

Catalonia: release the prisoners!

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On 14 October, after a trial lasting four months, the Madrid Supreme Court sentenced nine Catalan separatist leaders to between nine and 13 years in prison for their part in the 2017 secession movement.

In response, tens of thousands of mainly young protesters gathered in the region's town centres, where they were met with a police crackdown that has developed into three days of running battles, with at least 54 arrests.

The Catalan leaders had already spent two years in prison, after former People's Party (PP) prime minister Mariano Rajoy deployed the paramilitary Guardia Civil to suppress the independence movement after an unofficial referendum conducted by pro-independence parties.

In fact it should be Rajoy and his ministers in jail, not Oriol Junqueras and his comrades. Their draconian sentences are the result of the failure to purge the legacy of the fascist Franco dictatorship from the Spanish constitution, including the punitive powers of the Supreme Court, and the denial of the elementary democratic right of nations to self-determination.

The verdicts blatantly violate the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention of Human Rights, but Catalans will be waiting a long time for either of these bodies or their member states to condemn the actions of the Spanish state. Likewise they should not hold their breath for the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament, or its umbrella organisation, the moribund Socialist International, to come to their aid.

Indeed, its affiliate, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE, has enthusiastically welcomed the repression. Prime minister Pedro Sánchez told reporters, "Today brings an exemplary legal process to an end. No one is above the law. In a democracy like Spain nobody is subject to trial for his or her ideas or politics but rather for criminal conduct as provided by the law". He assured the media that his government would "fully comply" with the court's decision.

This cynical and sycophantic statement exposes the leftwing credentials of Sánchez and his party as a sham. It hammers home the futility of hoping that, when it comes to preserving the Spanish state as a prison house of nations, his policies would depart from the form established by Franco's heirs in the People's Party.

Compounding his crimes, Sánchez cynically fostered hopes of a negotiated settlement with the Catalans in order to boost his votes in the recent elections and to get Catalan parties in the Cortes (the Madrid parliament) to support his government. But, faced with the choice between defending the integrity of the Spanish state by force or maintaining his coalition, loyalty to his king and country trumped his electoral interests, let alone his socialist principles ? if he ever had any.

Pablo Casado, the present PP leader praised the Court in virtually identical words to Sánchez, only taxing the prime minister not to offer any amnesty or government pardon to the convicted leaders. Meanwhile, the leader of the proto-fascist Vox party, Javier Ortega-Smith, did criticise the verdict, for its leniency. The Catalan leaders should, he said, have been sentenced to 25 years apiece for the crime of violent rebellion.

The only principled position came from Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, albeit expressed in rather restrained language given the gravity of the situation. He said that the sentence 'will go down in the history of Spain as a symbol of how not to address political conflicts in a democracy'. In a message on Facebook, Iglesias said he wanted to 'send his support to the convicted leaders and to their families'.

This mealy-mouthed solidarity is of a piece with his party's lukewarm support for national democratic rights. In fact, any democrat, let alone socialist, living in the Spanish state should demand the immediate release of the convicted leaders, the overturning of their convictions, and the dropping of all charges against the exiled Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont.

Resistance

Though it was the moderate grassroots organisation, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) that called for the first evening's candlelit demonstration, that very night several thousand people occupied Barcelona airport. They were met with police baton charges and volleys of rubber bullets that injured more than 130 and cost one young demonstrator his eye.

This direct action and those in the days that followed have been organised by the Tsunami Democràtic, a new online mobilising platform. Key to the movement's success are the activists of the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDRs), established to resist the assumption of direct rule by the Spanish state during 2017, who tweeted: 'It is time to rise up against the authoritarian fascism of the Spanish state and its accomplices. It is time for the #PopularRevolt.' Solidarity demonstrations erupted in other Spanish cities, including in Madrid, and a general strike has been called in Catalonia for 18 October.

Justified as the demonstrators are, it should not be forgotten that, although the months around the 2017 referendum saw huge demonstrations and direct action, nonetheless the weakness and divisions of the nationalist leaders, as well as the lack of effective and sizeable solidarity from across Spain and Europe, ended with the victory of the Spanish state. The present leadership of the Catalan parliament, the Generalitat, is calling plaintively for negotiations. These will get nowhere. Denunciations of protesters facing police violence by the Catalan president will only embolden the Madrid government.

Strategy

For as long as the separatists pose the question as a struggle for independence, rather than for the democratic right of self-determination, they make it more difficult for the roughly 50 per cent of Catalonia's population opposed to full independence to join in.

Today, Catalonia does not even have real autonomy. If it did, it would not have been possible for Madrid to dissolve its parliament and jail its leaders for organising a referendum. All sincere Spanish democrats should support and fight for the extension of genuine autonomy to all of Spain's nationalities, even if they do not wish to see the country's working class divided into competing states. But if, in a referendum conducted without repression, the majority voted for complete independence then it would equally be the duty of democrats and socialists across Spain and Europe to help them realise their democratic decision.

However, as in the case of Scotland, we do not believe that creating new and smaller capitalist states will

answer any of the major social questions facing workers. Indeed, any temptation to culturally or linguistically 'Catalanise' the large number of Spanish speakers and migrants would be reactionary in itself.

As socialist internationalists we counterpose to illusions in bourgeois nationalist separatism - the struggle to turn the neoliberal and imperialist EU into a Socialist United States of Europe in which all nations and nationalities would have a broad degree of autonomy plus the right to form distinct units if they so wished.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring European Union states, socialists should demand that Labour and Socialist MPs and MEPs put down resolutions condemning the Madrid court's decision, demanding the unconditional release of the prisoners, and the immediate constitutional recognition of the right of Spain's nations to conduct independence referendums if they wish.

A powerful European solidarity movement can help workers in Spain confront the democratic deficit in their constitution, and overcome the Castilian chauvinism that corrupts and weakens the working class. This means taking up the patent need to rewrite Spain's constitution as a federal republic, a task that can only be achieved through a sovereign constituent assembly convened and defended by a workers' government based on, and accountable to, organs of working class democracy.

In this way the necessarily interlinked social and democratic revolutionary tasks can be fulfilled, and the unity of the working class achieved and preserved.

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