

# Spanish State and Catalonia: Democratic revolution or authoritarian state

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*November 11, 2017 demonstration in Barcelona demanding release of Catalan political prisoners.*

## Introduction

The Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) is a left pro-independence party in Catalonia that has emerged in recent years and developed around an anticapitalist program. With ten seats in the now-deposed Catalan parliament, it gave critical support to the Puigdemont government, ensuring a pro-independence majority, but was not a member of the government as such. For background information on the CUP, see:

The radical party behind the Catalan referendum,  
<https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2017/09/29/the-cup>

The far-left separatists who took Catalonia to the brink,  
<http://tinyurl.com/yb9tjbg8>

On November 12 a CUP general assembly voted by 64% in favour of presenting a slate in its own name in the December 21 Catalan elections called by the Spanish government, to be held under the occupation regime Madrid has installed after jailing Catalan government ministers and leaders of the mass pro-independence civic organizations. The CUP will also support parties in the Constituent Call [1], as in the 2015 elections.

In the following article a leader of the CUP explains its view of the central issues in the election campaign, outlines the history and origins of the rising pro-independence movement in Catalonia in recent years, and critically analyzes the positions on the Catalan national question taken by Podemos and other left forces in the Spanish state as well as by the major pro-sovereignty parties in Catalonia.

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article was published on November 7 on Viento Sur. Footnotes and bracketed explanatory notes in the text are taken from the French translation published in À l'Encontre. My translation from the Spanish text.

**Richard Fidler**

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## **Behind the events in Catalonia, the question of power, alliances and self-organization of the people**

By Óscar Simón Bueno

November 7, 2017

The struggle for self-determination in Catalonia, carried by an authentically popular movement, has highlighted a number of features of the situation, especially since the unilateral referendum of October 1:

- The highly reactionary nature of monarchical Spanish nationalism.
- The inability of Spanish republicanism (with few exceptions) to generate a critical political stance capable of mobilizing broad masses of the population and detaching them from rightist influence.
- The need for any movement of democratic rupture to seriously confront the question of power.
- The unity of the bourgeoisie as a class in defense of the status quo.

These issues, without exception, can be resolved only in the process of the democratic revolution.

## **The pact that assigned the Spanish state its function as an instrument of class domination is weakening as a result of globalization**

The Spanish state has been the political form of capitalist economic exploitation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through this pact the constituent bourgeoisies maintained their domination and obtained some economic advantages. Territorial specialization, with peripheral zones that serve as reservoirs of migrant labour and raw materials, coexisted with central territories like Madrid, Barcelona or Bilbao which held the administrative, industrial and financial power.

The configuration of this pact permitted exploitation under the regime of state territorial monopoly.

Despite some dysfunctioning, in particular owing to the preponderance of each of the bourgeoisies in the management of the state apparatus, the pact was maintained under Franco and during the three long decades that followed the dictatorship. It is only with the development of neoliberal globalization that the distribution of roles became outmoded, especially in regard to the Catalan industrial power which, owing to the free circulation of commodities, no longer enjoys its prerogative within the Spanish state.

Faced with this process, the various bourgeoisies within the state understand that in a globalized world the management of infrastructures is essential in order to attract investment and transform a given space into a pole of capitalist accumulation. The contest to manage airports, rail transportation and highway investment, like the battle for control of the strategic sectors, was clearly taking place during the first decade of this century. The expansion of airports like the Prat [Barcelona], Barajas [Madrid] or others built without a plane taking off; the harbour construction bubble or the takeover bid on Endesa [the electricity and natural gas company in which the Italian firm Enel holds a large majority of shares] launched by Gas Natural [its head office is (or was) in Barcelona], aborted to cries of “rather Italian than Catalan,” are illustrative.

The idea of developing a new statute for Catalonia [between 2003 and 2006] was an attempt to update the pact and — beyond the powers it comprised and the fact that the word “nation” appeared in its preamble — its central aspect was the investments in infrastructures in Catalonia, the amount of which was included in a provision of the 2006 Statute. As it happens, that statute has not been implemented by the state during most of the years following its coming into force. [A provision of the Statute specified that “the investment in infrastructures of the State in Catalonia, with the exception of the interterritorial compensation fund, will amount to the relative share of Catalonia’s GDP in the GDP of the Spanish state for a period of seven years.”]

The collection of signatures against the statute initiated by the PP [People’s Party, the governing party in Madrid] generated anti-Catalan feeling but also provoked a contrary effect in Catalonia: a growth of what the former President of the Generalitat José Montilla [between 2006 and 2010, a member of the PSC, the Party of Socialists of Catalonia] called “disaffection toward the Spanish state.”

The economic crisis and the harsh antisocial policies initiated by the Zapatero government (April 2004-December 2011] and deepened by the PP have also put an end to the mirage of political alternance at the level of the central state. The fact that the PSOE (Zapatero’s party, social-democratic) appears as a force implementing budget cutbacks has had serious consequences throughout the state and particularly in Catalonia where the image of the PSC, its Catalan counterpart, was clearly damaged and marked the beginning of a decline that continues today [one of the expressions of this decline was that several small formations separated from the Party of Socialists of Catalonia to join the Junts pel Si coalition]. That is, the political forces that govern the state found themselves without a party with the capacity to win elections in Catalonia.

### *Preparation of the 2009 referendum at Arenys de Munt*

It was in this context that the movement promoting referendums for independence began in Arenys de Munt in 2009, and it soon extended throughout Catalonia. [By the spring of 2011, hundreds of popular consultations had been held in Catalan communes; more than 800,000 people had voted, and the state had already initiated legal proceedings against these referendums.] This, combined with the 15M movement [the anti-austerity mass occupations of city squares that began on May 15, 2011] helped to increase popular consciousness of the need for “self-government” in all of its implications, including the national question. But the emergence of the idea of self-determination and defense of independence from a state that oppresses and exploits had first to confront the attempts of the defunct CiU [a conservative coalition that governed Catalonia between 1980 and 2003, and between 2010 and 2015] to redirect the popular demands toward reaching a fiscal agreement with the state.

This goal of a redivision of the tax system between the two levels of government was intended to achieve the same status that the Basque bourgeoisie had obtained through the *Concierto Económico* [a series of agreements between the central state administration and the Basque autonomous

community that govern tax issues between the two with broad autonomy for the latter]. However, the popular mobilization, especially after September 11, 2012, ended that attempt.

The social mobilization for improved living conditions converged with the idea of a break with the Spanish state, making independence an alternative for millions of people.

As a result the CiU — Convergence and Union, the coalition that had managed to participate in the governance of the state [2] while posing as the guarantor of Catalan demands — could see how the popular movement for independence was preventing it from playing both of these roles simultaneously.

The Spanish state no longer united the bourgeois or right-wing parties; it entered into a profound crisis. Not by the will of the party leaderships, but because the society in Catalonia had changed and the only possibility of governing for the CiU, which was now falling apart, was to commit to following in the wake of the newly independentist Catalan voters who were evolving toward positions further to the left. In this sense, the basic idea of “first independence, then we’ll see” was to win the votes that had moved from autonomism to independentism while preventing the compelling proposals of the Catalan social left from becoming a permanent part of the independence movement.

The clearest consequence of this break between the bourgeoisies in Catalonia and the Spanish state was this: if the state was to maintain its primacy it would have to inflict a decisive defeat on the Catalan movement, and be especially harsh with the Catalan Right in order to win the support of those business interests that had previously used the CiU as the political vehicle for their economic ambitions. It was indispensable to defeat and humiliate the representatives of the small and middle bourgeoisie — who even today support the process — in order to relaunch the Pacto de Estado, the state agreement, by which this bourgeoisie would agree to a centralist administration of the infrastructures that are indispensable to globalization. The multinational corporations, financial interests headquartered in Catalonia, and a large section of the employer organizations positioned themselves in opposition to the Catalan Republic. In other words, Spanish monarchical nationalism could count on the support of almost all of the big bourgeoisie.

### **Spanish republicanism, the inability of Podemos and the IU to confront the reaction**

Throughout the economic crisis and the process of neoliberal structural adjustment, the left in the Spanish state was unable to recognize or understand that the fight against neoliberalism in Catalonia was associated, for huge numbers of people, with the struggle for national liberation, both because of the existence of a national conflict and because of the neoliberal ferocity of the PP. The latter did not hesitate for one moment to cut back the gains obtained by social struggles in Catalonia, as in the case of the Emergency Housing Law. [3] This does not mean that the independence movement is anticapitalist, but that for many people independence is associated with the idea of a less unfair and unequal society.

Podemos and IU (Izquierda Unida), for whatever reasons, have been unable to place at the heart of the state political crisis the idea of the Republic as a mechanism to break with the 1978 regime. Their idea of social patriotism has failed, until now, because it did not manage to place it on a material basis from which to fight in the streets and in the workplace against the Spanish right wing or, to use the terms of their populist analysis, because it has not found the signifier needed to build the chain of equivalence that gives birth to a people. Why the leadership of Podemos and Izquierda Unida have chosen to this point not to place the demand for a republic, federal or confederal, at the

heart of it all, and why instead they evoke an incomprehensible plurinational state, only they know. It is however evident that this indefiniteness has brought them neither improved electoral prospects nor greater strength in the street nor even a discursive capacity to confront, until now, the Spanish unity around the institution of the monarchy.

The misunderstanding of the role played by the struggle for liberation of the oppressed nations has tended to confuse unity of the working population with unity under a state flag, a position which reflects the same error that led the parties of the Second International to support the First World War. The main enemy of the popular classes of the Spanish state and the working class in particular is the political, economic and social system that allows their domination and exploitation. The task of any force hoping to contribute to the social liberation of the working and popular classes must therefore take advantage of any opportunity to weaken that state. This means, in the here and now, to support, and not to question, the self-determination of Catalonia, not on the basis of a demand that goes against a negotiated referendum on self-determination but rather on the basis of unconditional but critical support to the Catalan movement. With two objectives: (1) to strengthen the position of the left in Catalonia, so that the process places the needs of the popular classes at the center, and (2) to undermine the foundations of Spanish monarchical nationalism, which is one of the fundamental tools that the Right uses to mislead large popular layers.

The positioning of the lefts has led them to view the Catalan conflict from afar and, in Catalonia, to be unable (with the exception of the layer close to Albano Dante [the leader of Podem who has just resigned due to the brutal pressure of the Iglesias leadership] and the Anticapitalistas) to position themselves alongside the popular movement that is conducive to rupture. Had they done so, 78% of the Catalan parliament would have been in favor of the referendum and the left would have been able to act together in the streets and in the workplaces. No one can say what the result would have been, but it is clear that the Republic proclaimed by the Parliament on October 27 would have been much stronger.

## **The democratic revolution**

At this point, it is important to think about how to move forward in this situation. In Catalonia, this means opposing Article 155, which translates, in practice, into promoting the Republic and developing the constituent power.

We have seen how the employers' organizations, in their majority, have chosen to position themselves on the side of Spanish monarchical nationalism; the banks have done likewise along with the multinationals that were headquartered in Catalonia. This positioning means that only the popular classes and the working class can be looked to as powerful allies of the Republic. And there is the additional problem that the defense of the aforementioned Republic is a matter of indifference to a large part of the working population, because the social agenda of the process has been minimal.

On the current battlefield, there is the political power at the state level, in which the bloc of the PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos is the political expression of Spanish monarchical nationalism. Added to this are the judiciary, the police, the army, the big bourgeoisie and their communications media. On their side we also find the far right. The latter is a minority, but it swims like a fish in the waters of the defense of the sacrosanct unity of Spain.

In the Catalan republican camp we have the sovereigntist entities, the political parties that voted for the Republic in the parliament and the Committees for Defense of the Republic as well as a part of the trade-union left. In the rest of the state, the Catalan republic is supported by the forces of the

abertzale left [the Basque “patriotic” left], the sovereigntist forces in Galicia as well as the trade union left in general, especially the left that participates in the Marches for Dignity and, more broadly, in Euskal Herria [Basque Country] and Galicia where there are strong sovereigntist unions. The main political referent for the social left, Unidos Podemos, opposes Article 155 but considers the Catalan Republic illegal. Thus — with the honorable exception of Albano Dante, Marina Albiol (IU) and the Anticapitalistas current — its political action is reduced, for now, to mere rhetoric since it is not even able to call for rallies to support the right to decide.

One of the priorities is to reverse this situation, so that the left which — just two years ago — called for a break with the 1978 regime and the overthrow of the *casta*, can return to this path or build a new one, a referent that can resist the great pressure of Spanish monarchical nationalism.

Without a mobilization in the rest of the Spanish state the fight for the Catalan Republic will be much more difficult. If, on the issue of Catalonia, Spanish monarchical nationalism manages to win, the defeat of the PP, Ciudadanos and the PSOE will become more remote.

The impetus for the Catalan Republic entails as well the need to confront the question of the power of the Spanish state in Catalonia, which is incorporated in the army, the police and its monopoly on collection of the principal tax revenues.

The Catalan government in recent years has dealt with this question through the idea of creating parallel state structures as well as through the passage from one law to another [“legal transition”]. The reality is that this approach has failed to give the Republic sufficient strength. The parties running in the December 21 elections on the independence and sovereigntist ticket will have to come up with answers on how to approach this issue.

Since it is clear that we need to find another way, some will talk about a highly improbable negotiated referendum. Once the path of the Herrero de Miñón type<sup>[3]</sup> has been ruled out, the only way left for a referendum on self-determination in Catalonia, based on the rights of historical nationalities, is through a constitutional reform that can only be achieved with a three-quarters majority vote in the Congress of Deputies, followed by the convening of elections, and then ratification. This chain of events is possible, but highly improbable, to say the least, as long as Unidos Podemos does not clearly decide to oppose Spanish monarchical nationalism in defense of the Republic and self-determination, a position that would be more understandable than an abstract plurinationalism, and one which would offer a real alternative to the millions of people who are being plundered under the leadership of the elites.

In Catalonia, it is necessary to build a social program associated with the establishment of the Republic, so that the working class and the popular classes, with their methods of struggle and the position they occupy in the system, can be transformed into a counter-power able to promote the Republic. The idea “first the Republic, then we will see” will prevent us from achieving the social strength necessary to overcome the powers of the State. We must, in addition, build a horizon of struggle that is shared with the other peoples in the state.

If the various left forces are able to recover the idea of the “Federation of Iberian republics,” adapted to the situation today, or of republics united on an equal footing on the basis of the independence of each of them, we will be able to smash one of the best tools available to the elites to dominate us, namely Spanish monarchical nationalism.

In the end, it is not superfluous to recall that the working class is united not by state flags but by the struggle against the common enemy: capitalism.

On the other hand there is the question of how to accumulate sufficient power to break with Spanish monarchical nationalism and its system of political domination. That is, how to develop the mechanisms to implement the program that we were talking about earlier. In Catalonia, this involves an exploration and deepening of the collaboration between the CDRs (the Committees to Defend the Republic), the organized working class and the sovereigntist forces present during the strike of October 3 and which probably will expand during the November 8 general strike [this was not the case].

The CDRs have a central role. They are now the mobilizing organs of the base [this November 8, they blocked dozens of roads, highways and railway lines throughout Catalonia]. Moreover, the coordination among the hundreds of existing committees is progressing at the general and regional level. Their composition is diverse and plural, the dynamic is based on assemblies, and they are rooted in localities and neighborhoods, which enables them to be areas for struggle as well as debate. Therefore, they will always be more fundamental in giving an impetus to the republic and in establishing a constituent process.

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**P.S.**

\* Posted by Richard Fidler at Thursday, November 16, 2017 :  
<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.fr/2017/11/catalonia-democratic-revolution-or.html>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular\\_Untity\\_Candidacy-Constituent\\_Call](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_Untity_Candidacy-Constituent_Call)

[2] That is, when the PSOE or PP governments did not have a majority. In 1996, CiU reached an agreement along these lines with the PP, the Catalan section of which supported the government coalition in the Catalan parliament between 1999 and 2003.

[3] At the end of October this year the Constitutional Tribunal, on a motion by the Spanish government, suspended the Catalan law to protect the right to housing of persons facing eviction, popularly know as the "Housing Emergency Law." This law had been adopted by the Parliament in December 2016. It established a mediation agency and allowed the temporary use of empty houses foreclosed by banks or owned by major housing landlords. A supplementary provision aimed to establish a "social rent" that would cover persons in debt or about to be evicted. However, it was rejected by Junt pel Si.