

7.4.2016 Political prisoners. Basques and Corsicans in the same struggle!

The EFA General Assembly was the occasion of a debate which, for the first time, brought people who support Corsican and Basque prisoners together on the same platform. Gabi Mouesca for the Basques, and Jean Marie Poli and Dumè Tafani for the Corsicans, described their struggles on a panel including EFA bureau member Lorena Lopez de Lacalle, and Tatiana Zdanoka, an MEP involved in the Basque Friendship Group at the European Parliament who has served three terms of office.

Bringing Corsicans and Basques together is more than necessary, it is common sense. And it is completely obvious when we understand the real affinities between Corsican and Basque activists who in their dozens or even in their hundreds have spent time side by side in the same prisons, the same cells and exercise yards, and the same courthouse corridors. But the fact is that despite comparable activist involvement, hitherto the pooling of their actions has not been a priority.

After two hours of debate the importance of doing so became clear, and the EFA is proposing to extend it in Brussels in a joint demonstration that will bring the spotlight on the intolerable and even irresponsible behaviour of the French and Spanish States.

The attitude of the two governments is irresponsible because in both Corsica and the Basque Country peace processes are under way through which the FLNC and ETA have decided - ETA in 2011, the FLNC in 2014 - to abjure violence definitively. Before them, the IRA in Northern Ireland opened the way towards ending the persistent armed conflicts in the Europe that we are building. But Tony Blair's British government responded quite differently. Negotiations were begun without delay, and were continued until the end of violence had become irreversible.

Because that is the duty of any responsible government: to seize the opportunities that arise to consolidate peace in any region that has suffered from conflicts and tensions. This, the British government was able to do. The French and Spanish governments are refusing to do so, and we must mobilise democratic Europe against this irresponsible attitude.

André Paccou, representing the Human Rights League on the platform, highlighted the extent to which the decision to end violence changed everything and made it possible to mobilise new circles of solidarity to denounce the injustices regularly inflicted on prisoners and their families. These start with the refusal to recognise the genuine political status of these prisoners who are nevertheless treated in a particular fashion by the prison authorities, affecting their conditions of detention, the terms of conditional release, or the way in which they treat the illnesses suffered by some detainees, with often terrible human consequences; and the systematic use of geographical isolation, at variance with all French and Spanish laws and despite repeated condemnation by the European Court of Human Rights, the sole purpose of which is to intensify the sentence handed down by the courts.

For geographical isolation is the primary repressive policy applied to political prisoners, both by Spain and by France. In Corsica, the sea creates the first natural and financial barrier, and the near-systematic refusal to bring these prisoners nearer to the island constitutes an additional sentence for the families who have to arrange visits to their loved ones during the long years of their imprisonment. In Spain, the distances are over land, but this isolation is systematic, over thousands of kilometres, with only

two Basque detainees among the 400 prisoners held in the Basque Country. They are sometimes exiled as far as prisons on the Canary Islands to break the most militant individuals. And in France too, the distances are deliberately extended by the prison authorities, who in this way inflict a second sentence on families.

Bringing prisoners closer to their homes is the biggest joint demand addressed to France and Spain by Corsicans and Basques. In France they share this aspiration, and can accordingly apply combined pressure on the French government to make progress. Because the attitude of the French government serves as a cover for the even more repressive attitudes of the Spanish government, which keeps hundreds of Basque militants in prison in absolutely scandalous conditions.

In Corsica as in Euskadi, times have changed. Corsicans and Basques are seeking emancipation through democratic processes, and the successes obtained both here and there must be consolidated. The fight for political prisoners is of the first importance. Corsica has already launched a campaign for an amnesty, while Basques believe that this question should be on the table when the peace process is definitively consolidated.

The nationalist movement has a duty to present a united front on the question of political prisoners. This can only strengthen the unity which is essential to great political and democratic victories, as December's elections in Corsica have shown.