the Baskongadak – the provinces of Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Alava – drafted by a Madrid commission. A referendum of the provinces of Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Alava (Navarra was excluded) held in 1933, resulted in 84 per cent voting for an autonomy statute.

It was the new right-wing government and, particularly, the extreme right CEDA, that blocked any such moves. The PNV refused to join the alliance of the right because of this. Pressure was brought to bear on the PNV by the Vatican but it would not support candidates who were against including autonomy in the Republic's constitution. The PNV argued that this was essential in order not to drive supporters of autonomy into the arms of the Communists and its own candidates were clearly on the political right. The new Popular Front government of 1936 finally approved the autonomy statute which included the possibility of the Navarra province joining the autonomous region at some point. Aguirre was named president of the government of Baskongadak.

Much of the Basque bourgeoisie had started to support the PNV. Many saw it as the best way to mobilise other sections of Basque society against the workers' movement and to undercut –communist? support. Nonetheless, the Basque bourgeoisie's own material interests also influenced it towards the PNV, underlining its lack of integration into a Spanish ruling class. It did not want a victory of the monarchist right because it favoured the modernisation of Spanish society and it was also concerned that the CEDA and Falange were too closely associated with German and Italian imperialism. The Basque bourgeoisie favoured an alliance with Anglo-French imperialism, not least because of the role British capital had played in Vizcaya.

Nonetheless, the right wing policies of the PNV meant that it was far from certain that it would side with the Republic during the civil war. PNV leaders were approached to help form Basque militias which would help quell any workers' revolt. A few days before the Franco uprising, two PNV deputies declared that the party would support the Republic in case of a military intervention but, on the night before the military rebellion, the PNV executive retracted these assurances of automatic party loyalty. On the day of the uprising, the first section of the PNV to react was its executive in Navarra, which declared its opposition to the government of the Republic accusing it of religious persecution.

It must be noted that the Navarra province was different. The Carlists organised volunteers called the Requetes who were recruited mainly from the peasantry in defence of 'God and his Church, King and Fueros!'. They joined the Franco forces. No doubt the PNV in Navarra was more influenced by this but, in the other three provinces, the PNV finally declared in favour of the Republic. The treacherous role the party played is described by Felix Morrow in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*. Bilbao's metal industry was not converted to munitions production. San Sebastian was surrendered without serious resistance and the CNT militants, who wanted to resist and sabotage or destroy any factories that could be put to use by the fascists, were arrested or driven out of the city by the Basque nationalists themselves.

The bombing of the historic town of Guernica, a symbol of Basque freedom, revealed Franco's attitude to the Basque nationalists, as did the response of his victorious army as it entered San Sebastian. Despite the nationalist surrender, many of the leaders were executed or imprisoned. For a while, this stiffened the resolve of the northern front but the Basque government continued to try to make a separate peace deal with the Franco forces, using the Vatican, among others, as mediator.

What the Spanish Civil War revealed was the lack of a bourgeoisie able to carry through the eradication of the social roots of the monarchy and complete the modernisation of Spain. When the working class came

to the fore, its struggle necessarily threatened not just to complete that task but to overthrow capitalism as well. The treachery of the Stalinised Communist Party prevented that outcome and ensured the bloody defeat of both the Republic and the working class movement. That defeat, however, could only be inflicted through the installation of Franco's dictatorship which ensured that opposition to separatism remained absolutely central to the ideology of the Spanish state. There was no possibility of reconciliation between Franco and the Basque nationalists. In 1937, the imposed Francoist mayor of Bilbao referred to self-determination and an independent and democratic Basque nation as "that horrible, sinister, and atrocious nightmare," a result of "socialism" and "imbecility".

After the victory of Franco, the Basque government went into exile. During the Franco years, the Basques were severely repressed. Some 11,000 were forced into concentration camps, and 20,000 children were sent out of the country into exile. Over and above the fascist terror that was used against all political opposition, the Basque language was banned and driven underground, the use of the Ikurri—a flag was outlawed and Basque names forcibly hispanicised. During the years 1956-1975, there were 10 States of Exception declared in the Basque provinces compared to only one in the rest of Spain.

ETA and the transformation of the nationalist movement

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA) emerged from the PNV at the end of the 1950s. A group called Ekin ("to act") the name of a radical Basque nationalist magazine, split from the PNV. The group was led by several young activists from EGI, the PNV youth group. They were critical of the leadership's support for passive resistance and impatient of the leadership provided by the exiles in France who were from the Civil War generation.

The old leaderships of all the opposition parties, not just the Basque nationalists, were still hoping for the western democracies to intervene against fascist Spain but it was the Cold War that led to the end of the Franco regime's isolation. An agreement was reached with the US over the use of Spanish bases by its military in exchange for credit. This was followed, in 1955, by the admission of Spain into the UN and the further integration of Spain into the world economy. It was becoming clear that the opposition could not expect any outside intervention. The leadership of Ekin demonstrated that a new generation was about to come into conflict with the Franco regime and it was a generation that had not been defeated. In 1959, Ekin became ETA. This new period was also to see a number of dramatic changes in the Spanish economy, in the Franco regime itself and in the opposition. The rise of working class organisation, demonstrations and strikes showed the possibility of building an opposition to Franco from these forces and ETA's orientation towards them clearly revived the nationalist movement.

Spain experienced rapid economic growth during the 1960s, the income per capita grew by 315 per cent between 1960 and 1973. Among the OECD countries, only Japan had a greater rate of growth in those years. This was achieved through a massive industrialisation of the country which not only produced glowing economic statistics for that period but changed the social reality of Franco's Spain. It was no longer a predominantly rural society. In 1960, out of the total active population of 11.8 million, some 41.7 per cent were involved in agricultural economic activity. By 1973, out of 13.3 million only 23.8 per cent could be recorded as active in the agricultural sector.

The change in the economy can be dated to the 1959 Stabilisation Plan. This was developed by the Franco cabinet in partnership with the IMF and World Bank. It contained the following essential points: further devaluation of the peseta to a realistic value in comparison with the \$US; restriction on credit and an increase in interest rates; a wage freeze; reductions in public spending with a view to improving the balance of payments deficit and the opening up of the economy to the import of goods and capital.

The 1959 plan and its precursor, the 1957 economic reforms, were carried through in the face of considerable resistance from Falangist supporters in the government. The government implemented the plan for one simple reason, Spain was in economic crisis. Franco knew this and was forced to listen to the technocrat wing of el movimiento led by Opus Dei. By 1959, Spain had a terrible balance of payments crisis, with its foreign currency reserves dwindling, even the question of a moratorium on payments on external debt was raised. The international banking and economic regulators would not tolerate this and, therefore, Spain was threatened with being left completely isolated from the world economy and with no sources of new credit.

The locomotive for the Spanish economy's growth was the world economy. Since the 1950s, the world market had been expanding, trade was more international than ever. The key industrial nations were keen to invest in new markets. Indeed, Spain's reliance on this is shown by the fact that, although during the 1960s there were periods of recession or out-of-control inflation, the serious crisis, and the end of the rapid growth, only came with the world economic crisis of 1973.

Acute poverty and rampant unemployment actually intensified immediately after the introduction of the 1959 Plan. Thousands and thousands of Spaniards were forced to pack their bags and head off to other European countries to find work. With economic crisis came the rebirth of the workers' movement. Strikes were held and the beginnings of a new workers' movement began to appear through the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO). In 1962, a general strike took place throughout Spain. One of the strike's strongest centres was among the metal workers in the Basque provinces of Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa.

ETA's first military action occurred in 1961 with the unsuccessful attempt to derail a train carrying civil war veterans to the Basque city of San Sebastian to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist victory. The police responded with numerous arrests and torture of suspects. The campaign of repression soon accelerated with constant roadblocks, arrests, house searches and the widespread use of torture. Basque prisoners filled Spanish jails, and the exodus of a new generation of exiles to the Basque country in France began.

Because of the increased repression, ETA's first assembly (ETA I) took place in France, in 1962. Although the group's initial ideology was inspired by the nationalism of Sabino Arana, ETA replaced the concept of the Basque race with the Basque language and culture as the main determinants of Basque identity, unity and right to independence. In contrast to the Christian-Democratic ideology of the PNV, ETA brought a radical secularism to Basque nationalism with its defence of the working classes.

ETA's ideology was deeply influenced by Federico Krutwig, a Vizcayan intellectual and exile in France. In his book, *Vasconia*, Krutwig argued that guerrilla warfare was the only means of liberating Euskal Herria. His theory of the cycle of action/repression/action, which held that, where popular protest against injustice met with oppression, the revolutionary forces should act to punish the oppressors, formed the basis of ETA's strategic thinking. In that same year, the group Enbata⁵ emerged in the Basque territory in France. The work of Enbata, and of its magazine of the same name, was crucial for the development of Basque nationalist consciousness in the Basque country in France, and for the growth of political support for ETA.

Between 1963 and 1974, some 37 per cent of all industrial unrest in Spain was in the Basque country. In 1967 alone, up to 39 per cent of all strike action concerned political and social protest rather than economic issues. Hence, significant sections of the nationalist movement saw the working class struggle as critical and the question of how to combine the national and social question continued to dominate the ideological and political disputes within the nationalist organisations. This period saw the formation of what is known as the abertzale nationalist movement, or left patriots.

The 1968 underground meetings organised by ETA to celebrate the Aberri Eguna, Basque Homeland National Day, ended in riots as groups of demonstrators battled with the Spanish police. In June, the leader of ETA V, Txabi Etxebarrieta, killed a policeman at a road control (ETA congresses and the leadership they elect are identified by Roman numerals). A few hours later, Etxebarrieta was killed by police. Public protests and masses were conducted in his honour. Following his death, ETA killed the chief of the police in Guipuzcoa, Meliton Manzananas, well known for his use of torture during interrogations. Madrid imposed a State of Exception and hundreds of suspects were arrested. Those put on trial with little evidence and lack of proper defence, were given extremely long prison sentences or sentenced to death. In 1969, the police arrested almost the whole leadership of ETA.

Sixteen ETA militants were brought before a military tribunal in Burgos in 1970 on charges of illegal organisation and the murder of Manzananas. Many of the defendants, among them two women and two priests, clearly showed signs of torture. The tribunal handed down six death sentences and more than 700 years of prison sentences. The army was placed on full alert for fear of a popular revolt. During the trial, there were general strikes and street demonstrations, the German consul was kidnapped in San Sebastian and protesters attacked Spanish embassies in Western Europe. Artists, intellectuals, every organisation against the Franco regime, endorsed ETA's struggle. The death sentences were eventually commuted to life imprisonment. For the first time, ETA's political demands were heard outside France and Spain.

In the wake of this, attempts were made to create a single Basque nationalist front, uniting all the nationalist forces. The initiative in this was taken by ETA's ethno-linguistic group, Branka, and Anai-Artea, an association aiding refugees, and attracted support from both ETA V and ETA VI as well as the PNV's youth organisation, EGI. However, agreement proved impossible. ETA VI left the meeting over disagreements with ETA V and the PNV rejected a nationalist front it could not control. Today ETA can be traced to ETA V.

The year 1973 was a pivotal one for ETA as it carried out the most spectacular action in its entire history. The Spanish prime minister, Carrero Blanco, was killed in an explosion that sent his car skyrocketing over the roof of an apartment building. Carrero Blanco was the president of the government and Franco's right-hand man and had been expected to prolong Francoism when the dictator died.

The death of Franco and the transition to democracy

From the late 1960s, the Franco regime was in a state of continual crisis. Students were in revolt and, by 1968, this meant an almost permanent occupation of the university campuses. Meanwhile, the workers' movement had become stronger and there were regular waves of strikes which were met with vicious repression. Important sections of the Francoist movement increasingly supported the idea of some reform. Although the immediate result of the assassination of Carrero Blanco was to strengthen the so-called 'bunker', the wing of the Francoists who were against any reform, the imminent death of Franco, and the planned succession of Juan Carlos II as king, meant that the reformers, especially around Opus Dei, were in the ascendancy. The Portuguese revolution served as a reminder to those in power of what could happen if they did not oversee change.

Adolfo Suárez was appointed as prime minister in July 1976. This was the government that negotiated with the opposition to secure a peaceful transition to democracy. Its main aim was to demobilise the mass opposition movements and strike waves and to bring about a stable situation for Spanish capitalism, in short, to avoid a revolution. The leaders of the main workers' parties, the PSOE and the Communist Party (PCE) were steadfast allies of that section of the old regime who wanted to bring about this peaceful transformation to bourgeois democracy. It was their leadership, or rather misleadership, that ensured the demobilisation of the workers' movement and a democratic counter-revolution.

Among the key issues were elections and the legalisation of parties, the right to organise in trade unions, the release of political prisoners and the question of autonomy. The new government granted an amnesty to political prisoners as one of its first measures. The way this was carried out is indicative of how the whole transition to democracy was carried through in a thoroughly Bonapartist manner and how, in particular, this meant that the important democratic right of national self-determination was denied to the people of the Basque country. Those who had committed 'crimes of blood', that is, people like ETA militants who had shot police and army officers of the dictatorship, were not released under the amnesty.

The issue of the prisoners and the demand for a full amnesty were to become the major reason for the continuation of ETA's military campaign. While oppositionists who had resorted to armed action in response to a violent dictatorship remained in jail, no such punishment was meted out to those members of the Francoist state that had been guilty of directly carrying out 'crimes of blood' or who had been complicit in such crimes.

The reformers within the old regime, led by Suárez, used the threat of a backlash by the ultra wing inside the regime, particularly the army, to force the opposition to accept limited reform. The leaders of the PSOE and the PCE agreed and argued that insisting on the root and branch dismantling of the Francoist state could result in an army coup and civil war.

They used the same argument to justify their position during negotiations on the 1978 constitution. On the question of national self-determination, the PSOE and PCE accepted a compromise that meant the constitution included a clause which declared the 'indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation'. This allowed Suárez to include nationalist parties in the December 1977 Pact of Moncloa on one condition: ETA's exclusion. In return, the Basques would receive a pre-Autonomy Council on December 30 1977. The decision to support the Pact of Moncloa by the PSOE and PCE was a betrayal of the democratic right of the Basques to determine their own system of government and relationship, if any, to the Spanish state.

The boycott called by most members of the combined national movement's political party organisations, under the lead of the PNV, for the December 1978 referendum was widely supported. More than half, 56 per cent, of the population abstained, confirming that, even in the post-Franco period, the issue of self-determination was still a live one. Of those voting, 68.8 per cent ratified the Constitution, much lower than the nationwide average. ETA responded by rejecting the Pact of Moncloa as illegal. None of the Basque parties and movements recognised the legitimacy of a plebiscite in which only 44 per cent of the population had participated. Article 2 of the new constitution talked of the 'indivisible unity of the Spanish nation, common and indivisible fatherland of all Spaniards;' whilst acknowledging 'the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions which form it'. Article 145 insisted that: 'No federation between autonomous communities will be permitted under any circumstances.'

Nonetheless, on the basis of the new constitution, a further referendum on a statute granting a degree of autonomy to the provinces of Guipuzcoa, Vizcaya and Alvara was held and in this a majority voted in favour of the statute. Thus the 'Basque Autonomous Community', or 'Euskadi' was born.

Throughout this period, the state continued to use harsh repression in order to break the resistance of those who refused to accept limitations on their national and democratic rights. The Anti-Terrorist Law was used solely in the Basque country. Over 650 people were arrested between December 4, 1978, and December 5, 1979, and a further 329 by June 1980.

The objectives of the regime at the time were clear. It wanted to destroy the radical opposition groups that had emerged from the Franco years, above all ETA. Throughout the late 1970s, the state forces maintained a level of repression that had ceased to exist in the rest of Spain. As late as 1981, the

government was prepared to send units of regular troops along with the navy into the Basque provinces. The nature of the autonomy statutes and their implementation again showed how the driving force behind regional autonomy reform was not democratic principles.

The effect of the 1981 Tejero coup attempt and its defeat was not to speed up and deepen democratic reform but to prompt both Suárez's party, the UCD, and the PSOE, to create the Organic Law on the Harmonisation of the Autonomy Process. This meant that Catalonia and the Basque region could only increase their autonomy if other regions also wanted that degree of autonomy. It was argued that regional autonomy was considered by rightists to be the first step leading to the dismemberment of Spain so limits would have to be applied to the regional autonomy movement to avoid further attacks on democracy itself. The new law now meant that the autonomous areas of Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque regions would be considered in the same way as the regional autonomous governments of Andalusia or Valencia.

Gonzalez's dirty war

The 1982 election saw a massive swing to the PSOE and the collapse of the UCD vote across the rest of Spain, but a quite different outcome in the Basque country. On a turnout of over 80 per cent the results for nationalist parties were as follows: PNV 32 per cent, HB 14.8 per cent, EE 7.7 per cent. Although this cannot be broken down into reliable evidence of support for autonomy within Spain or complete independence, it is clear evidence that a majority (54.5 per cent) still had some nationalist sentiment.

The new government of Felipe Gonzalez proved just as incapable of resolving the Basque national question. Gonzalez and the PSOE cabinet were also intent on ensuring the destruction of both ETA and other groups that maintained a militant opposition in the Basque country. Reports began to surface in 1994 that Gonzalez had been directly involved in the establishment of a secret paramilitary force known as the GAL. The GAL was used to harass, kidnap, torture, and murder Basque nationalist activists. Twenty eight people were killed by the GAL in their dirty war against the Basque Country from 1983-1987, and it was discovered that high ranking members of the army and the Gonzalez government were involved in these actions, some of which were as crude as the indiscriminate murder of civilians in a pub.

Despite the use of the GAL, the PSOE government and ETA still entered into negotiations. A preliminary agreement was reached by ETA and the government and made public on 23 January 1988 and five days later ETA implemented a truce of three months. Talks between ETA and the Spanish government began in Algiers in 1989 but ended after just one month when the government broke the preliminary agreement. There were to be no further attempts at a deal until the late 1990s.

The defeat of the PSOE government in the election of 2000 and the formation of Jose Maria Aznar's PP government brought no change with regard to the issue of self-determination. In 2002, Basque regional leader Juan Jose Ibarretxe suggested that within a year a vote should take place on sharing sovereignty with Spain over three Basque provinces, creating a 'state of free association'.

Aznar replied: 'There is not going to be any room for breaking away. No one is going to impose an illegal regime' Nobody is going to be allowed to take it upon themselves to choose which laws they will obey and which they won't.'⁶ Just before its defeat at the general elections, the PP government was trying to push through legislation that would have made it a crime even to organise such a referendum.

The issues today

The situation in the Basque country in Spain remains one in which the Basques are denied their right of self-determination. That right is based on recognition that the Basques are a nation as has been

demonstrated not only by their possession of the characteristics of a nation such as language, geographical cohesion and historical and cultural identity, but also by their evident sense of a separate identity, expressed in separate political, cultural and economic organisations and virtually permanent majority support for nationalist political parties whenever the opportunity has been allowed. The one exception to this, in the election of 2000 when Aznar's Partido Popular won a majority in Euskadi, as it did in Spain as a whole, was followed by a return to majority support for the nationalist PNV in regional elections.

Recognition that the right has been denied does not imply any belief that the Basques in their majority actively want separation from Spain, only that they have been repeatedly denied the right to register their opinion in a free and fair referendum. What evidence there is, from election results, suggests neither Herri Batasuna (HB), nor any other of the parties and movements that are in favour of separation, has ever commanded majority support in the provinces of Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Alava, which make up Euskadi. HB has consistently received between 10 and 15 per cent of the vote. The parties in favour of separation have even less support in the province of Navarra and among the Basque provinces in France.

In nearly all of the elections since 1977 it has been the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) that has been the largest party. The PNV is a bourgeois nationalist, Christian Democratic party. It has agreed to work within the constitution set down in 1978 and has accepted the level of autonomy granted after the laws on autonomy approved in 1979 and 1981. While there have always been differences within the PNV over whether it is for autonomy or complete separation, even the votes cast for this party are a sign that Basque voters see themselves as distinct from the rest of Spain.

A similar expression of a strong majority identification as Basque but no powerful rejection of a shared identity with Spain is provided by a survey commissioned by the Office for Sociological Research of the Basque Government itself. This showed that 31 per cent of the Basques consider themselves only Basque, 16 per cent Basque rather than Spanish, 36 per cent equally Basque and Spanish, with 11 per cent more or only Spanish.⁴ No doubt the figures for Navarra and the French provinces would show a lower number of those who consider themselves to be Basque. The picture is much the same with the language. Nowhere is there a clear majority who speak mainly Basque in the Spanish provinces.

In the absence of any evidence that a majority of Basques wish to separate from Spain, the League for the Fifth International believes that revolutionary communists should not advocate or fight for independence of the Basque country. However, we are not indifferent to the many aspects of national oppression to which the Basques are subjected, first and foremost the denial of their right to self-determination. Communists should be in the vanguard of the fight for this right. This means campaigning against all acts of repression by the Spanish state or the regional government and all restrictions on democratic rights. It also means fighting for the workers' movement in the whole of Spain, and in France, to support the right of the populations of the Basque provinces to decide freely whether or not they wish to separate from both these states.

Communists, since the time of Lenin, have realised that support for the right to national separation is essential to unite the working class of different nations. Where one nation is oppressed by another this can have reactionary consequences for the workers of both. In the oppressed nation, workers are pressured to see a common identity with their bosses and to see the workers of the oppressor nation as their enemies while, in the oppressor nation, the workers are encouraged to identify with the superiority of 'their' nation, reinforcing their own subordination to their bosses. However, where the working class of the oppressor nation opposes its ruling class' oppression abroad, this presents a powerful ally to the workers of the oppressed nation and opens the prospect of alliance against their common exploiters.

In Spain, today, the Basques clearly have a separate sense of identity, reinforced by their treatment at the hands of the Spanish state. One result of this is that half of unionised workers are in unions affiliated to the nationalist PNV while, in the rest of Spain, most unionised workers are affiliated to the UGT or CCOO, which have historic links to the workers' parties. The effect of this can be seen from the last general strike in Spain when up to 90 per cent struck in the rest of Spain, but only half of workers in the Basque country.

A determined campaign by the unions of the UGT and CCOO in support of the Basque right of self-determination, in practical terms, for a referendum on separation, would create a strong basis for unity. If, in such a referendum, the majority of Basques voted against separation, as we would urge, this would provide a massive boost to working class solidarity and potentially alter the entire face of Spanish politics.

Equally, if the result of a referendum were support for independence, the working class of Spain should oppose any attempts by Madrid to oppose or obstruct full separation in order to ensure that the workers of the newly independent state see them as a natural ally, not the dupes of the Spanish state.

The responsibility for the continued military campaign lies with the Spanish state for its denial of the Basque people's right of self-determination. It must also be recognised that the continuing struggle in the Basque country over the national question undoubtedly arose from two major issues: the undemocratic bonapartist nature of the transition and the high level of repression in the Basque country during that period.

Revolutionary communists should unconditionally support the right of the Basque organisations, including ETA, to resist the armed forces and the police of the Spanish state who enforce the national oppression of the Basque people. This means we recognise ETA's right to resist these forces through military struggle. However, we believe that ETA's chosen strategy of guerrilla actions and individual terrorism actually sets back the movement for national self-determination. It relegates the role of the masses to that of cheerleaders for a self-selected guerrilla elite and makes the struggle to win solidarity from the working class of the rest of Spain a thousand times more difficult. Within Euskadi, it reduces the self-organisation of the working class and the youth to an auxiliary, rather than the leading, role in the national and democratic struggle.

Revolutionary communists' support for ETA's struggle against the repressive state forces of the Madrid government is unconditional, that is we do not make it dependent on the acceptance of our criticisms or the adoption of our political programme. However, we do oppose armed attacks on representatives of the labour movement, including those thoroughly bourgeois politicians who operate within the labour movement as PSOE officials. Certainly, they act as instruments of the national oppression of the Basques and for this they deserve punishment but not through individual terrorist attacks.

As revolutionary Marxists have always argued, any individual can easily be replaced and the act of assassination itself (outside the context of dictatorship) is likely to outrage the mass of the population and even drive them into supporting the oppressor state. In addition, such a strategy leaves the oppressed people themselves passive, waiting on the acts of heroic saviours rather than mobilising against their oppression.

The most politically effective form of punishment would be mass mobilisation to remove such people from office and prevent their replacement. Crucially, mobilisation of the members and supporters of the PSOE to oppose and bring to an end their own leaders' complicity in the repression of the Basques would open the way to the removal of the whole system of repression, not just of individual perpetrators who can easily be replaced.

For this reason, we do more than criticise, we unreservedly condemn, all indiscriminate bombings or other armed actions which target the workers and other civilians, or tourists, in the non-Basque regions of Spain. Such attacks deserve no support from communists, they serve exclusively the forces of reaction, playing into the hands of the right and providing a pretext for heightened repression of the mass of the population.

Nevertheless, the fundamental responsibility for the continued ETA campaign lies with the Spanish state for its refusal to recognise the principle of Basque self-determination. ETA's objective today is principally the securing of negotiations on the release of their prisoners and achieving self-determination, both entirely legitimate, democratic demands. We believe their strategy, however, is counter-productive. Instead of devoting their energies to mobilising the masses of both the Basque people and the wider Spanish population in a campaign of direct action to force Madrid to concede an amnesty and a referendum, their military strategy necessarily separates them from the masses and hands the government the trump card of mobilising the masses against 'terrorism'. Thus, we have not only seen demonstrations against ETA in Madrid but even in Euskadi itself.

For this reason, while not denying the right of an oppressed nation or workers' movement to take up arms, we believe ETA should suspend its offensive actions. We also warn against the dangers of relying on any 'peace process' or negotiations to achieve the right of self-determination. As we have seen, defence of territorial unity is a cardinal principle of the Spanish state, irrespective of which party is in office and only a sustained and irresistible campaign of mass action, one which threatens to undermine their rule, will force them into concession.

The mass opposition to Aznar and his attempt to whip up anti-ETA hysteria after the Madrid bombings, show that such a campaign is entirely possible and revolutionary communists, therefore, advocate a programme that links the struggle for democratic, national, economic and social demands to the struggle for a real working class government. A campaign based on direct action and mobilisation of the working classes of the Euskadi and the whole of Spain should fight for:

? The immediate repeal of repressive legislation, including all anti-terrorist and emergency powers.

? Immediate lifting of the ban on parties and organisations linked to ETA and other radical nationalist organisations, including the ban on standing candidates in elections and the censorship of the media.

? Immediate amnesty for all Basque political prisoners and those wanted by the police. Prosecution of all state officials guilty of torture.

? Withdrawal of all Spanish armed forces, police and military, from Euskadi and dissolution of all units specifically used for repression of the Basque people.

? Immediate recognition of the right of self-determination, expressed through a free and fair referendum, of the Basque people.

To conduct such a campaign, new organisations of the working class and anti-capitalist youth are necessary so that the national, democratic and social struggles can be brought together. Such organisations are already being built across Europe, and within Spain, they are the social forums. They should be built at local, regional and national level and, despite the many betrayals of the main Spanish workers' organisations; the PSOE, the Izquierda Unida, the Comisiones Obreras, the UGT and the Basque unions should all be drawn into these forums.

The more effectively the forums can mobilise mass action to fight for their goals, including self-determination for the Basques, the more the Spanish state can be expected to use its full force to repress

the movement. To meet this, the forums would have to rally the working class and its organisations to organise their own self-defence, laying the basis for the revolutionary overthrow of the Spanish state and, within that, the resolution of the Basque national question and other democratic demands within a new, and this time victorious, Spanish revolution.

Footnotes

1 US Department of State Designation of Batasuna, Euskal Herritarrok and Herri Batasuna under Executive Order 13224.

2 Report to the Spanish Government on the visit to Spain carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 22 to 26 July 2001.

3 Report of Theo van Boven, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the question of torture. Released 10 March 2004 following a visit to Spain in October 2003.

4 In Spain there are four (names are in Basque and Spanish): Nafarroa ? Navarra; Guipuzkoa ? Guipuzcoa; Bizkaia ? Vizcaya; Araba ? Alava. In France: Lapurdi ? Labourd; Benafarroa ? Basse Navarre; Zuberoa ? Soule.

5 Translated as ?the strong sea wind preceding a storm?

6 ?Aznar stamps on Basque devolution?, 30 September 2002, [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2289036.stm) ^[1]

7 The Decline of ETA, 2002, www.gees.org/articulo/337/3 ^[2]

8 Research document on trade unions in Spain from the CWU, 1998, Roger Darlington, www.cwu.org/uploads/documents/research/rd98_036_1.html ^[3]

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[1] <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/>

[2] <http://www.gees.org/articulo/337/3>

[3] http://www.cwu.org/uploads/documents/research/rd98_036_1.html