

# Catalonia: Self Determination and Class Struggle

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**S**ince 2010 anti-capitalists in Catalonia have been faced with more or less all the dilemmas posed by the national question: the inter-class nature of national movements; the incomprehension of the independence movement by most of the left in the rest of the Spanish state; how to maintain the political independence of revolutionaries; the question of power; and even the role of mass strikes.

The struggle for the self-determination of Catalonia carried out by a genuinely popular movement, especially since the referendum for a unilateral declaration of independence on 1 October 2017, has starkly revealed: the highly reactionary nature of Spanish monarchical nationalism; the impossibility of Spanish republicanism (with a few exceptions) generating a political position capable of mobilising great masses of the population and thus distancing them from the influence of the right; that any movement for a democratic break (with the existing state) needs to face up clearly to the question of power; and that all these questions can only be dealt with from the perspective of the democratic revolution.

Recent events, particularly the fall of Mariano Rajoy's government following a vote of no confidence in parliament backed by the left and the Basque and Catalan nationalist parties, have not altered the main questions underpinning the situation of crisis and polarisation. Neither does the establishment of a new government in Catalonia, after six months during which Madrid had blocked the inclusion of any of the Catalan

politicians at present in prison or exile, fundamentally change what is at stake. Albeit, it's very possible that both new governments will try to lower the tension in order to take politics off the streets and back into the offices.

## **A historically specific form of domination**

The very specific form of capitalist domination in Spain is a product of the compromise in the late seventies between the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) and the moderate democratic opposition. This took the form of the reestablishment by Franco of a monarchy that had fallen in 1931 as a way of giving continuity to his regime. The 'transition' of 1976-1978 (when the new Constitution was accepted by popular vote) consisted of sanctifying monarchical rule within a parliamentary democracy backed by a state where the legacy of Francoism was never swept away. The Constitution of 1978 specifically rules out the possibility of self-determination for the national minorities and charges the army with defending Spanish national unity.

What is often referred to as the 'Regime of 78' was a compromise with the remnants of dictatorship, which was accepted by most of the opposition and the population as the only alternative to military intervention. This set-up functioned, more or less, with the integration of the important Basque and Catalan bourgeoisies by ceding some regional autonomy (the system of *Comunidades Autonomas*). But it was a set-

up that was weakened under the impact of globalisation by the early 2000s.

The 'Regime of 78' stems out of a longer historical process: the creation of what is usually referred to as the 'Spanish state' as a specific form of domination, rather than the more general term 'Spain'. As a recognisable entity, the Spanish state has been the political form of capitalist economic exploitation since the nineteenth century. Like all modern states, the Spanish one is based on the forces of order (army and police) its legal system (judges and courts) and its administrative apparatus (senior civil service). During the Franco regime (1939-1975) the ecclesiastic hierarchy formed part of the state, providing an ideological tool for domination and repression.

What sets apart the Spanish state for many others has been the existence of an effective consensus between different sectors of the bourgeoisie; the undermining of this pact is at the heart of the present territorial crisis. Since the nineteenth century the different 'peripheral' bourgeoisies (essentially Basque and Catalan) have reaped economic benefits on the basis of a pact with the monarchy and the traditional ruling oligarchy: industrial capital in its centralised form and historically the large landowners, the church and army (the forces behind the fascist military uprising of 1936).

Territorial specialisation, with peripheral territories providing a reservoir of migrant labour and raw materials, coexisted with the administrative, industrial and finance centres of Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. This de facto pact was backed by a monopoly of power in the hands of a centralised state.

Despite certain malfunctioning, especially due to conflict with the regional bourgeoisies over the running of the state apparatus, the pact was maintained during Francoism and the first thirty years after the end of the dictatorship. It was not until the emergence of neoliberal globalisation that this distribution of roles became obsolete. Above all this was the case in relation to Catalan industrial power, which given the increasing free circulation of goods, ceased to have in the Spanish state its private hunting ground.

In the context of growing globalisation, the bourgeoisie as a whole understood that the management of infrastructures is essential in order to attract investment and thus maintain capitalist accumulation.

This led to increased rivalry in the early 2000s over the control of strategic sectors such as airports, railways, roads and public utilities.

### **The end of consensus**

In an attempt to update the pact with the central state and guarantee investment in infrastructures the Catalan government, controlled by the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) rather than the nationalists for the first time since it was re-established in 1980, proposed a new statute of autonomy. This revised statute was accepted by the Catalan population in a referendum in 2006. One central aspect of this new Statute, accepted by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government in Madrid, was a specific annual amount assigned to investment in infrastructures.

The fact that a preamble described Catalonia as a 'nation' was used by the conservative People's Party (PP), then in opposition, to launch a fierce campaign in the rest of the state whipping up long-standing prejudices (identified by many as 'Catalanophobia'), with the collection of four million signatories against any 'privileges' for the Catalans. The result was the mutilation of the Statute in the Constitutional Court. The latter is the same body that has been repeatedly used by the PP since they returned to government in 2011 to both block any moves towards independence and to declare a whole swathe of legislation introduced by the Catalan government in recent years, much of it progressive, as illegal. The other result of the Constitutional Court's decision to effectively destroy the new Statute was the mass disaffection of significant sections of the Catalan population. Meanwhile, even the now reduced money allotted for infrastructures has not been paid in full since the amended Statute came into force.

The mutilation of the new Statute, combined with the vivacious campaign against the whole idea of Catalonia as a 'national' entity, radicalised Catalan society. This radicalisation took place in the context of economic crisis and tough austerity policies pushed through by the PSOE government (2004-2011), and subsequently deepened by the PP. The perception of the PSOE as the party of austerity and cuts had serious consequences for it in the whole State, but especially in Catalonia where the PSC governed as the dominant partner of a

left coalition between 2003 and 2010. The fact that the PSOE in Madrid was seen as not standing up for the Statute of 2006 had already undermined its support in Catalonia. Now the political forces that governed at a state level were left without a party capable of winning elections at a 'regional' level.

### **The turn to independence**

It was in this context that locally-organised referendums on independence, first organised in the town of Arenys de Munt in 2009, extended all over Catalonia. This, combined with the emergence of the 15M (*indignados*) movement in 2011, would lead to an increase in people's consciousness about the need for self-government at all levels, including in Catalonia in relation to national rights.

The forces behind this upsurge in support for not only self-determination, but also independence, had first to deal with the attempts of the main Catalan nationalist party *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) to channel the movement towards demanding a new fiscal pact with Madrid. By promoting such a fiscal agreement, CiU hoped to obtain the same status as the Basque bourgeoisie which had long benefitted from a special Economic Agreement with the state. However, mass mobilisation, especially after the massive demonstration of 11 September 2012, shifted the ground towards demands for complete separation. Social mobilisation for a better life now became intertwined with the idea of breaking with the Spanish state, converting independence into an alternative for millions of people.

As a consequence CiU, the dominant force in Catalan politics since 1980, now found its dual role as power broker in Madrid seriously undermined – previously it had allowed both the PSOE and PP to govern when in a minority and simultaneously appear to guarantee Catalan interests. The unity of the bourgeois right at a state-wide level was now broken thus precipitating a crisis in political stability which still rages on. But this disunity was not a result of either the wishes of the PP or CiU but because of the shift in Catalan society. Now the only possibility for CiU to govern was to follow in the wake of the voters who moved from being simply 'Catalanists' to become 'Independentists' and, in most cases, had turned to the left.

The conversion by CiU to the cause of independence

meant that it could hold on to part of its electoral base while putting a break on the Catalan social left dominating the movement. Albeit, the left in the form of the ERC (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*) and the anti-capitalist CUP (*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*) have widened the base of their support as a result of the surge of mass support for independence.

The clearest consequence of this rupture between the political representatives of the Catalan middle classes and the PP and PSOE at a state level is that if the supporters of centralism and Spanish nationalism wanted to conserve its dominance then it now had to smash the emergent independence movement, including its right wing in the shape of CiU. The harshness of the offensive by the State has had the effect of driving a wedge between much of big and medium business in Catalonia and the CiU; the party that they previously used a conveyor belt for their economic ambitions. As a result not only have the main employers organisations openly opposed the creation of a Catalan Republic, but hundreds of major companies, including some considered emblematically 'Catalan', have moved their headquarters to elsewhere in the Spanish state.

Meanwhile the defeat and humiliation of the representatives of the petty and middle bourgeoisie, which still support the independence process, remains essential for the forces of centralism.

Thus, far from the Catalan independence movement being 'bourgeois', or simply about the privileges of the 'rich Catalans', as many claim, the reality is that nearly all the ruling class, be it traditionally associated with centralism or 'regionalism', now support the Spanish nationalist project.

### **Spanish Republicanism fails the test**

The constant blocking by Madrid of laws introduced in the Catalan parliament to alleviate the worst effects of the crisis and austerity, for instance the Emergency Housing Law, has reinforced the belief in many people's minds that the struggle for independence is associated with the creation of a more just society. Unfortunately the state-wide left has been incapable of recognising that the struggle against neo-liberalism in Catalonia has become associated, for important sectors of the population, with the struggle for national liberation.

Podemos and Izquierda Unida, united in Unidos

Podemos (United We Can), reject that the unilateral establishment of a Catalan Republic, in the midst of a profound political crisis, could represent a real step towards breaking the very 'Regime of 78' they have long claimed to have opposed. The only explanation of why UP balk at defending the very Republican solution which previously they defended is that a considerable part of its base accept the reactionary prejudices against 'Catalans' that is unfortunately widespread in Spanish society. Fear of losing votes or of having to oppose their own state are common enough factors in determining social democratic politics; the slide by UP towards such politics is increasingly evident. In reality, however, this lack of a defined position in defence of a Catalan Republic has not improved their chances electorally or in the streets and prevents them from facing up to Spanish Monarchical unity.

This incomprehension of the role the national liberation struggle of oppressed nations has led some on the left to confuse working class unity with unity under their state's flags, a position that has its origin in the same error that led the parties of the Second International to support 'their' governments in the First World War. As anywhere, the main enemy of the working class in the Spanish state is the political, economic and social system that leads to their domination and exploitation. Thus, any support for social liberation is underscored by the need to take advantage of any opportunity to weaken those states. In the here and now this means giving unconditional but critical support for the independence movement in Catalonia. This is necessary to strengthen the position of the left in Catalonia in a way that the independence process places at its centre the needs of the working and lower middle classes. Also, unequivocal support for independence from the left would weaken the ability of the right to use Spanish nationalism to win support among workers.

Formally, UP defends the right of the Catalan people to vote, but only through a 'legal' referendum agreed upon with the state. Given the ingrained hostility of the main political forces to even discussing the Catalans right to self determination, this is at best a naïve illusion and at worst simply cynical. As a result the equivalent of UP in Catalonia, Catalunya en Comú, has been incapable of aligning itself with a popular movement which poses

breaking with the State. If they had, 78% of the Catalan Parliament (the independentist parties and Catalunya en Comú) would have been in favour of the referendum and the whole left would have acted together in the streets and in the work places. No one can know what might have happened if Catalunya en Comú had taken this position, but it is reasonable to believe that the Republic proclaimed by the Catalan parliament on 27 October last year would have been in a much stronger position.

### **The democratic revolution**

The unity of the bourgeoisie in defense of the Spanish state together with the mainly passive position of the state-wide left has avoided the deepening of the political crisis and has allowed the state use its power to impede the free self determination of Catalonia. Despite this, today the PP and PSOE, which for years obtained 80% of the vote, now receive less than 55%.

Between 2010 and 2017 Catalonia lived through an accelerated political process that reached a climax in October 2017. During this period the centre-right independentists of the PDeCAT and the centre-left ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya) found themselves pushed by popular mobilisation into supporting the holding of an 'illegal' referendum in the face of stiff opposition from central government.

Despite the deployment of thousands of Spanish police who tried to sabotage the referendum by confiscating hundreds of thousands of ballot papers and searching in vain for the ballot boxes, the vote went ahead. On 1 October the CDRs (Committees to Defend the Referendum; later changed 'to Defend the Republic') proved capable of not only making sure the vote took place but mobilised tens of thousands to defend the polling stations in the face of extreme police violence. Two days later the Catalan working class launched the most important general strike of recent decades in reply to this repression; a strike that CCOO and UGT (the two main union federations) were forced to follow after the leftist unions decided to back it. It was at this very moment, when the whole of Catalonia was paralysed and the streets were full of people, that the state was at its weakest and there existed an opportunity for the movement to win. The relative weakness of the anti-capitalist left, basically the CUP, combined with the

inconsistency of the petty bourgeois leadership, which for years had been fantasising about some kind of magical overthrow of the state, meant that the strike did not go beyond being a huge protest. When on 4 October people returned to work, the chances of victory for the independence movement dropped drastically.

Subsequent repressive measures – the jailing and exile of Catalan politicians, direct rule from Madrid and over nine hundred people charged with a range of offenses from Mayors having declared in favour of separation from Spain through to teachers accused of ‘indoctrinating’ school children – there is a need to pose how the movement can advance. The application of Article 155 of the Constitution, which meant direct rule from Madrid for six months, was finally lifted in early June. However there exists the threat of it being reintroduced at the least sign of the new Catalan government behaving ‘illegally’. Even more significantly, the hard Spanish nationalist right, most clearly represented in the populist Ciudadanos (Cs) party has made it clear that if in government it will launch a crusade to finish with ‘separatism’ by attacking the Catalan public education system and Catalan public media.

Lined up on the side of state power is the block of ‘constitutional’ parties: PP, Cs and PSOE backed by the power of the judges, the police, the army, the big bourgeoisie and their means of communication. They can count as well on the ultra right which, although a small minority, has found a lot of space both for its propaganda and for street violence in the context of rampant Spanish nationalism. In the Catalan Republican camp there are the entities that defend sovereignty (especially the ANC), the parties that voted for the Republic in parliament, the CDRs and part of the trade union left.

With the full weight of the capitalist class and its allies in Catalonia clearly on the side of the Spanish nationalist project, only the working and less prosperous sections of the middle classes can be counted on as allies of the Republic. But this means intensifying the social content of the independence programme. The fact that demands for social measures has often been relegated by the PDeCAT and ERC leadership of the movement has only perpetuated the indifference to independence in important sections of the Spanish-speaking working class in Catalonia.

In the rest of the Spanish state support for the Catalan Republic is based in the left independentist movement in the Basque Country and Galicia and the left unions. While the main reference for the left, UP, was against the application of Article 155 it considered the declaration of the Catalan Republic as illegal, which has reduced their position to mere rhetoric as they have been incapable of or unwilling to organise any solidarity in support to the right to decide. Turning this situation around is a priority. So that the left, especially Podemos, that barely two years ago talked of breaking the ‘Regime of 78’ and kicking out the ‘caste’, returns to this position and resists the pressures of Spanish nationalism. Without the mobilisation of the left in the rest of the Spanish state, the struggle for the Catalan Republic will be much more difficult. If the Spanish nationalist and monarchist forces impose their will over Catalonia the defeat of the PP, Cs and PSOE also becomes decidedly more difficult for the left at a state-wide level.

Defending the demand for the Catalan Republic also means confronting the question of the power of the Spanish state in Catalonia, represented by the army, the police and the monopoly in tax collection. The Catalan government in recent years has confronted this question by means of the idea of creating parallel state structures and the gradual passing of laws. The reality has been that this strategy has not managed to open the doors to the Republic. In fact the whole strategy of the PDeCAT and ERC has been subordinated to forcing the Spanish government into negotiation: a strategy that has proved quite illusory up till now.

In reality there is no alternative to the need for a complete break with the Spanish state and this means mass mobilisation and civil disobedience. Events have justified the intransigent defence by the CUP of the Republic which was voted for on 1 October. More than ever it is necessary to defend a social programme as a *central* part of the struggle for the Republic, so the working class can become a counter-power capable of driving this forward. Any idea of postponing such a programme for later will impede achieving the social base necessary to overcome the forces of the state. On the other hand, it is necessary to ask how sufficient power can be accumulated in order to break with Spanish nationalism and its system of political domination. At the same time the CUP has to open up its organisation

and to avoid its tendency to be inward looking. It also means on the one hand having a strategy to win support in the rest of the state and on the other strengthening the CDRs.

If the different sectors of the state-wide left are capable of recuperating the idea of a 'Federation of Iberian Republics', Republics united through equality on the basis of independence of each one of them, it will be possible to break one of the key tools used by the elites to dominate the masses – Spanish nationalism. In the end, it should not be forgotten of course that the working class is not united by the flags of different states but by the struggle against a common enemy: capitalism.

In Catalonia this means deepening collaboration between the forces that were behind the general strikes of 3 October and 8 November: the CDRs, the organised working class and other entities that defend national sovereignty. The CDRs today are rank and file bodies that can pressurise from below and mobilise and thus have potentially a central role. More than a hundred now exist and they are advancing in how to strengthen local and general coordination. Their makeup is diverse. They include supporters of all the independence parties as well as many unaligned activists. Politically they are closer to the radical left, in particular the CUP. The CDRs assembly-based dynamic rooted at a local level and in neighbourhoods allows them to be both spaces of struggle and a place to launch proposals. Therefore they are going to be increasingly fundamental in the fight to establish the Republic.

For the forces of the anti capitalist left, there is no alternative to intervening in the CUP and building the CDRs. Given both the radicalisation and polarisation of Catalan society and state repression, such an intervention is not only a priority but the only real way forward today in Catalonia.

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