

The Spanish state: the Indignados enter the European parliament

Andy Durgan

Despite what much of the media want us to believe, it has not just been the extreme right that have benefitted from disillusionment with established politics. Apart from the notable victory of Syriza in Greece, the election of five MPs from the anti capitalist Podemos ('We can') in the Spanish state has rocked the political establishment.

Formed only four months ago, Podemos won a staggering 1.2 million votes mostly from young people who do not usually vote but also many from working class voters disillusioned with the social democratic PSOE (the Spanish equivalent of the Labour Party).. With the Communist Party-led United Left (IU) tripling its vote since the last EU election to 1.5 million and winning 6 MPs, the left as a whole took over 20 percent of the vote.

In contrast, support for the two main parties, the ruling conservative party, the People's Party (PP), and the PSOE, plummeted to under 50 percent, compared with around 80 percent received since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the seventies. To make matters worse for the rabidly centralist PP, left nationalists won in both the Basque Country and in Catalonia - once more showing the depth of support for independence.

The cracks that appeared in the political system are now threatening to become seismic. with first the resignation of the PSOE leader and then on 2 June the abdication of the King, which immediately led to massive demonstrations all over the country calling for a referendum on whether Spain should be a Republic or a Monarchy.

Podemos has its roots in the indigna-

dos 15M movement which occupied hundreds of squares across Spain in May 2011 protesting about both the political set-up and the ravages of austerity. During 2012 the 15M dovetailed into the growing resistance to cuts; its methods and activists were central to the rank and file movements (the mareas, 'tides') launched to defend education, health and public services and in the two general strikes of that year. 15M activists have also been central in the impressive Anti Evictions Campaign (PAH), which has prevented hundreds of families, indebted to the banks, from being thrown out of their homes.

But life remains dire for many people. The figure for those living under the official poverty line is around 22 percent and for children at risk of falling into poverty is 30 percent, the second highest in the EU. Unemployment stands at 26 percent; over 54 percent among those under 25.

Resistance, although more fragmented, has continued over the last year, including a series of tough all-out strikes against redundancies at a local level. In particular, the Marches for Dignity, called by several small left unions, which culminated in a million-strong demonstration in Madrid on 22 March, were a dramatic reminder that the radicalisation behind the 15M has not gone away. That such an unprecedented mobilisation could happen without the backing of the main trade unions is particularly significant.

To this background, activists, most from the 15M, some ex-members of IU, launched Podemos with a programme based on many of the demands that came out of the squares such as ending austerity, cancelling the debt, ending evictions, tax-

ing the rich and bringing financial institutions under democratic control. It has also taken a stand in defence of abortion rights, under attack from the PP, and the right to self determination for the national minorities.

Podemos, like the 15M, has made direct democracy a central part of its programme by insisting on the direct participation by citizens in the political process through regular consultations and referendums, control over elected representatives and the end of their privileges.

Its structure mirrors that of the indignados being based on open assemblies, ‘circles’, of which there are already some 400. The 64 candidates for the Euro-elections were chosen through an on-line primary in which over 33,000 people voted. Those involved in Podemos are overwhelmingly young non-aligned activists. Organised revolutionary socialists also have a small, but locally relevant, presence.

Central to the success of Podemos has also been the role of its main figurehead, Pablo Iglesias. The 35-year-old university lecturer is immensely popular among supporters of the 15M and the left in general, due to his prominence in TV chat shows (in particular the online programme, La Tuerka) denouncing political corruption and neo-liberalism. Inevitably a project like Podemos, with no clear structure and a very general programme, with participation open to all, has many potential problems to face. Not least the perception that everything revolves around Iglesias; something which Iglesias himself opposes.



Pablo Iglesias of Podemos

Insistence on an open assembly-based structure and opposition to the professionalization of politics clearly separate Podemos from IU. Despite insisting on the need for unity, it is unlikely that IU’s hundreds of elected representatives in local government would either accept such constraints or break alliances with the PSOE.

Podemos insists that real change will not come through a purely institutional struggle but it remains to be seen how it will deal with the obstruction it will inevitably face from the economic elites and the state. Iglesias and his closest allies are heavily influenced by the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela so there will certainly be debate over the road to take. But regardless of the multiple uncertainties facing Podemos, socialists can only welcome what represents a tremendous opportunity to create a mass left alternative to neo-liberalism and social democracy.