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200,000 protest jailing of Catalanian nationalist leaders in Barcelona

By Paul Mitchell
19 October 2017



The jailing this week of the leaders of the largest separatist organisations in Catalonia—Jordi Sànchez of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Jordi Cuixart of Òmnium Cultural—was met with demonstrations throughout Catalonia culminating in a 200,000-strong protest in Barcelona on Tuesday night.

The incarceration of the two marks the first jailings of political prisoners since the end of the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco.

A mass mobilisation has been scheduled for Saturday afternoon calling for their release. There are talks of another “national strike” by the “Board for Democracy”, which comprises 60 organisations including the ANC, Òmnium Cultural, the UGT and CCOO unions and the employers umbrella organisations, CECOT and PIMEC.

Sànchez and Cuixart are being held pending investigation of trumped-up sedition charges, which carry a maximum sentence of 15 years imprisonment. They are accused of orchestrating demonstrations on September 20 and 21, which attempted to prevent police raids on organisations promoting the October 1 Catalan independence referendum.

The arrests came after weeks of sustained repression by the Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Catalan government officials have been arrested, scores of websites closed, millions of posters and leaflets seized, print shops and newspapers searched, meetings banned, and hundreds of mayors threatened with prosecution for supporting the referendum.

On October 1, the PP government sent in tens of thousands of police in a failed attempt to prevent the referendum. Social media was flooded with images of Civil Guards forcing their way into polling places, grabbing ballot boxes and beating up peaceful, defenceless voters, hundreds of whom were injured. A nationalist, law-and-order hysteria has been whipped up and far-right protests encouraged.

Today, by 10am, Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont must “clarify” whether or not he has declared independence—following his statement last week in which he reaffirmed the right of Catalonia to independence, but that it would not be declared for several weeks in order to allow for negotiations with Madrid.

If he does not deny the declaration of independence, many reports suggest Rajoy’s Council of Ministers will invoke measures under article 155 of the Spanish Constitution—routinely described as the “nuclear option”—that suspend Catalan autonomy. Such a step lays the basis for imposing direct rule from Madrid through military intervention.

According to media reports, the regional parliament (Generalitat), will be dissolved and a “transitional governmental authority” will be created, composed of appointed technocrats who will take over the functioning of the various Catalan ministries.

Puigdemont would be allowed to continue as President of the regional government, but he would be stripped of his powers. Vice-president Oriol Junqueras, responsible for the finances of the Generalitat—and blamed for driving away investment in Catalonia and companies relocating their headquarters—could be removed. Junqueras and other officials are likely to be rounded up and imprisoned as Jordi Sánchez and Jordi Cuixart have been.

The next step, according to reports, would then be to hold new elections in Catalonia. These would not be convened by the regional government as normally the case but under the control of Madrid. Whether parties calling for independence would be allowed to stand is increasingly unlikely, as calls for their banning increase.

The government is not talking openly at the moment of military intervention, but logistics troops have been sent to support National Police and Civil Guard units in Catalonia and details of the “Chain Mail” troop deployment plan have been published alongside comments from military figures.

Rajoy is travelling Thursday afternoon to Brussels to take part in the European Council summit of the heads of state and government of the European Union (EU). The EU has consistently declared that Catalanian succession is an “internal” crisis that Spain must resolve within the limits set by its Constitution—a view taken by the Trump administration in the US. The PP crackdown enjoys the support of the EU and the US because they fear the break up of the EU and the NATO alliance into a patchwork of competing mini-states.

To that end, Catalonia does not even feature as an official item on the summit agenda. “We do not intend to put it on the agenda, but of course, if President Rajoy wants to talk about it, we will reflect it on the agenda,” said one senior European official.

The Secretary General of the Socialist Party (PSOE), Pedro Sánchez, is also visiting Brussels. His main role is to cover for the PP and attempt to counteract depictions of the repressive measures being enacted by the Spanish state. On Wednesday, he met the president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, the High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the President of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, Gianni Pittella, before taking part in a conference organized by the European Social-Democratic faction. Today he will meet European Commission president Jean Claude-Juncker.

The unrelenting juggernaut of police state measures being imposed in Catalonia by the PP government, which rules over the fifth largest, supposedly democratic, capitalist country in Europe, is a warning to workers and youth across the continent and internationally. The green light given to the PP’s repression, supported by the right-wing Citizens party and the PSOE by the EU and US is further confirmation that the global ruling elite will not tolerate any opposition to its social counter-revolutionary policies.

What is happening in Catalonia will become the benchmark for rule across Europe.

The rapid re-emergence of such repressive measures in a country, which the PSOE and Communist Party insisted had resolved its bitter 20th century history of class struggle, revolution and dictatorship through the “transition to democracy”—following the death of Franco in 1975—is a graphic expression of the collapse of the post-World War II global capitalist order.

The political settlement concocted during the Transition has disintegrated. The PSOE, the Spanish ruling elite’s main party of government in the post-Franco period, has been discredited by decades of policies of austerity and war.

The critical question is the political mobilization of the entire Spanish and European working class in struggle against the return to police state rule and any attempt to mobilise the army.

Workers and youth in Catalonia, throughout Spain and across the continent must demand an end to the brutal repression being carried out in Catalonia. All troops and government forces must be withdrawn from Catalonia and those held captive as political prisoners immediately released.

Opposition to state repression cannot be mounted under the auspices of the ruling parties in Madrid or the Catalan nationalists, who are unflaggingly hostile to the working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International insists that the only viable policy against the danger of war and dictatorship is to fight to unify the working class in Spain and Europe in a struggle against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of society. This can be carried out only in revolutionary struggle against all of Spain's bourgeois factions, whether in Madrid or Barcelona.