

Against all states, old and new! Down with patriotism! Down with borders! Long live the international class struggle!

Catalan independence: what's hiding behind the nationalist myth?

The radicalisation of an important part of the dominant classes in Catalonia has provoked a major political crisis in the kingdom of Spain. It's a political crisis accelerated by the decision of the kingdom to respond by force to the independence referendum called by the government of the region but also by the attachment of large sections of the proletariat to the perspective of creation of a new state.

Pushed onto the ropes after the referendum by the intransigence of the monarchy, duly supported by the EU, the Catalan Generalitat quickly resigned itself to demanding negotiation with Madrid and met no resistance. Despite the promises made about the road to follow after the referendum on 1 October 2017, the regional government of Barcelona back-pedalled and deceived important sections of its supporters. These people believed in the possibility of demolishing a central pillar of the Spanish state with a simple determined vote within the framework of the normal functioning of bourgeois political democracy. But this was only posturing, of concern to the parties involved and no one else.

The first question that revolutionaries must ask themselves therefore concerns the reasons for the radicalisation of significant sections of the Catalan dominant classes. To do this we need to look at the recent causes of the Spanish political crisis.

At the base of it all: the fiscal crisis of numerous states

The latest episode of Catalanian independentism occurs in a global framework marked by two central elements: the political crisis of European states produced by the fiscal crisis at the beginning of the decade and the absence of any expression of workers' autonomy capable of dragging the mass of contradictions riddling the civil societies of these states onto the terrain of class struggle. In the case of Catalonia, the fiscal crisis is joined by a banking

crisis, itself caused by the collapse of the construction sector.

According to Eurostat, the statistical office of the EU, the Spanish building crisis was the harshest on the Old Continent, with a plunge in sales of more than a quarter between June 2007 and June 2008. Catalonia saw sales of property fall by more than 42% in the same period. In May 2012, several banks, whose balance sheets were stuffed with property loans, were declared insolvent by ratings agencies and ended up being nationalised. Three lenders then risked causing the collapse of the whole banking system. Catalunya Banc, the biggest Catalan bank and the fourth largest in Spain, was among them. In 2015, after having received more than €12 billion in new funds from the central state, Catalunya Banc was bought out by BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, lender number two in Spain). The central role of the banking system in Catalonia is well known: more than a fifth of the Spanish savings banks (45 today) have their head offices in this region, including the most important one, la Caixa, the biggest savings bank in Europe and the third biggest financial establishment in the country, and also Banc Sabadell, number four of the Spanish private banks.

It's also worth noting that the Catalan banking network is opposed in practice to independence. La Caixa has moved its headquarters from Barcelona to Valencia and Banc Sabadell is preparing to set up in Alicante. The main reason for the lack of patriotism on the part of the Catalan banks is simple: they need refinancing from the Central European Bank to avoid a bank run, in the form of a massive and sudden flight of accounts to the banks of the euro zone. We must also not forget the thorough integration of the Catalan economy into that of Spain (45% of trade is with Spain). If we can believe the Catalan bureau of statistics, the region had, in 2016, an export surplus of €27 billion, €14 billion with Spain. Close to half this surplus is attributable to trade in commercial services,

principally tourism. Yet, this balance of payments surplus, including the part from tourism, is clearly financed by the system of credit. If this surplus were to disappear the loans which have made it possible would be in danger. But the banks are not the only ones tempted to flee towards more tranquil places. At the time of writing, the number of firms doing this has reached 1,885 – among them, the really big companies are not going to be outdone¹. Meanwhile, “*the international funds have stopped all investment in Catalonia and have put Spain on their red list*” says the site *El Confidencial*. Finally: “*The SMEs, which represent the immense majority of enterprises in Catalonia, say they are dismayed and concerned*”, according to Antoni Abad, president of the second bosses’ association of the sector, Cecot, quoted in the French daily *Le Figaro*.

Catalonia came out of the fiscal crisis with the region’s public finances in tatters. The regional debt alone rose to 35% of Catalonia’s GDP, and together with its share of the Spanish debt would be around 115% of regional GDP, according to the most optimistic calculations. Catalan nationalists claim that the budget deficit will disappear with the separation from the kingdom, as opposed to consuming 1% of GDP at the moment. In 2016 Catalonia borrowed more than €50 billion from the central government, corresponding to around 80% of its direct debt. The dependence of the Generalitat of Catalonia on Madrid money becomes tighter and tighter. From this comes the decision to force the hand of the kingdom with the referendum, with the aim, at a minimum, of obtaining greater fiscal and budgetary autonomy. The pretext to rally the local population to its fight was the offensive led since 2006 by the People’s Party in power in Madrid. The PP are the legitimate heir of a “moderate” Francoism which wanted to transform the regime into a classic parliamentary democracy, against the recognition of the Catalan “nation” and against the granting of primacy to the Catalan language over the Spanish language, with the exception of education.

This recognition had already been conceded by the Socialist Party and then in orders which were inscribed in the Spanish Constitution. This inscription was referred to the Constitutional Court in 2010 by the People’s Party. It would have been

¹ Abertis (road and airport infrastructure), General de Aguas de Barcelona, (water distribution), Cellnex Telecom (infrastructure for telephony, data and broadcasting), Freixenet and Codorniu (wine making), Gas Natural Fenosa (distributor of gas and electricity), Inmobiliaria Colonial (property group) etc.

sufficient to simply not touch the Constitutional modification of 2006 to avoid the situation where the Generalitat has created an undeniable popular consensus. It’s a consensus manifested during the latest illegal referendum which saw a massive participation by voters, despite the repression imposed by the monarchy and the post-Francoists of the People’s Party.

So why therefore haven’t the dominant classes of Spain, well supported by the EU and all the states which belong to it², agreed to this inoffensive “demand”? First of all, because Catalonia plays a central role in the economy of the country, still convalescing after the fiscal and construction crisis. Also, it’s because the formal constitution of each country is deeply rooted in its history, in its material constitution, the still-not-formalised representation of the dominant social relations and their specific characteristics. Present day Spain comes out of a “peaceful” transition from an openly dictatorial regime to a “modern” democracy. This transition was sanctified on 25 October 1977 by the Moncloa Pact, between all parties and unions of Spain (with the exclusion of the anarchist CNT). Francoist Spain at the time was on the edge of collapse with an inflation rate close to 50% and a massive capital flight, while being undermined by a soaring workers’ autonomy. All this led the old regime to scuttle itself very gently without the state or the civilian administration experiencing any discontinuity. The regime succeeded in this with great difficulty, from one putschist shock³ to another, fighting against the workers’ struggle with the active complicity of the left of the state and the Basque and Catalan independentists. The silence of the proletariat as a class has not been fundamentally interrupted since this era. In Catalonia, this silence is particularly deafening today.

The disarray of the working class in Catalonia, torn between two states, one existing, the other pending

The political general strike called on Tuesday 3 October 2017 to protest against the police violence of the previous Sunday following the banning of the

² “By virtue of the Spanish Constitution, the ballot organised in Catalonia was not legal. For us ... it’s a matter of an internal question for Spain which must be dealt with in respect of the constitutional order of the country”, as a spokesperson for the EU pithily stated on 10 October 2017.

³ Like the putsch by lieutenant- colonel Tejero, in November 1978, or that of Captain Milans del Bosch in February 1981.

independence referendum by Madrid, did not see a massive participation by the big factories and other manufacturing centres in Catalonia. Production at SEAT in Martorell on the day fell by scarcely 10%. Only one of the three assembly lines was affected. On the other hand, the strike had some success in public transport, health and administration. In the massive demonstrations, high school kids, students and public sector employees were the most numerous. Significant agitation was also put into practice by blockades of roads, ports and railways, as well as by demonstrations. Despite the numerous weaknesses of this movement, it would be mistaken to equate the mass demonstrations inspired by the Catalanists with the shows of force in the streets pushed for by the monarchy and the post-Francoists in Madrid. These “oceanic” gatherings defend the established order and support repression in Catalonia. They are the actions of a reactionary social bloc in which the Franco loyalists and those still nostalgic about Colonial Spain have a dominant position.

Although the regional sections of the CCOO (*Comisiones obreras* – Workers’ Commissions – close to the Stalinists) and the UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores* – General Union of Workers – of Socialist inspiration) called for the strike on 3 October and were the originators of the “Council for democracy” which organised the agitation, their Spanish mother ships had declared their opposition to the independence process along with all the national political parties – the People’s Party, the Socialist Party, the United Left (of reformed Stalinist affiliation) and the Chavistas of Podemos. The bosses’ associations of the big companies in the region also joined the opponents of the referendum. The two biggest organisations of the left of capital, the United Left and Podemos, plus the more left-wing parts of the Socialist Party, called themselves nationalist but not independentist: that is, in favour of the recognition of the Catalan “nation” but against its separation. As for the anarchist CNT, which (on 28 September, with the CGT) called for the general strike on 3 October, it defends the right to self-determination while denouncing “*the repressive nature of the Generalitat of Catalonia*”⁴.

Of course, the privileged ideological domain of culture reigns over Catalan nationalism, and it is strongly based on the demand for the

recognition of the Catalan tongue as the official dominant language. If it is probable that the majority of inhabitants of the region want nothing to do with independence, the violence of the police response and the daily propaganda flaying handed out by Prime Minister Rajoy and King Felipe have certainly reinforced the camp of Catalan nationalism. The proof is in the mass participation in the referendum vote despite the brutal repression. Many young proletarians (in education or not) have joined the most determined fringes of the Catalan nationalist movement, and pushed, albeit in a dispersed way, for a harder confrontation with Madrid. The royalist repression has helped to hide the bourgeois class nature of Catalan independentism and its less than glorious history. We must never forget that the Catalan nationalists, notably those of *Izquierda Republicana de Cataluña* (Republican Left of Catalonia)⁵, were also, like the Stalinists, the main people responsible for the counter-revolutionary repression of 1936-37.

The state, necessity for capital and public enemy number one for the proletariat

The avowed objective of the independentists is the constitution of a new state. To do this, they intend to constitute civil society in Catalonia into a nation, recognising a tradition, a culture, a specific language. In the ideological construction, a major role is played by a historical revisionism which aims at individualising the trajectory of the “Catalan people”. History is thus ceaselessly rewritten according to the yardstick of the founding myths, often changing as a function of the nation’s needs of the moment. “*Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past*”, as Orwell said in 1984⁶. The aim of this manipulation is obvious: to hide class conflict and to transform the perception of exploitation and oppression which the subordinated classes experience into the rejection of an enemy, internal or external, presumed responsible for all bad things. This mechanism plays out in both Spain and Catalonia – the monarchy denying all national specificity to the Catalans and the Catalan

⁵ This party was founded in 1931 and was part of the Popular Front, in power after the elections of February 1936. It led the Generalitat until the victory of Franco in 1939. This party has always been for independence.

⁶ Conveniently available on a University server in Australia (where Orwell is out of copyright!): <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/orwell/george/o79n/chapter3.2.html>

⁴ <http://cntbarcelona.org/triem-lluitar-el-3-doctubre-totes-i-tots-a-la-vaga-general/>

nationalists identifying the kingdom as the root of all evil, while it is only one specific expression of the domination of capital in the country. The hundreds of thousands of young proletarians who devote themselves to the Catalan Republic are giving an erroneous response to the often well-founded reasons for their anger. We must not see them as being the same thing as the Generalitat and the sections of the independentist dominant classes, driven by the will to reinforce their essentially material base via fiscal sovereignty.

A Catalan Republic will not eliminate exploitation and will create new barriers, new frontiers, when it is necessary wipe out all of them and, with them, the states which set them up. Today this mystification has free reign because of the political silence of the proletariat, which makes it shut up and work hard.

This is why the only viable response to the “nations” involved is the class struggle in all its international dimensions. Communists do not have to take one or other side in this internal fight within the dominant classes through the intermediary of civil society. They no longer have to intervene in the national questions which appear here and there in the world of capital, embracing some, rejecting others. They must, on the other hand, explain the reasons for their emergence, criticise specific cultures and traditions, defend linguistic freedom of expression (since 1993 Catalan has been the co-official language with Castilian in the main territories of Spain where it is spoken) and also avoid supporting existing states directly or indirectly. Translated into the Catalan situation, this means that communists have nothing to do with Spanish national unity, any more than with the birth of an independent republic of Catalonia. If one population wants to separate from another, it is not a matter for the proletariat, the only international class, without fatherland or nation, which exists, as long as it doesn't translate into new oppressions. Communists fight all borders and all states which defend them. Their terrain of combat is, from the outset, international, global, as global as the domination of capital and the state, as the states they want to destroy. Communists explain that only the return of the class struggle on a massive scale can dissolve the nationalist illusion, independentist or not. Finally, communists fight state repression when it hits sectors of the oppressed classes, including those who are prisoners of ideologies contrary to their historic interests. Certainly on one condition:

that they don't mobilise themselves against other proletarians, against other class brothers and sisters, here, there or elsewhere as in Lombardy and Venetia.

“Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?”

No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.

Further, it has co-ordinated the social development of the civilized countries to such an extent that, in all of them, bourgeoisie and proletariat have become the decisive classes, and the struggle between them the great struggle of the day. It follows that the communist revolution will not merely be a national phenomenon but must take place simultaneously in all civilized countries – that is to say, at least in England, America, France, and Germany.

It will develop in each of these countries more or less rapidly, according as one country or the other has a more developed industry, greater wealth, a more significant mass of productive forces. Hence, it will go slowest and will meet most obstacles in Germany, most rapidly and with the fewest difficulties in England. It will have a powerful impact on the other countries of the world, and will radically alter the course of development which they have followed up to now, while greatly stepping up its pace.

It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range.” Friedrich Engels, “Principles of Communism” (Question 19), October-November 1847.