

Challenges Facing the Left in Spain



Podemos, meaning “We Can,” is one of the most exciting developments taking place on the left in Europe today. For years politics in Spain had been dominated by two parties: the conservative the People’s Party (Partido Popular or PP), headed by Mariano Rajoy, and the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE), led by Pedro Sánchez. But, in the last election held in December of 2015, the new left party Podemos won five million votes, fundamentally votes by the lower classes against the economic elites and their austerity plans. That represents 20% of the electorate, and 69 out of 350 seats in the house of deputies.[1]

Podemos has its roots in the Spanish Occupy 15-M movement, also known as the *indignados* (indignant ones) or *movimiento de las plazas* (the movement of the plazas) that began on May 15, 2011. Eventually over six million Spaniards participated in the 15-M protests that from occupation of the public squares developed over two years into tides of mobilization against unemployment and government privatization of public services such as the national health system and public education. This movement reflected the lack of confidence of large parts of Spanish society, specially educated youth, in the old parties’ system, including the traditional social liberal PSOE that enacted and supported the austerity policies, but also lack of confidence in the social democratic Izquierda Unida (United Left, IU).[2] That long wave of mobilization eroded the

legitimation of the *bipartismo* or two-party domination of the political system that had been set up in the transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy that took place in 1978.

The success of Podemos in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament led others with more conservative views to set up a new neo-liberal party, Ciudadanos (Citizens) that got support from people disenchanted with the inefficacy and corruption of the PP. The success of Podemos on the left and Ciudadanos on the right meant that neither the PP nor the PSOE won over 50 percent of the vote. Consequently, neither PP nor PSOE could rule alone, and, since they could not agree to join together, one or the other would be forced to form a coalition in order to rule.

The PP attempted to form a coalition with the new right party, Ciudadanos, while the PSOE was hostage to its loyalty to neoliberal politics and it also preferred a coalition with Ciudadanos—or even a suicidal broad coalition with the PP—rather than a progressive coalition with Podemos. Therefore, after 128 days, no government had been formed. So on April 26, PSOE went to King Felipe VI to tell him that a government could not be formed and that there would have to be new elections in June.

Podemos, the party expressing the demands of the 15-M movement, was created by two groups. The first was a group of political scientists and consultants in Spanish universities, while the second was a radical left organization called Izquierda Anticapitalista (Left Anti-capitalists) that evolved out of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). Podemos adopted many practices of 15-M political culture, such as a wide network of open and democratic assemblies that allowed it to expand fast, currently reaching 300,000 members and, as mentioned, won over 5 million votes in the last election. Of those 300,000 members, about 20,000 can be characterized as activists.

The composition of Podemos comprises three main groups: The two original founding groups, the group led by Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, Anticapitalistas group, and a third group of people whose main political experience was in the 15-M movement. Pablo Iglesias, a former member of the Communist Youth of Spain, leads the young academics that have the support of the majority of the organization. Iglesias is a charismatic figure and he and his inner circle tend to make decisions and then hand them down to the members, largely through social media. Their tendency is to create a populist organization based on the charisma of the leader and plebiscitarian participation, that is, the leaders hand down decisions that the members vote to endorse. Most recently there has been a break within this tendency between Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, the party's second most important leader.

The second founding component is Anticapitalistas, an organization of about 700 members that works through the discussion and organizing circles that form the base of Podemos in an attempt to make the organization more democratic. Though small in numbers, Anticapitalistas activists exert an inordinate influence because of their role in the circles and because their anti-capitalist politics tend to both better explain the current situation and provide better answers.

Anticapitalistas is a revolutionary current that evolved from a classical working-class based Marxist organization with a deep involvement in social movements such as the feminist movement and the movement that rejects Spain's joining NATO. During the current financial crisis Podemos has been built and gained influence through its members' involvement in social movements such as the 15-M, Juventud sin Futuro (Youth with no Future), the Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas (PAH, Platform of those Affected by Foreclosures), and most recently the Mare Mortuum (Sea of Death) movement protesting European policy toward Syrian and other immigrants.

Anticapitalistas does have a relationship to the labor movement, supporting the wave of autonomous struggles and strikes often outside the framework of the major unions (like Coca-Cola and the subcontracts of the cellphone operator Telefónica).

Anticapitalistas is not an old left organization with a single doctrine and a disciplined membership. It does, however, attempt to be a radical, democratic organization. All of the party's major decisions are made in public at mass meetings. The party exerts no discipline over its members in the social movements whom it trusts to make responsible decisions.

The third component is a large and diverse group of people which with no previous political experience participated in the 15-M movement. There they drew the conclusion of the need of a political tool beyond the assemblies in order to cope with the systems' institutions and change the balance of power in society. This group thus conveys 15-M's political culture of democratic open assemblies. In the internal debates and decision processes of Podemos, this group does not participate as an organized collective, used to maintain pragmatic positions and to shift alliances with the other two groups.

For the upcoming elections, Podemos has been negotiating a coalition with IU. There is widespread support for this coalition because the million voters of IU may help the left overtake the PSOE as the second political ticket in the parliament, and if that happens it will represent a dramatic change in the political situation. The support for this coalition also stems of the success of Peoples' Unity platforms in the May 2015 local elections. These platforms, formed by Podemos, IU, and the municipal assembly slates of 15-M in various cities, allowed the left to win the majority of the big Spanish cities in these elections. Most important, in Catalunya (a region within the Spanish state with its own strong sense of national identity), the coalition Barcelona en Comú succeeded in electing the organizer of the PAH Ada Colau

to mayor of Barcelona (the second biggest city in the state).

The agreement between Podemos and IU may also end in a merger, especially since several former currents of IU have already joined Podemos, taking positions of power within the party structure and electoral lists. The possibility of this merger represents both a new opportunity and a challenge for Anticapitalistas.

Today Podemos is debating four central questions: 1) What is the relationship between Greece and the Syriza party on the one hand and Podemos and Spain on the other? 2) What is the relationship between reforming the existing system and moving toward the creation of a socialist society? 3) What kind of internal organization should Podemos have? 4) And what is Anticapitalistas doing in Podemos; that is, what role should it play?

Anticapitalistas has an important role to play these debates because it sees the central issue as being the capitalist system itself and therefore has a different program. As Manolo Gari told the solidarités Suisse's Spring University, "We are for the nationalization of the electrical industry. We are for refusing to pay the debt. We are for auditing the debt."

The coming elections present Podemos with the opportunity to become the leading party of the left and challenges Anticapitalistas to find a way to build a stronger radical current within Podemos. We will be watching these developments with interest.

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[1] *The following article is based in part on the talks of*

Andreu Coll and Manolo Gari, both of whom are members of both Podemos and of Anticapitalistas, on April 25 at the Spring University of solidarités Suisse (Swiss Solidarity) held near Lausanne, supplemented by conversations with other members of Anticapitalistas..

[2] IU was founded in 1986—after the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) did poorly in the 1982 election—as a coalition of the PCE and other smaller left groups. The IU's politics were a continuation of the Eurocommunism of the PCE; that is, the attempt to turn the former Stalinist Communist Parties into social democratic parties.