

Protests continue in Spain as ruling Socialist Party suffers electoral defeat

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Tens of thousands of protestors continued to occupy Madrid's Puerta del Sol and other centres in numerous cities and towns across Spain through the weekend, despite a government ban. Spain held regional and municipal elections on Sunday, which returned a big defeat for the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of José Luis Zapatero.

The main driving force behind the PSOE's defeat was the massive austerity measures imposed by the government, which have compounded the economic crisis. Early results showed the PSOE won less than 28 percent of the vote.

The biggest beneficiary of the collapse in support for the PSOE was its main rival, the right-wing Popular Party, which won 38 percent. The PP also supports the attack on the working class. The PSOE also lost control of the country's second largest city, Barcelona, for the first time in more than 30 years, with a coalition including Catalan nationalists taking power.

"The results show that the Socialist Party has clearly lost today's elections", Zapatero said on Sunday. He blamed the economic crisis for the defeat, as if the policies of the PSOE government had nothing to do with the disastrous conditions facing Spanish workers and youth.

The elections were overshadowed by the protests, known as the M-15 movement, the day they were first called by social network and Internet groups. They have drawn a big response from younger workers, students, the unemployed and broad sectors of Spanish working people. Organisers have indicated that they will continue the protests past the election.

The protests were banned by various local electoral boards and the central election commission ahead of yesterday's elections. Spanish law prohibits party political activity on election day and the preceding 24 hours, which are designated a "day of reflection". This does not cover the M-15 protests, but has been the pretext for the ban. So far, the PSOE government has refrained from sending in police to enforce the ban, although there have been reports of police intimidation and violence.

The opposition right-wing Popular Party (PP) is demanding tough action to break up the "illegal" encampments that protesters have said will continue past the elections.

The majority of the demonstrators, dubbed "los indignados" [the angry ones], have been young people who have been hit especially hard by the crisis. Almost half of 18 to 25-year-old Spaniards are out of work, more than double the European Union average. Most of those that are able to find work end up on temporary contracts.

However, increasing numbers of families and older workers have joined the occupations in Madrid and other cities including Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Zaragoza and Bilbao, in protest over unemployment, government austerity measures and a political system that serves only the banks and big business.

Those participating in the protests have said that they are hostile to all of Spain's major political parties. Over the weekend, they urged people not to vote for either of Spain's two main parties, the PSOE or the PP.

Puerta del Sol serves as one large assembly, with many discussions taking place over what to do after the elections. Some have called for the occupation to become permanent, and that the movement should be broadened by creating popular assemblies throughout Madrid. Several committees have been set up looking after food supplies, legal matters and communications.

The Puerta del Sol assembly has adopted a list of 16 demands, including the democratisation of the election process; the proclamation of basic rights, such as housing, health care and education; greater government control over banks and businesses; reduced military spending; and the renationalisation of privatised public enterprises.

One protester, Alejandro, told the BBC, "I hope this changes our situation. We have a right to regular jobs, a future and a decent salary, to more opportunities in life, the chance to get a house, to pay for that house without being enslaved, but especially a better quality of life".

Carlos Gomez said, "We have no option but to vote for the two biggest parties in Spain, who are more or less the same. They are unable to solve any problem; it is just a nest of corruption. We are tired. In short, we want a working democracy. We want a change".

Milena Almagro García added, "These protests are not only about unemployment. They are about the unfair political situation that exists in Spain. We protest against the political situation that allows more than 100 people who are accused of corruption across the country to stand in the next elections.

The demonstrations and the election results expose the vast gulf between the interests and sentiments of the majority of the population and the policies dictated by the financial elite and supported by all the official parties—in Spain and throughout Europe.

While the organising forces behind the protests have claimed to be apolitical, they do have a political perspective, namely that mass demonstrations by themselves can force the political system to change. This is false. As the European debt crisis enters a new stage, the ruling class is determined to enforce even more brutal austerity measures, which will increasingly require the abrogation of the most basic democratic rights.

The PSOE government has already imposed one of the most brutal programmes in all of Europe, introducing a €15 billion package of spending cuts that includes 5 to 15 percent cuts in civil servants' salaries, attacks on pensions and reformed labour protection laws.

As part of the campaign to force deeper cuts, financial markets have sent Spanish interest rates to their highest level since January. Regional governments, which are responsible for one third of public spending, have carried out cuts in healthcare, education and other essential public services. There are indications that this week newly-elected regional

governments will begin to reveal debts much higher than previously published, which will only escalate the pressure for more austerity.

To combat this drive, the working class needs its own organisations of struggle. Noticeably absent in the protests over the past week have been the official trade unions, which have worked closely with the PSOE in enforcing cuts and demobilising the mass resistance that erupted last year. These unions represent barely 14 percent of the workforce according to data from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

To carry forward a struggle, workers must build independent rank-and-file committees to unite all sections of the working class with unemployed youth.

Above all, a new political party must be built-on the basis of an uncompromising revolutionary and internationalist perspective. It is not only a question of protest, but of building a new leadership to fight for the socialist transformation of the economy in Spain, throughout Europe and internationally.

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