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Social democrats fail to win Podemos support to form Spanish government

On Thursday, Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) leader and Acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez lost a second parliamentary vote seeking confirmation as prime minister, after the PSOE failed to secure a deal with the pseudo-left Podemos party. This has launched a two-month countdown: either Sanchez has to find another way to form a government by September 25, or call new elections. These would be the fourth legislative elections in four years.

On Tuesday, Sánchez had lost the first vote, where he needed an absolute majority of 176 members in the 350-seat Congress. He lost 155 to 124, with 67 abstentions. In Thursday's vote, he needed a majority of those voting. With the 122 seats, the PSOE needed a vote in favour from Podemos 42 lawmakers, and the support or abstention of nationalist and secessionist parties such as the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), the Basque-nationalist PNV, and the Catalan-nationalist Compromís.

Previously, Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias had stressed in talks with the PSOE that his party would make all necessary concessions to enter into a government led by the PSOE, the Spanish bourgeoisie's traditional social-democratic party of austerity and imperialist war. "We have done nothing but make concessions, and we have been flexible from the beginning," Iglesias said earlier this month. He pledged "full loyalty" to the PSOE's repression of the Catalan nationalists, after the brutal police crackdown on the October 2017 independence referendum.

An anonymous Podemos leader even told the pro-PSOE daily *El País* that “we are ready to accept the strategy of the PSOE in sensitive state matters such as Catalonia and foreign policy.”

Ultimately, however, Podemos deputies in the Congress did not support the PSOE in the final vote and instead abstained, effectively keeping themselves out of government. Podemos, the PNV, Compromís, ERC and Bildu abstained, as the right-wing Popular Party (PP), Junts per Catalunya, Navarra Suma and Canaries Coalition voted “no.” Sánchez’s candidacy thus went down to defeat with 124 “yes,” 155 “no” and 67 abstentions.

PSOE officials have indicated that they will now explore the possibility that factions of the PP could agree to back Sánchez in a new investiture vote so as to avert new elections.

The principal reason Podemos gave for this apparent shift in its strategy is an absurd concoction. Podemos pretended that it was not voting to form the government that it claimed to ardently desire because of the PSOE’s refusal to give Podemos control of industrial relations policy.

Over the last week, the PSOE had offered Podemos several ministries but refused to hand over the Labor Ministry. During the government talks, Iglesias claimed that “all we wanted were powers, not seats. Powers to raise the minimum wage, to stop health privatizations, for a euthanasia law once and for all, to lower university fees... We haven’t asked for anything else.” During the government vote, from the parliamentary tribune, Iglesias asked Sánchez to continue negotiating, saying, “We will give up on the Labor Ministry if you give us active employment policies.”

Claims that Podemos, the ally of the pro-austerity Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) party in Greece, wanted to pursue a pro-worker policy are a pack of lies. The PSOE has been the Spanish bourgeoisie’s traditional party of rule since the regime of fascist dictator Francisco Franco fell in 1978. Over four decades in government, it has built a record of austerity and war. It campaigned this year based on raising defense spending, ending pension increases linked to inflation, and slashing unemployment insurance. Podemos sought to join a PSOE government on this basis.

Were it to come to power, a PSOE-Podemos coalition government would predictably mount savage attacks on the working class, regardless of which party held the portfolio of labor minister.

Podemos has also stated that it will continue talks with the PSOE for a new vote in parliament during September. Podemos deputy spokesperson in parliament Ione Belarra said after the failed vote that “we will continue with our hand extended, we are still available to negotiate because there is no reason to threaten Spaniards with new elections. That is irresponsible.”

This further begs the question of why Podemos refused to go into government with the PSOE when it had the chance, and why it sought to put off the decision until the end of September.

The decision by Podemos not to enter government with the PSOE was a calculated one, based on fear of rising opposition on its left in the working class, in Spain and internationally. It comes only a few weeks after voters threw Syriza out of office. At the same time a strike wave in Portugal, the “yellow vest” protests in France, strikes against European Union (EU) austerity across Europe and mass movements against military dictatorships in nearby Algeria and Sudan have staggered the Spanish ruling class.

The latest report prepared by Spanish business confederation CEOE shows rising strike activity in the first six months of 2019 as compared to the year before. From January to June, 303 strikes were followed by 845,018 workers, amounting to 16,183,504 working hours lost.

Amid deep concern in the European bourgeoisie over rising opposition in the working class, the caretaker PSOE government is also building up a police-state regime and creating conditions for the rise of the pro-Francoite Vox party. Despite mass protests in Catalonia, it is holding a show trial of Catalan nationalist politicians it accuses of involvement in the 2017 referendum and is allowing Vox to participate in the prosecution. It is widely expected the courts will hand down draconian sentences against these prisoners in an explosive decision scheduled for September.

Under these conditions, powerful factions of Podemos are now arguing that it was correct not to join a PSOE government at this time, as this would have made too obvious the right-wing character of Podemos and its collaboration with the PSOE.

Professor Jaime Pastor of Podemos’s Anticapitalist Left (IA) faction, linked to France’s Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party, laid out this argument in the online Pabloite magazine *Viento Sur*. He wrote, “It was difficult to think that Podemos could have developed left-wing policies from within the government and, on the other hand, by its

silence it would have had to admit it was complicit in right-wing policies on economic and social questions and repressive policies in Catalonia.”

Pastor argues that while Podemos should maintain its alliance with the PSOE and remain complicit in the bourgeoisie’s shift to the far right, it should not admit to its complicity. He advocates continuing the alliance of Podemos with the PSOE, while deceitfully trying to preserve the fiction that Podemos pursues an “alternative” policy. He proposes that Podemos keep supporting the PSOE, but from outside the government, as in Portugal where the Podemos-linked Left Bloc backs the social-democratic government without joining it.

He writes, “Given this, from the experience of the recent days we should conclude that the path chosen by the Podemos leadership to respond to the aspirations expressed in the April 28 elections to form an alternative government ... could only lead to failure given the character of the party regime that characterizes the PSOE.” Instead, he calls for “a Portuguese solution,” arguing that “this allows us to force the PSOE leadership to accept public commitments to minimal points of agreement ... while also guaranteeing our political independence to develop firm opposition from within parliament and in popular movements so we can demarcate ourselves, overflow or confront this party, the regime and EU austerity if it is ever necessary.”

Thus speak layers within academia and the union bureaucracy, terrified of an independent movement of the working class against European capitalism. The “independence” that Pastor wants to preserve is the ability of Podemos to maintain links with the reactionary and fascistic agenda of the Spanish bourgeoisie, led by the PSOE, while hiding their complicity with the PSOE if protests erupts among workers in Spain. They thus hope to block the building of a political leadership of the working class to the left of Podemos, so as to ride out protests and strangle popular opposition.

The task that emerges from the Spanish bourgeoisie’s rapid shift to the right and the complicity of Podemos is the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Spain to give leadership to a struggle against Podemos, the PSOE and the entire ruling class.

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