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Spain: Socialist Party government mounts a provocation in Catalonia

Calling its weekly Cabinet meeting in the Catalan region's capital, Barcelona, instead of Madrid is a deliberate provocation by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. It threatens to ignite sectarian strife in the already politically volatile region.

Today's meeting takes place only a fortnight after the PSOE suffered a debacle in the regional elections in Andalusia, which produced a right-wing majority in the region's parliament after 36-years of uninterrupted PSOE rule. A fascist party, VOX, entered Spanish politics for the first time since the death of General Francisco Franco, winning 10 seats after mounting an aggressive campaign against Sánchez for holding talks with the Catalan nationalists.

Sánchez's response was to hold his Cabinet meeting in the historic building Casa Llotja de Mar, located in the centre of Barcelona, only 500 metres from the regional government headquarters and only 700 metres from Parliament Park. The government took the decision against the advice of the Catalan regional police, the Mossos d'Esquadra, which recommended the Palacete Albéniz, located outside the city.

Sánchez, aware that it would provoke demonstrations, has put the city under lockdown with the deployment of more than 9,000 officers from four agencies—the Barcelona municipal police, the Mossos d'Esquadra, the National Police and the militarized Civil Guards—to protect the meeting. The police and media have warned that protestors face prosecution under articles 503 and 504 of Spain's Criminal Code, which carry a sentence

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of up to five years in prison for anyone who tries to interrupt a Cabinet meeting “violently or with intimidation.”

The meeting takes place under conditions where 22 former Catalan ministers and activists face sedition charges for their role in last year’s independence push. Their trials are due to start early next year and will be politically explosive.

Four separatist leaders in pre-trial detention—Jordi Turull, Jordi Sànchez, Josep Rull and Joaquim Forn—are on indefinite hunger strike against the Constitutional Court blocking their appeals to the European Court of Human Rights. Last week Turull, the former Catalan government spokesman, was moved to hospital due to his deteriorating health situation.

The Catalan nationalists have responded to the continued imprisonment of their leaders by blocking the 2019 budget of the minority PSOE government, which only has 84 seats in the 350-seat parliament in Madrid and relies on the pseudo-left Podemos and the Catalan separatist parties to pass legislation.

Sánchez is utilising the Cabinet provocation and display of force to show the ruling class that he is prepared to move against the Catalan separatists. As right-wing *El Español* editorialised on the meeting, “If on that day the situation becomes out of control in Catalonia, the government will have no other choice but to break with the separatists.”

Sánchez is seeking to win the backing of the Spanish bourgeoisie should he call a snap general election early next year with a show of force, while making limited concessions to the working class as a sop to mounting social anger after a decade of austerity. He is expected to approve by executive decree at today’s meeting a 22 percent increase in the minimum wage to 900 euros and a 2.25 percent increase in public sector pay promised in the stalled 2019 budget agreement with Podemos.

If elections are called, Sánchez will blame the Catalan nationalists for the failure of his government to fulfil its “left” programme, further fuelling sectarian divisions. Last week in parliament, he accused the Catalan nationalists of “lies and grievances” that, like Brexit in the UK, was splitting the nation and “undermining the European common project.”

“I will not accept a new violation of the Constitution in Catalonia,” he said in a veiled threat to reintroduce direct military rule from Madrid.

Sánchez was making it clear he has junked previous promises to “engage in a constructive dialogue with the Catalan government on how to resolve the ongoing conflict” and is reverting to the position he took while in opposition last October. The PSOE backed the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government as it outlawed the independence referendum

and implemented Article 155 of the Constitution to impose direct rule from Madrid, leaving over 1,000 injured and arresting the secessionist leaders.

Soon after the results, Andalusia PSOE leader Susana Díaz declared she was “wrong” to ignore the Catalan crisis in her own election campaign. PSOE regional premiers of Aragón, Javier Lambán, and Castilla La Mancha, Emiliano García Page, called for the outlawing of Catalan secessionists.

Sánchez’s filthy provocation exposes all the claims by Podemos that a PSOE-led government would be an alternative to the PP. Instead, it acts just as ruthlessly in ramping up repressive measures and dispatching more police to Catalonia than Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy did last year.

This left Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias calling on Sánchez to not to give in to the “pressures” to re-impose direct control on Catalonia, as if Sánchez is an innocent bystander. “Many sectors are pressuring you to burn Catalonia, don’t do it...Let us speak,” he pleaded—recalling his appeals to the PP government last October, when he called on Rajoy to be “responsible” and place himself “at the forefront of negotiations” with the Catalan premier.

Like last year, Podemos is again seeking to defuse deep-seated opposition among workers and youth to the developing of an authoritarian state by corraling them behind the PSOE. This highlights the unbridgeable political gulf separating the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and Trotskyism from the middle-class populism of Podemos. The ICFI has consistently called for a common struggle of Catalan and Spanish workers, and the entire European working class, against the danger of state repression by Madrid. It opposed Madrid’s repression in Catalonia, without backing Catalan nationalist calls for a separate capitalist mini-state warning of the threat of a bloody Balkans-like ethnic conflict developing in Spain.

The Catalan nationalist parties, Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT) and Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), meanwhile are scrambling to arrange a deal with Sánchez--fearing that new elections will result in a right-wing coalition government of the PP, Citizens and Vox which will suspend home rule again, this time indefinitely, and outlaw secessionist parties. This week nationalist leaders indicated they are preparing to vote for Sánchez’s budget and an open letter was published, signed by five former regional premiers, appealing for the hunger strikers to stop.

The Committees for the Defense of the Republic (CDR) is a pro-secessionist group backed by the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), a pseudo-left group that has repeatedly

supported regional pro-austerity nationalist governments. Along with other small separatist groups, it is urging that Barcelona is brought to a standstill today, with protests and road blockades demanding the release of the imprisoned Catalan leaders and self-determination. Their value in mobilising limited protests to strengthen the hand of the Catalan bourgeoisie in its negotiations with Madrid was recognised recently by regional premier Quim Torra, who declared, “Friends from the CDR, you put the pressure on and you do it well.”

The PSOE for its part is using these protests to legitimise its turn to repression. Workers must oppose all threats of violence directed against the Catalan separatists. A powerful basis exists for mobilising a unified offensive against the PSOE and taking forward a struggle against all factions of the bourgeoisie in Madrid and Barcelona—the ongoing radicalisation of the working class epitomised in the Yellow Vest protests against the Macron government in France.

Last month saw a strike by hundreds of thousands of workers and students in Catalonia, demanding a reversal to the budget cuts imposed by regional nationalist governments since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis. Sánchez’s meeting today takes place on a day of mass workers’ struggles involving taxi drivers, workers from Spain’s train service Renfe over job cuts and working conditions and by postal workers.

The critical question is to develop the programmatic and organisational means through which to fight back against the ruling elite. This can only be done through a revolutionary struggle for power on a socialist, internationalist programme and the building of workers states as part of the United Socialist States of Europe. This requires the building a Spanish section of the ICFI.