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Thousands attend right-wing, anti-Catalan protest in Madrid

On Sunday, tens of thousands of people joined a protest called by Spain's main right-wing parties in Madrid's Plaza de Colon. The Popular Party (PP), Citizens, and the far-right Vox party had chartered hundreds of buses to bring right-wing supporters from across Spain, calling to "throw out" social-democratic Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez over his talks with the Catalan nationalists.

Between 20,000 and 45,000 people attended the protest, listening to speeches from right-wing politicians. Also participating were groups like the neo-Nazi Hogar Social (Social Home); the Spanish Falange; España 2000; and Spain's main police union, the United Police Union. The role of this last organisation underscores the critical role of the state machine in promoting the protest and the broader rise of neo-fascistic, anti-Catalan agitation.

The protest took place days before 12 Catalan secessionist leaders go to trial tomorrow, facing up to 25 years in prison on charges of rebellion and misuse of public funds for organizing the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. However, Sánchez's minority Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government relies on Podemos and the Catalan nationalists support in parliament to try to pass its budget this week.

Earlier in the week, PP and Citizens backed by right-wing media started to agitate in support of the demonstration and—as polls show the PP and Citizens placed to do well if elections proceed—of potentially bringing down the PSOE government over the budget. PP leader Pablo Casado accused Sánchez of "high treason" for discussing the budget with

Catalan separatists. He said Sánchez “is committing a criminal act, he is a criminal [acting] against the very democratic continuity of Spanish democracy,” comparing Sánchez to a drug trafficker.

Citizens leader Albert Rivera called for “defending the Constitution beyond ideologies or acronyms.” He added, “We must stop Sanchez in the streets.”

The pretext for the protest was the PSOE government’s decision to include a “mediator” in planned cross-party talks aimed at creating a dialogue with the Catalan nationalists. The PSOE’s decision was part of its attempt to gain the nationalists’ support in the upcoming budget vote, after pro-independence lawmakers earlier this week announced they could block Spain’s 2019 budget. The “mediator” was a longstanding demand of the Catalan nationalists.

Soon after, Casado told Spain’s EFE news agency that appointing a mediator was Spain’s “gravest event” since the failed coup attempt of February 23, 1981—when more than 200 Civil Guards armed with submachine guns held parliament and the cabinet hostage for 18 hours. Casado called Sanchez “the greatest traitor to the historical continuity of Spanish democracy” and a “felon,” while calling his government illegitimate.

Casado’s comments prompted PSOE Finance Minister María Jesús Montero, who said his language was “reminiscent of the [Spanish] Civil War.”

PSOE politicians also attacked Sánchez over the issue, however. Castilla-La Mancha regional premier Emiliano García-Page said Sánchez has to “play his role, defending the Constitution,” while Aragón regional premier Javier Lambán said “approving a budget does not justify concessions that put the Constitution, the unity of Spain, the Rule of Law or decency in question.”

The holding of such a far-right protest in Spain, which still had a fascist government barely four decades ago, well in living memory, is a warning to the working class. The right-wing and neo-fascistic parties do not have mass support and depend on backing directly from the state machine. However, events are confirming the assessment made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Spanish ruling elite is seizing on the 2017 Catalan referendum to drastically restructure political life and move towards authoritarian forms of rule.

All Spain’s major capitalist parties fear the growing opposition and strike activity in the working class and youth, internationally and across Europe. As the largely working class “yellow vest” movement brings President Emmanuel Macron’s government to its knees in

neighbouring France, and hundreds of thousands protest the far-right government in Italy, strike activity is surging in the Spanish working class.

In January alone, there were 49 strikes according to Spain's business federation (CEOE), which caused 2.9 million working hours lost. According to the CEOE's calculations, as compared to the same month last year, the number of workers participating in strikes increased by 622 percent and the amount of hours lost by strikes increased by 575 percent. This was due in large part to a nationwide taxi strike.

No political organisation in Spain speaks for the growing opposition to the PSOE government in the working class, however. What predominates in what passes for the "left" are the pseudo-left politics of Podemos and its various petty-bourgeois allies, and Catalan and Basque nationalist parties. They are state parties largely oriented to the PSOE, however, and all fear rising social opposition in the working class far more than they fear the rising influence of far-right and authoritarian forces.

These forces, like the PSOE itself in government, are all adapting to and helping oversee the drive to austerity and police-state rule. Yesterday, Sánchez said he "respected" the demonstration but demanded "loyalty" from PP and Citizens. Sánchez then recalled that the PSOE loyally supported the PP government of Mariano Rajoy when it sent in the paramilitary police against the Catalan independence referendum—to smash polling stations, suspend Catalan self-government, and jail Catalan politicians as political prisoners on charges of sedition and rebellion.

Before the demonstration, Deputy PM Carmen Calvo had tried to placate the right wing, lamely claiming that what the PSOE calls a "rapporteur" is "not a mediator." She added that the person would be "someone who can take notes, who can call us to the meetings, who can coordinate."

By Friday, the PSOE government announced it was backing down. Calvo said talks with Catalan separatist parties over the budget were off, and that Madrid would make no more proposals. "This government made a firm decision to build as many bridges as possible, but right now the framework we have created is not being accepted by the pro-independence parties," said Calvo.

"Without a budget, the political term gets cut short," she added, warning that if on Wednesday the Catalan nationalist vetoed the budget in parliament, this could trigger early elections.

Podemos has also only emboldened the right. It was the chief architect in the installation of the PSOE in government last year, adapting itself to Sánchez's continued threats against

the Catalan nationalists. Now, as the PSOE debates whether or not to call snap elections, Podemos is desperately clinging to its budget agreement with the PSOE, *Público* wrote, to show it can “influence the PSOE to the left.”

Events are also yet again exposing the bankruptcy of the Catalan nationalists, who also helped install the PSOE minority government.

Catalan President Quim Torra asked Sánchez on Sunday to “reconsider” dialogue with the Catalan nationalists. “We wait for him at the table to talk,” Torra offered.

The Catalan nationalists reportedly only threatened to veto the budget in an attempt to strengthen their negotiating position and did not expect the PSOE to break talks. The daily *La Vanguardia* noted that the Catalan nationalists “had calculated that there was time until Monday or Tuesday to continue negotiating, since the budget is on Wednesday.” Now it appears that the PSOE is staking the survival of its government on an attempt to compel the Catalan nationalists to support its austerity budget even as the PSOE continues to jail Catalan nationalist political prisoners.