

## UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 11TH DECEMBER 2012 by Kevin Bruton



The day following the last Update, on 14th November, a General Strike took place in Spain, the second this year (the first was 29th March), against the 'slash and burn' policies of the PP government of Mariano Rajoy, none of which were in the Manifiesto prior to the General Election of 20th November 2011. Millions of people came out again across the country demanding a referendum on the cuts virtually no-one voted for. The public sector was paralysed and, in the private sector, most large companies were heavily affected. In the Valencia Region, for example, the huge Ford plant south of the city, one of the biggest car factories in Europe, came to a virtual

standstill.

Spain's General Strike was, of course, part of a Europe-wide mobilisation against austerity measures. There were General Strikes also in Greece and Portugal, partial strikes in Italy, regional and sector shut-downs in Belgium and demonstrations in 23 EU countries. In Spain the umbrella slogan of the two main trades unions, the Socialist UGT and the Communist Workers' Commissions was "Nos dejan sin futuro", also translated on huge banners into English as "They leave us no future", and also into German. One of the most striking of the individual banners carried was one which, in a play on words of the film title "No country for old men", (in Spanish "No es país para viejos") the banner read "No es país para jóvenes" or "No country for young men/people".

Clashes with the police were few (although always, of course, exaggerated by the media) but there were 118 arrests (fewer than March) and 74 injured. The two most serious were in Tarragona where a 16-year old girl, apparently a passer-by, was attacked by the infamous 'Mossos d'Esquadra', the regional police force, and, also in the same city, a 13-year old boy, on the receiving end of a police baton charge, needed 5 stitches in his head. Both families are considering legal action.

On 25th November, Regional Elections took place in Cataluña. It is worth recalling that these elections were called two years early by the President, Artur Mas, leader of the Convergència Party, riding a wave of nationalist fervour he himself helped to whip up following the Diada, or Catalan national day, on 11th September. His aim was to increase his party's number of seats in the Regional Parliament. Before the Election he held 62 of the total 135 seats and was seeking an overall majority of at least 68. He also promised a referendum on independence for Cataluña.

The present writer's personal headline for what happened in the Election would be "From hubris to humiliation". Mas's party actually went down from 62 seats to 50, a loss, obviously, of 12 seats, although his party remains the biggest party. The PSC or Catalan Socialist Party also went down from 28 seats to 20. Smaller parties picked up seats but the net overall winner, up from 10 seats to 21, was Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) or Republican Left of Cataluña – for the present writer, as a socialist, an oxymoron for a nationalist pro-independence party.

A veritable bombshell was hurled into the campaign a week before the election when the right-wing daily newspaper 'El Mundo', rabidly anti-catalan nationalist, claimed to have a draft police report from the Ministry of the Interior revealing a vast web of corruption affecting Mas's party, Convergència. The report apparently alleges that, in almost 25 years of governing the Region, Convergència skimmed 4% off all contracts for public works, 2.5% to the Party and 1.5% to the Party's leaders. 'El Mundo' claims that 137 million euros are lying in Swiss bank accounts credited to the family of Mas himself and that of his predecessor Jordi Pujol. The last week of the election campaign witnessed a major Barcelona/Madrid

confrontation, with Mas denying all charges and wrapping himself in the nationalist flag, saying at one stage "The sewers of the Spanish state are being used to silence the voice of the Catalan people". The PP government of Rajoy, on the other hand, have fanned the flames of suspicion by refusing to either verify or refute the draft police report. Mutual accusations and recriminations continue as a chastened Mas still looks for a coalition partner. His plans for an independence referendum appear severely compromised and, probably, Convergència is already looking for a new leader for the next regional elections.

At the time of the last Update, the PP government was sitting down with the opposition Socialist Party to formulate ideas to halt the scandal of home evictions following two suicides and a growing "Stop desahucios" or "Stop evictions" movement. The talks failed and, on 17th November, the Government announced a 2-year moratorium on evictions, but only in certain limited cases. These were: that a family unit must have an income lower than 1600 euros in total, or two children with one parent, or a child under 3 years of age, or a disabled member, or be unemployed without benefits. Even though these conditions account for only a small percentage of people threatened by eviction, the government went ahead. Opponents have called the measures "like putting a plaster on a haemorrhage".

The economy goes from worse to worst. On 27th November, the OECD forecast (agreeing with a previous EU forecast) that the recession will deepen in Spain next year, with GDP falling 1.4% (the Government prediction is 0.5%) and with unemployment rising to 6 million or 26.9%. Unemployment actually rose by 75,000 in November to almost 5 million, with 85% of job losses in the service industry. One of the four nationalised banks, Bankia, in receipt of an 18 billion euro bail-out from Brussels, is to get rid of 5,000 jobs, a quarter of all staff, and close 1100 branches. The other three banks, again in receipt of European bail-out funds - Catalunya Bank (9 billion euros), Nova Galicia (5.5 billion euros) and Banco de Valencia (4.5 billion euros) - all are expected to announce staff and branch cuts in the New Year. Ironically, Banco de Valencia has just been bought by Caixa Bank from Cataluña for 1 euro!

The Paradors, the state-run luxury hotel group, which lost 113 million euros in 2011, want to shed 644 jobs out of a total of 4,400 and to close 27 paradors temporarily and 7 permanently. A recent strike by parador workers merely added to the partial stoppages and demonstrations taking place on a massive scale across Spain every day in numerous sectors. Alongside health and education protests, the 'discapacitados' or disabled lobby held their first major demonstration on 2nd December and even the police have joined the protests. Up until the end of November, in the Valencia Region alone there have been 4,500 demonstrations, an average of 15 per day every day throughout the year!

Worse is to come, however. The government is planning to privatise the national rail network, RENFE, next year and already there are job losses (450 announced in the Valencia Region). In education, government research funding to universities is being cut by 80%. This measure, in a climate where Spain's Research and Development budget is already one of the lowest in Europe, is forcing a brain-drain of Spain's scientists and researchers. In another education initiative, painfully reminiscent of Thatcher policies in the UK, the Spanish Government is pushing draft education legislation through Parliament which will: firstly, privatise more schools in Spain; secondly, produce more central control of the curriculum; thirdly, promote 'core subjects' at the cost of ancillary subjects (music, technology, the arts etc); fourthly, increase the place of Religion in schools; and, finally, promote 'castellano' or Spanish at the cost of Spain's other three languages - Basque, Catalan and Galician. The last two proposals in particular are attracting widespread condemnation.

The government has also announced the introduction of onerous charges for anyone wanting to pursue legal action through the courts. At the moment of writing, the entire legal profession in Spain - solicitors, barristers, judges, magistrates, etc - is protesting against these charges. Finally, the government has broken its last pledge to the people - on

pensions. On 10th September this year, in a major TV interview, Rajoy stated "If there is one thing I will not touch it is pensions , because pensioners cannot defend themselves and have no second opportunity". However, on 13th November, the government announced that they will not , as promised, increase pensions by the 2.9% rise in inflation to date in 2012. Despite minimising the cuts for lower rate pension recipients, the announcement effectively amounts to a CUT in pensions.

How are Spaniards responding to all this? The answer is by deserting both major parties in droves. An opinion poll published in 'El País' on 2nd December shows, since the General Election of 20th November 2011, a drop in support for PP from 44.6% to 31.3%, but also a worrying fall for the Spanish Socialist Party from 28.7% to 22.7%. More disturbingly, respondents were asked the question "Do you approve or disapprove of Rajoy as Prime Minister?" 71% expressed their disapproval. The same question asked about Rubalcaba's performance as leader of the Socialist opposition produced a devastating disapproval rate of 84%.

After all this gloom and doom, one bright seasonal note to end this Update. Spain's national Christmas delicacy is "turrón", a type of nougat. The huge turrón Christmas market in Spain, however, is threatened this year by the rise in VAT in September and the suppression of the extra Christmas monthly payment for millions, especially in the public sector. But, one of the biggest manufacturers of turrón, Almendra y Miel, is ready for the challenge. It already exports to 54 countries around the world but this year is loading even more reindeer-drawn sleighs with even more turrón to new markets in Russia, China and the rest of Asia!