

From the Basque Country: The left must support Catalonia

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Mural calling for freedom for political prisoners arrested by the Spanish state in the Catalan city of Terrassa.

The struggle in Catalonia for self determination has shaken the whole Spanish state. It has forced all political forces to take a stance.

Much of the left across the Spanish state, while not supporting the repression of the right-wing government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, have also not supported Catalonia's independence process.

One clear exception is in the Basque Country, itself the scene of a long battle against Spanish state repression and for self-determination. The article below is by Gorka Elejabarrieta, head of the international department of Sortu, a left-wing pro-independence party in the Basque Country.

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Let us be clear, to defend the unity of the Spanish state is at least as nationalist as to stand for the independence of Catalonia.

Being pro-independence does not make you automatically progressive or leftist, but contrary to what some prominent Left representatives in the Spanish state are stating, you can be in favour of Catalan independence from a very progressive perspective.

Moreover, I believe that the driving forces of the Catalan process are mainly progressive. As the process has moved forward in recent years, the left in Catalonia has strengthened while conservative forces have weakened.

Many unacceptable lies have been told lately in the name of the left in regard to the Catalan process.

When Alberto Garzon took over as leader of the Spanish state-wide United Left (IU), it seemed to some of us that IU would finally correct its position towards stateless nations within the Spanish state — moving to a more democratic approach that respects these nations right to decide its relations with the Spanish state.

The same can be said about Podemos. The rise of Podemos (which emerged out of the 2011 indignado anti-austerity movement) and its initial discourses in favour of the right to decide for Catalonia and the Basque Country became an important change in the traditional position of the left in Spain towards our nations.

In recent weeks, Garzon and other representatives of the Spanish left have given some profound and thoughtful theoretical insights for the left globally to think about. Among Garzon's pearls of wisdom, "The left cannot defend the independence of Catalonia" and "It is not coherent to be a communist and pro-independence in the Catalan context".

Spanish nationalism

It is clear that when he says this it only applies to Catalonia and probably the Basque Country as well because Garzon and his party don't have any problem openly defending the status quo — that is the unity of Spain — while being leftist and communist. It seems to me that he and his party are much more nationalist — Spanish nationalist — than they are ready to admit publicly.

From a progressive stance, this position is hard to understand unless you add to it a strong dose of Spanish nationalism. From a democratic perspective, this shows that their support for the "right to decide" is just a valid political position as long as no nation dares to use it. Or, what is more pernicious, tries to implement what the majority of the people has decided democratically.

Saying as many others have said — that the Catalan process is not a valid one because Spanish laws, specifically the Spanish Constitution, do not allow it — is a not progressive approach. On the dispute between legality and legitimacy, the left should always be on the side "of the many, not the few".

How many battles would the left, historically, have won if it did not prioritise legitimacy over existing legality? Suffragist struggles, workers' organising, the US civil rights battle, anti-Apartheid movement, national liberation movements around the globe — every battle that the left has fought over the past centuries in favour of a better society and for freedoms would not have been fought if restricted to respecting existing legality.

In Catalonia, more than 80% of the population supports the right to decide of the Catalan people. For the past years, there has not been such a huge popular, civic, peaceful, social, political and cultural process in Europe as the Catalan one. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have protested once and again.

This process has brought together the main Catalan institutions, various political parties from the left and right, the main trade unions, hundreds of social movements, and small- and medium-sized businesses.

The response of the Spanish state has been to send state Civil Guards and national police to attack thousands as they tried to vote, arrest leading figures of the Catalan social and cultural movements, suspend Catalan autonomy, and jail the Catalan government, forcing President Carles Puigdemont and four ministers into exile in Belgium.

As a consequence, Catalonia is now being directly ruled from Madrid by a party that has 8% of electoral support in Catalonia.

Choosing sides

When state repressive apparatuses attack those trying to defend democratic rights for everybody (including unionists), the left cannot remain neutral. It cannot position itself between those being attacked and the perpetrators of the attacks.

As human rights activist Desmond Tutu once said: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Some on the left say that the consequences Catalonia is facing today are equally the responsibility of those promoting independence as of the Spanish state. From a democratic and progressive perspective this position is not acceptable.

Left-wing British journalist Owen Jones, in a debate in the BBC, said it clearly: "It doesn't matter whether you support Catalan independence, it really is quite irrelevant. The issue is, do you support the right of the Catalan people to freely determine their own future without being dragged from polling stations and being thrown downstairs?"

"And in modern Europe, to see... an elected political leadership fleeing a country to claim political asylum and being locked up in prisons should chill every single European and encourage us to stand in solidarity with the Catalan people..."

"If Scotland have been denied the right to determine its own future that would have been a democratic outrage, and... the least that other European governments can do is tell the Spanish government: Stop assaulting voters, stop locking up elected politicians, stop denying the rights of your people to determine their own future and stop attacking civil liberties."

Some claim the only way for Catalans to exercise their right to decide is first through a profound reform to democratise the Spanish state. This is the path that we Basques have followed for years with no result.

We always believed that Spain should acknowledge the Basque Country as a political subject with the right to decide. Only then would Basques be in a position to freely and democratically determine our own future.

It should be noted that the right to decide is a democratic right, which would allow every political project to be defended equally: that of independence, unionism, autonomy etc. It is a right that at the end of the day would allow every people to determine its future among the existing possibilities.

This path proved futile. There is not enough progressive strength within the Spanish state to democratise it. Not in the past, not now, nor in the near future.

Sortu secretary-general Arkaitz Rodriguez has repeatedly said to the left across the Spanish state: "We are willing to cooperate in the democratisation of the Spanish state with you, but we ask you to be honest and that the day you realise this to be impossible, that you sum up your forces with the pro-independence parties to support constituent processes in our nations, because unlike in the Spanish state, we have enough strength in Catalonia and the Basque Country to reach independent

and progressive republics.”

Path to democracy

The path towards a more democratic and progressive Europe passes through building free republics in Catalonia and in the Basque Country. In his day, Karl Marx understood Irish struggle for independence in a similar way, when he wrote in a letter to Friedrich Engels: “The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland.

“That is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general.”

David Fernandez, a leader of the pro-independence Catalan left, summed up this strategy with the simple phrase: If there is not a democratic path towards independence, then a path towards independence will also bring us democracy.

We are facing, in my opinion, a two-dimension dilemma in Catalonia. On the one hand, the Catalan process is a democratic conflict. Catalans should have the right to determine their own future freely. No law or constitution should prevent exercising this democratic and legitimate right. Progressive forces in Europe and around the globe should stand with the Catalans on this.

The democratic solution to this conflict is clear — a legal and binding referendum on independence. The problem is that Spain will never accept what seems to everybody else a logical and democratic solution.

On the other hand, the Catalan process is a political process. It offers a clear chance to build a republic that is more progressive and democratic than the status quo. It is a political process in which the left is increasing its support daily, and where the status quo is being contested strongly.

Catalonia will never walk alone, and the left must be by its side —because it is also our battle.

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P.S.

* November 25, 2017: <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/left-must-support-catalonia>