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Spanish State

Spanish state: PSOE Congress closes ranks around leader

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The 41st Congress of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE – Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party), held from 29 November to 1 December 2024, took place against an increasingly unstable international and geopolitical backdrop, and at a time when the media and the judiciary are focusing on corruption, the new shadow hanging over ‘Sanchismo’, the method of government of the current prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, who is also the party’s general secretary, in particular the affair involving the party’s former number two, José Luis Abalos.

In these conditions, the course of the Congress held in Seville was predictable: to make a grand show of cohesion around the charismatic leader and his *Manual de Resistencia*, and to reaffirm the gamble of playing the blackmail card (‘the arrival of the right and the far right’) to the full in order to discipline his partners in government and parliament. In this way, Sánchez is seeking to achieve his objective: to stay in the palace of Moncloa until 2027 and, despite the poor predictions of the opinion polls, to win the next elections. Unsurprisingly, there has been not the slightest hint of self-criticism about the policies pursued in recent years, or even about his co-responsibility for the inertia in the face of the tragic DANA disaster, although the reproaches have come from very different quarters, and even from some of his partners, such as Compromís and Podemos. [1]

Framework document

If we look at the Congress’ framework document, entitled ‘Spain 2030. A socialism that advances, a Spain that leads’, we can see some signs of a rather radical rhetoric against the “super-rich”, in defence of the “middle and working classes”, but little programmatic novelty. In fact, the document begins by announcing four major challenges for 2030, which seems a long way off in these times of reactionary upsurge: developing a different model of growth and tackling the climate emergency (we’d have to explain how the first and second can be compatible), tackling the transformation of the world order and finally responding to the ‘rise of authoritarian values and the international ultra-right’.

This is followed by an attempt to magnify the ‘impossibles we have achieved’ in the last period (starting with the employment reform, albeit very limited) and the announcement of the ‘impossibles we will achieve’ (with the project, hardly viable with its allies, the Basque PNV and the Catalan Junts, of a constitutional shield for social conquests), before moving on to define a national project with ten objectives. The first of these (‘A more competitive, fair and sustainable economy’) sets out the framework within which the following objectives are to be pursued: shorter working hours, quality education, housing for all, the fight against all inequalities, a strengthened ‘autonomous’ state, full democracy to confront disinformation, a vocation for leadership of the European project, support for the (false) ‘two-state solution in Israel and Palestine’, and the strengthening of the EU’s ‘strategic autonomy’ in defence matters with the alibi of the war in Ukraine.

In addition to the most widely publicised measure to reduce working hours, the concrete content of which remains to be seen, other new measures that could attract attention include the creation of a ‘citizen’s seat’ in Congress and the Senate so that representatives of civil society can intervene, the right to vote from the age of 16 and the convening of deliberative citizen’s conventions, a ban on the conversion of residential housing into tourist and seasonal accommodation, the creation of a public office for the construction of social housing and the obligation that loans and rents should not exceed 30% of salaries, reform of the system for financing the regions (with a formulation vague enough to satisfy all the baronies) and the repeal of the 1979 agreement with the Catholic Church on cultural and

educational issues.

Some of these promises sound like mere repetition of those already included in previous Congresses, while at the same time they highlight the scant attention paid to the mortifying migration policy (there is simply mention of the need for 'an immigration model that guarantees a constant flow') or the absence of a tax policy that goes beyond a reference to the obligation (how?) for big business to share some of the scandalous profits made in recent years. [2] Last but not least, the absolute silence on the Saharawi people's right to self-determination, once again confirming complicity with the repressive Moroccan regime.

We should also note the triumph of the so-called 'classical' feminists with their amendment aimed at preventing the inclusion of Q+ alongside LGTBI. This result was obtained thanks to the lobby led by former vice-president Carmen Calvo, and was finally voted in plenary with a very low turnout. This decision represents a serious step backwards in the recognition of diversity, contributes to the promotion of transphobia, strengthens the right in its cultural war and distances the PSOE from a position on which there is a broad consensus throughout the feminist movement, particularly among its younger generations.

A fragile domination

In short, Sánchez took advantage of the Congress to demand the loyalty of the activist apparatus in the face of the judicial, political and media harassment to which he has been subjected, especially since the approval of the amnesty law (while seeking to make people forget that he did not protest, and was even complicit, when the harassment was directed at Catalan nationalism and Podemos). At the same time, he is proposing a government project that is sufficiently ambiguous on the fundamental issues that oppose him to the right wing Partido Popular (PP) to try to attract part of its electorate and even re-establish a two-party system with this party in the name of a sense of responsibility towards the state. This is a difficult task, as we can see from the migration emergency in the Canary Islands, since the PP remains under pressure not only from Vox (ready to unabashedly claim the legacy of the Franco dictatorship as we approach the 50th anniversary of the death of its founder), but also from the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, both of whom have been strengthened by Trump's election victory. Furthermore, given the heterogeneity of his allies in parliament, it is impossible to predict whether some of the progressive laws and measures promised, starting with their inclusion in the budget, will materialise.

As a result, we are going to end up with a PSOE that will continue along the path of reformism without structural reforms that challenge the interests of big business and the foundations of the monarchical regime of which this same party has been and still is a fundamental pillar. This is not the way to stem the real threat of the reactionary bloc, or even, despite the good macroeconomic data, to mitigate the worsening inequalities. At best, the PSOE can try to neutralise social conflicts by responding to certain demands, as in the case of the fight for decent housing; but it will be difficult to achieve this if the tax on seasonal rents has not made any headway in Parliament.

The strategic impasse into which the PSOE has plunged is not unrelated to the long-standing trend towards an Atlanticist social liberalism which is tending to lose its centrality in many countries, as is the case today in France and very probably in Germany after the general elections in February. Against this backdrop, in the case of Spain, the government's resilience increasingly appears to be an anomaly made possible by the fact that it has managed simultaneously to cancel out the 'breakaway' potential of the parties that have emerged to its left - Podemos and then Sumar - and to maintain a policy of pacts with regional forces, mainly in the Basque Country and Catalonia, in exchange for modest concessions.

However, this policy of fear in the face of the 'greater danger' will not last forever, as social unrest and political

disaffection, now accentuated by the consequences of the DANA disaster, continue to grow. This government's policies will not prevent the reactionary bloc from capitalising on the spread of 'anti-politics' among new sectors of the electorate.

Fear of internal democracy

On an organisational level, the consolidation of a party model based on an increasingly reinforced Caesarism around the 'leader maximo' has also become evident, as Manuel de la Rocha Rubí, one of the few delegates from the Izquierda Socialista current present at the Congress, has already pointed out : according to him, a clear demonstration of a 'fear of democracy' was shown by 'the very refusal to debate government management at Congress, violating a basic democratic principle and a key article of our statutes'. [3] And the party's total subordination to the government has been established, in a way that is all the more visible given the large number of ministers on the new Federal Executive Committee. In the end, he concludes, 'the party's position is set by the government and not the other way round, without even the possibility of influencing each other'.

The case of Madrid, with the forced resignation of Juan Lobato from the post of Secretary General of the Partido Socialista de Madrid, regardless of what is thought of his behaviour in the case of Díaz Ayuso's companion, is another clear example of these practices, and Izquierda Socialista de Madrid rightly criticised (with the slogan 'Form counts!') the ban on meetings aimed at setting up another candidacy to face the official one led by the current minister Oscar López. [4]

At the end of the day, according to the maxim of making a virtue of necessity, we are witnessing the triumph of a plebiscitary leadership model that aspires only to remain in government, at the price of a few concessions to its allies in areas that do not touch the hard core of the political economy dictated by the European Union, notably through the European Commission and the European Central Bank.

The vacuum on the left

Added to these gloomy prospects is the tragic absence of political forces to the left of the PSOE, capable of building an alternative to confront the right's policies of division among the popular classes but also building an alternative to the declining social liberalism of Sánchez. Neither Sumar - who is increasingly content with the limits set by Moncloa and the EU - nor Podemos - despite its current efforts to appear hypercritical of the PSOE, with which it nevertheless aspires to govern - now have the credibility to constitute a pole of reference in the onerous task of recomposing a left that wishes to learn the lessons of the cycle opened by 15M and the Catalan process in order to chart a course of refoundation that is not subordinate to institutional politics.

On the social front, the leaderships of the major trade unions, the CCOO and UGT, which are themselves subservient to the government, do not appear today to be the frame of reference for the recomposition of a workers' movement ready to confront employers and big business who are increasingly inclined to favour the arrival of the reactionary bloc in government.

Nevertheless, the mobilisations for decent housing - a true expression, in almost all of Spain, of a class struggle that directly attacks rentier capitalism - the admirable outpouring of solidarity towards the population of Valencia and other regions of the country in the face of the eco-social disaster of DANA, the various forms of resistance in different sectors such as health and education, or the solidarity with Palestine are signs of hope that a new cycle of

mobilisation on the left, starting from the grassroots, can be opened up in the period ahead. It is on the basis of these experiences that we must learn to seek new forms of convergence, in the struggles and in the debates between renewed action collectives. And launch with them new initiatives to build a common political and social front, capable of confronting the reactionary threat and building up an anti-hegemonic potential from the neighbourhoods and workplaces. Only in this way can we put back at the centre the need for a strategy of ecosocial transition and a democratic rupture with this regime and the power bloc that supports it.

PS:

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[1] The DANA ('depression aislada en niveles alto', or 'isolated high-level depression') is a meteorological phenomenon also known as a 'cold drop', caused by the warming of the oceans and polar zones, which caused terrible destruction in Valencia in November 2024.

[2] This is what Andreu Missé criticises: 'The tax reform carried out by the government... and its partners is minimal. It is more like a succession of patches. The agreement reached in Congress approved the tax on banks, the increase in capital income, hydrocarbons and tobacco. But it had to defer the energy tax to a new law. And taxes on real estate (Socimis), private insurance, luxury goods and diesel, as well as VAT on tourist flats, were rejected'. *Alternativas económicas*, December 2024, 130, p. 3).

Not to mention the still-postponed repeal of the gag law and the law on state secrets; the urgently-needed democratic reform of the judicial system (where is that promise of 'democratic renewal'? [[The *Ley Mordaza* ('gag law' is the nickname given to the Citizen Security Law passed in 2015 under the Popular Party (PP) government. It includes sanctions against unauthorised demonstrations in front of public buildings, a ban on filming the forces of law and order, subject to heavy fines, fines for contempt of the forces of law and order, even without physical violence, and the express expulsion of migrants at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla.

[3] 'Congreso socialista y crítica a la gestión', *eldiario.es*, Manuel de la Rocha Rubí, 6 December 2024.

[4] In November 2024, Juan Lobato resigned as Secretary General of the Madrid PSOE after a controversy surrounding his handling of information about Alberto González Amador, the partner of Isabel Díaz Ayuso, President of the Comunidad de Madrid. Lobato had revealed sensitive information about him, fuelling accusations of tax fraud. Faced with internal pressure and to avoid division, he chose to leave. Díaz Ayuso, a key figure in the Popular Party, is known for her neoliberal management, her opposition to Catalan independence and her handling of the pandemic.