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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Alejandro López and Alex Lantier
18.10.2019

Spanish government threatens broader crackdown as mass protests escalate in Catalonia

Mass protests and street fighting erupted in cities across Catalonia for a third night running yesterday, as police attacked workers and youth protesting the fraudulent conviction of 12 Catalan nationalist leaders after a show trial over their role in the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Highways and train lines are blockaded, universities occupied, Barcelona's key avenues blocked, and thousands demonstrated in cities across the region amid tense stand-offs with police.

Police are using escalating violence as protests continue against the ruling. On Monday, 121 people were injured of which 24 were hospitalised. One young protester lost his eye due to the impact of a rubber bullet, a weapon banned for the region's police. Tuesday resulted in 51 arrests and left 125 people injured, 72 of them police officers, according to Catalan health services.

Last night, Spanish and Catalan regional police in Barcelona again violently attacked a protest that they estimated at 40,000 people, primarily youth reported to be members of the Catalan-nationalist Committees for the Defense of the Republic (CDR) coalition. BBC correspondent Jean Mackenzie tweeted: "Just watched rows of police run up the main parade in Barcelona shooting rubber bullets into crowds of people at a candle vigil for the Catalan prisoners. Turned the situation into a scary and violent one instantly. Now thousands running from the police in every direction."

Protesters lit fires, and violent clashes continued throughout the evening in Catalonia's largest city. Late last night, Barcelona mayor Ana Colau reported that there were over 40

ongoing fires blockading roads or burning cars. Protesters jeered Spanish police and the *Mossos d'Esquadra* Catalan regional police units as they abandoned their positions on the Gran Via and fled.

Protests of hundreds to several thousand people took place in towns and cities around Catalonia, including Girona, Lleida, Tarragona, Vic, Tortosa, Terrassa, Puigcerdà, Mataró and Igualada. In several cities, protesters burned Catalan Interior Minister Miquel Buch in effigy to protest his ministry's collaboration with Spanish police forces.

Significantly, protests in Spain extended outside of Catalonia yesterday. Thousands attended a protest on Madrid's Plaza del Sol, holding banners defending the Catalan nationalists' right to hold an independence referendum and shouting "Liberty for political prisoners," "Madrid with the Catalan people," and "Yes to the right to decide." A group of neo-Nazis who had reportedly hidden in nearby streets attacked groups of protesters around the Plaza del Sol rally.

Yesterday, tens of thousands participated in the five different three-day "Marches for Freedom" started on Catalonia's roads called by the ANC and Òmnium Cultural. The different columns are set to converge on Friday afternoon in Barcelona, where they aim to join the demonstration convened by the pro-secessionist trade union Intersindical as part of a one-day general strike to protest the court verdicts.

Sections of the trade union bureaucracy in Catalonia, aware of growing anger among workers at the authoritarian ruling against the Catalan nationalists, have felt compelled to call protests.

On Tuesday, amid growing anger among Barcelona dockworkers, the Union of Docks of the Barcelona Ports Tweeted: "we have decided to support next Friday's defence of labour and democratic rights of all citizens of Catalonia. ... We will protest against labor reforms but also against the Supreme Court verdict." It concluded that it was striking not "because we are secessionists, since we are a plural union that contains all political ideologies, but we see that there is a violation of civil rights and this verdict does not help resolve the conflict."

Spain's main trade union federations, the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CCOO) and the social-democratic General Union of Labor (UGT), have refused to call strikes, however, and are blocking strike action to defend Catalan workers. They are echoing the reactionary positions of their affiliated parties, the Stalinist-Pabloite Podemos party and the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) of Acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

The Sánchez government is escalating its police crackdown, working closely with the rest of the political establishment. The Interior Ministry has announced it will send 1,100 more Guardia Civil officers, adding to the 2000 Civil Guard and National Police officers already present. The Ministry has said that they will stay there at least for another month. The Ministry has also announced they are investigating Tsunami Democratic, an app which is allegedly co-ordinating protesters' actions.

After meeting with the leaders of Spain's main parliamentary parties, Sánchez warned that he does not rule out "any scenario," including the invoking the National Security Law to control the region's police or Article 155 to remove the democratically elected Catalan government. He added, "everything is planned and we will act, if necessary, from firmness, proportionality and unity."

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The far-right Vox party is calling on the PSOE to invoke article 116 of the constitution. This would mean the imposition of a state of emergency, martial law and the deployment of soldiers across Catalonia.

The principal prop on which the PSOE and the overtly fascist sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie rest is the role of Podemos and the Catalan nationalists themselves in suppressing political opposition.

Forty years after the Francoite regime collapsed amid mass struggles of the working class, there is deep opposition among workers to a return to a fascist dictatorship. Podemos, however, is making it clear that it will not appeal to this sentiment. Instead, as millions throughout Spain oppose the verdict, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias met with Sánchez to make clear Podemos would continue backing the PSOE's crackdown.

In a press conference after his meeting with Sánchez on Catalonia, Iglesias said he had pledged the "full collaboration of Podemos to support the government's initiatives to initiate dialogue and de-escalate tensions in the region."

Iglesias then tried to downplay PSOE repression. Asked if the PSOE is planning any actions, he said : "I don't think the government is planning any exceptional measures." He claimed however that "we would like to bring the PSOE to our positions to defend dialogue and measures to lower the current tensions."

Podemos is bankrupt because it is a bourgeois party basing itself on the same class axis as the PSOE: the the political authority, police repression and territorial integrity of the Spanish capitalist state.

As for the Catalan regional government, it is led by the pro-austerity, secessionist and pro-European Union (EU) Catalan nationalist parties, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and Together for Catalonia (JxCat), whose officials including former vice-premier Junqueras have just received draconian sentences. However, it is ordering its regional police, the *Mossos d'Esquadra*, to work and coordinate closely with Spanish police as they assault protests against the ruling across Catalonia.

The Catalan government cynically declared it shares the “anger of the people after the verdict,” while continuing to order their police to beat and assault protesters. Catalan government spokeswoman Meritxell Budó said she “empathises” with “forceful” protests against the ruling, but absurdly claimed that security forces are mounting their baton charges to “protect the protesters.” She added that there “were gatherings, agglomerations on the platforms of public transport. This can put security at risk and there were times when the police line could have broken.”

For now, the regional government’s crackdown has been so savage that the PSOE government has said it does not need to invoke a state of emergency for now.

Similarly, while falsely claiming to sympathize with this Friday’s general strike, the Catalan government has imposed strict minimum service requirements to limit participation in the strike. The Department of Labor, Social Affairs and Families has imposed 50 percent minimum services in the metro and the buses operating at peak times in Barcelona. Local and regional rail lines will be required have a minimum of 33 percent of trains running the entire day.

17 October 2019