



# Spain: Defeat Rajoy's coup against Catalonia

Dave Stockton Thu, 21/09/2017 - 15:42

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The present acute political crisis in Spain began with the decision by the Catalan parliament on September 6 to hold a binding independence referendum on October 1. On September 7, the government of prime minister Mariano Rajoy appealed to the Constitutional Court in Madrid to suspend the referendum decision. This the court immediately did.

Carles Puigdemont, who heads the 'Together For The Yes', Junts pel Sí, coalition government, elected in September 2015, had originally sought a referendum negotiated with the Spanish government, but Rajoy repeatedly rejected this. Hence Puigdemont's call for a unilateral referendum, which he rushed through the Catalan parliament with little or no debate, thus alienating parties that support the right to hold a referendum but not necessarily a vote for secession.

The arrogant actions of the Partido Popular government, designed to illegalise and frustrate the conduct of the ballot by Civil Guard raids and confiscation of posters, pamphlets and ballot boxes, has created a major crisis that has re-united Catalans who support and oppose independence.

On September 20, it was reported that ten million ballot papers had been seized and impounded. On top of that, 12 senior local government officials and business leaders had been taken into custody. Rajoy has even made a thinly veiled threat to invoke article 155 of the Spanish Constitution which would suspend the Catalan Statute of Autonomy and even to arrest its government and any public officials, such as mayors of towns and cities, who allow the referendum to go ahead. This would amount to nothing less than a coup d'état.

The latest news, that Civil Guards have entered government buildings in Barcelona, including the Economics ministry, suggest that this may already be under way. It immediately provoked an angry response from Catalan politicians. In Madrid, MPs of the Republican Catalan Left, the Esquerra, or ERC, walked out of Congress, with one young firebrand, Gabriel Rufián, exploding at Rajoy: "take your dirty hands off Catalan institutions".

The left wing Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, closely linked to Podemos, called on people to "defend Catalan institutions". The more left of the two major trade union federations, the Workers' Commissions, CCOO, said its members had taken to the streets to block a major road in Barcelona.

The response of large crowds of protesters was immediate, they surrounded the government buildings. Spanish security forces also tried to raid the headquarters of the left wing party, the Candidacy of Popular Unity, CUP, but, after crowds of demonstrators blocked their way for eight hours, they were forced to withdraw to jeers and shouts of triumph from the crowds.

Finally, the Catalan Government stated that the central government has "de facto suspended home rule" in Catalonia this morning.

The FC Barcelona football club also said in a statement: 'FC Barcelona, in remaining faithful to its historic commitment to the defence of the nation, to democracy, to freedom of speech, and to self-determination, condemns any act that may impede the free exercise of these rights.'

Rajoy's response was a TV broadcast in which, like a schoolmaster, he ordered Catalans to, 'Stop this escalation of radicalism and disobedience once and for all.'

Whilst there may be an element of bluff on Rajoy's part, he is undoubtedly playing with fire. Any major police repression will certainly provoke angry mass mobilisations and occupations in Barcelona and across Catalonia. This response will be fully justified and the entire internationalist left should do all in its power to copy it in Madrid and other cities.

The undemocratic 1978 constitution explicitly denies the right to self-determination of Spain's minority nationalities. It proclaims 'the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards'. The defence and assertion of the right of the Catalans to self-determination is an elementary democratic demand and should be supported by workers and socialists across Spain and, indeed, the whole of Europe.

This does not mean that socialists should argue for a Yes vote, that is, to secede, let alone advocate a unilateral declaration of independence by the present Catalan Government. Clearly, however, all impositions from Madrid, let alone an outright suspension of the Autonomy Statute or the arrest of government ministers or city mayors, should be resisted by mass actions on the streets, including an all out indefinite general strike.

Nevertheless, we also need to be aware that this conflict could well unleash dangerous and destructive forces of national chauvinism, dividing and poisoning the consciousness of the working class and youth of the entire Spanish state. It is no wonder that both Rajoy and Puigdemont head neoliberal, right wing, bourgeois parties and will be delighted to see the workers and other progressive forces divided and pitted against one another.

The answer to this danger, however, is for all progressive forces, the left parties and groups, the trade unions, the radical youth, to mobilise on the streets and squares across the entire Spanish state to put a stop to Rajoy's take-over, to force the immediate cessation of the Civil Guard's actions in Catalonia and, indeed, the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all repressive forces so that the Catalans can conduct their referendum. All must be allowed to vote with no pressure or coercion and with enough time and space to conduct a democratic debate.

There is no doubt that the Catalans constitute a distinct nation with their own language and culture within the Spanish state. This is a fact that should have been explicitly and unequivocally recognised in the post-Franco constitution. Under the Monarchy, and then under the Franco dictatorship, they, like the Basques, Galicians and other smaller linguistic communities, suffered severe national oppression by a centralised, authoritarian Castilian-speaking state.

With the fall of the Franco dictatorship, most of these elements of oppression were removed and autonomy allowed for great improvements in regard to the use of the language and the flowering of culture. What remained of oppression was basically the denial by the Madrid governments and the judiciary of the right to make an unhindered decision on whether to secede or not.

Catalonia is more industrialised and wealthier than any other region, apart from that around Madrid itself. Many of the Catalans' nationalist demands, such as an end to net payment of taxes, which are used to support and develop the poorer parts of the Spain, or the frequently voiced view that Catalans are harder working and inherently more progressive, are simply examples of a chauvinism that workers should utterly reject.

The creation of an independent Catalan state will certainly not decrease the divisions within the working class, either of the region or the state. If, as before, only a minority actually vote and the result is 'Yes', this will leave a majority deeply unhappy at the decision. Worse than that, any unilateral decision by the Puigdemont government would likewise alienate a large part of the Spanish-speaking plurality; 45.92 percent mainly use Spanish, 35.54 percent mainly use Catalan and 11.95 percent use both languages equally. In short, the new country would be born with an enormous democratic deficit. The rump of Spain would, moreover, lose a militant part of its working class movement.

On the eve of the crisis, polls showed that while around 60 percent of Catalans wanted a referendum, over fifty percent would vote 'No'. Rajoy's actions could quickly change this if his 'legal' coup turns into real repression. Part of the reason for the growth of nationalism in recent years is undoubtedly the effect of a right wing government and judiciary in Madrid that is a block on progress but seems difficult to break electorally on a pan-Spanish basis.

This right wing hegemony is the product of the failures of the workers' movement and the radical youth, over the recent period, to succeed in breaking its stranglehold with square occupations, the one day general strikes and mass demonstrations and even the sudden rise of Podemos. All these powerful movements, which had great potential, eventually broke on the question of leadership. Neither the reformist parties, whether old, the PSOE and IU, or new, Podemos, nor the horizontals and left populists, could focus the movements on the question of taking power.

Splitting the workers and youth of Barcelona and Madrid will not help to resolve this. On the contrary, it will only make matters worse. What is needed, and urgently, is to build up a Spanish state-wide political force, a new workers' party with a revolutionary, anticapitalist programme. Assembling its forces should start right now in a movement not just to stop Rajoy's coup in Catalonia but to drive him from power in Madrid, too.

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