

Catalan Premier Appeals to EU as Opposition Mounts to Madrid's Crackdown

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Featured image: Carles Puigdemont

From Brussels, where he fled to escape prosecution by Spanish authorities, deposed Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont appealed yesterday for the European Union to intervene in the secession crisis. Last week, Madrid invoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to impose an unelected regime in Catalonia in response to the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. Now Puigdemont is asking the EU to broker a deal between the Popular Party government in Madrid and the ousted Catalan authorities.

Workers in Catalonia and across Spain face an attempt by the Spanish ruling elite to seize the Catalan regional state apparatus, purge the public service and crush all opposition to the EU's agenda of austerity and militarism by mobilizing tens of thousands of *Guardia Civil* and soldiers. The danger of bloody police-military repression in Catalonia is looming.

Puigdemont's appeal to Brussels expresses the political bankruptcy and reactionary role of Catalan bourgeois nationalism in this explosive and dangerous situation. There are mass protests against Article 155 in Catalonia, fears in the European ruling elite of a mobilization of the working class, and popular opposition to Article 155 across Spain. Puigdemont's reaction to this growing popular opposition is to seek a deal with both Madrid and the EU, which has repeatedly made clear its support for Madrid's policy of authoritarian rule in Catalonia.

Speaking from Brussels, Puigdemont lamented "the grave democratic deficit that exists in the Spanish state" and urged Brussels to intervene "to protect the values of the EU." He said he wanted to base the Catalan regional government partly in Brussels for a time so as to escape "the violence and belligerence" of Madrid. Calling for a defense of Catalan "institutions and self government," Puigdemont at the same time endorsed Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's call for snap elections in Catalonia on December 21.

Though these elections will be held at gunpoint, amid a massive military-police deployment following the vicious crackdown on peaceful voters during the October 1 referendum, Puigdemont nevertheless claims that Madrid's December 21 election call constitutes a "democratic plebiscite."

Polls by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió show that an election held today would return a pro-independence parliament in Barcelona virtually indistinguishable from the parliament that was the basis for Puigdemont's government before he was removed by Madrid.

The Junts pel Sí (JxS—"Together for Yes") coalition would receive 60 to 62 seats, and the

petty-bourgeois Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP) would receive eight to nine. This would give the JxS-CUP coalition a majority in the 135-seat Catalan parliament.

Puigdemont did everything he could to suggest that Rajoy's December 21 election would be a truly democratic expression of the will of the Catalan population.

"I will accept the results, but will the Spanish government accept them if they are not favorable [to Madrid]?" Puigdemont asked, adding that Rajoy might somehow accept a unilateral declaration of independence by Catalonia if the December 21 vote gave the majority to secessionists.

Puigdemont's appeals for a deal with the EU and the political establishment in Madrid aim to promote absurd illusions. The EU will not intervene in Spain to preserve "democratic values" any more than Madrid is seeking a "democratic" consultation of the Catalan population by calling the December 21 poll. The EU and government leaders in Germany, Britain and France have repeatedly insisted that Rajoy is the only person in Spain with whom they will negotiate.

Madrid invoked Article 155 to suspend the powers of the Catalan parliament. Whatever majority is returned by the December 21 election will be powerless from the standpoint of Spanish law to name a government, pass laws or take any substantive action. Puigdemont's attempts to present the Catalan parliamentary election as "democratic" amounts to applying a "democratic" gloss to the dictatorial policies of Madrid.

The only way forward in the struggle against the turn toward dictatorship by the Spanish and European capitalist class is the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. The defense of the elementary democratic and social rights of the working class across Spain and Europe requires a struggle against the attempt by Madrid and the EU to impose a government by force on an entire region of Spain. The crackdown on Catalonia must be stopped, and Spanish troops and police withdrawn from the region.

Such a struggle can be mounted only in opposition to all factions of the Spanish political establishment, including its supposedly "left" factions such as the middle-class Podemos party, and to the Catalan nationalists. Despite the bitter conflict between the ruling elites in Madrid and Barcelona, they are reacting to growing popular opposition to the crackdown in Catalonia by closing ranks against the working class and shifting further to the right.

Mass protests of hundreds of thousands of people in Barcelona have pointed to the broad popular opposition to Madrid's crackdown in Catalonia. Residents of Spanish-speaking working class districts of Catalonia, such as L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, have denounced Spanish police units as "occupation forces," and there is growing fear in ruling class circles of an explosion of opposition in the working class.

Earlier this week, the French daily *Le Bien Public* warned that "no one can predict the reactions of non-Catalan populations who make up entire suburbs of Barcelona and can be aggressive." It cited a social democratic official in Barcelona as saying, "In meetings, in cafés, we avoid talking about it and that's for the best. It's a powder keg."

Yesterday, the right-wing and bitterly anti-Catalan independence daily *El Mundo* published a

poll showing broad opposition in Spain to Madrid's crushing of Catalan self-rule. Despite a month of wall-to-wall anti-Catalan propaganda in the press by papers like *El Mundo*, only a small minority of Spaniards support the onslaught against Catalonia led by Rajoy's Popular Party, the Citizens party and the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE).

The poll found that 57 percent of Spaniards and 76 percent of Catalans wanted Catalonia to hold a peaceful referendum on independence. Large majorities opposed Catalan independence (80 percent in Spain 58 percent in Catalonia) and believed that independence was, in fact, impossible (71 percent in Spain and 56 percent in Catalonia). But only a small minority approved a policy leading to "less self-government" in Catalonia: 27 percent in Spain and 10 percent in Catalonia.

This is a devastating popular repudiation not only of Rajoy's crackdown, but also of the press campaign to support it based on denouncing Catalans and promoting "Spanish unity" protests attended by fascist organizations such as the Falange of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. This turn towards dictatorial forms of rule, which is unanimously supported by the EU and the major European governments, faces deep opposition among workers. This is the objective social basis for a revolutionary counteroffensive against European capitalism and its drive to dictatorship.

It is also an exposure of Puigdemont's impotent appeals to Madrid as well as the reactionary role of Spain's Podemos party. The latter has done nothing to mobilize its 5 million voters to oppose the turn to dictatorship in Spain, and Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias has spent much of his time on the phone in talks with Rajoy. When Rajoy announced plans to the Spanish Congress to invoke Article 155, Iglesias fell in line with press demands for national unity behind the crackdown, telling Rajoy:

"Today is not a day for polemics. I want to reflect with you."

Podemos did not capitulate to Rajoy because Rajoy's policy was temporarily recording high poll ratings due to the neo-fascistic frenzy in the Spanish press. Rather, it capitulated because an appeal for opposition to Rajoy would have found broad support and risked provoking a confrontation between the workers and the ruling class, which Podemos, a petty-bourgeois tool of the political establishment, is determined to avoid.

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