

# **BUILDING A STRONG DEMOCRATIC LEFT IN THE SPANISH STATE**

*Yolanda Díaz's new coalition seeks to unite a broad front for transformational change*

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On 8 July 2022, Yolanda Díaz, Second Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Spain and Minister of Labour, announced the launch of a new political project, an electoral platform known as Sumar (Spanish for “to add”), with a clear message: Sumar is neither a political party nor a coalition; it is a “citizen movement” whose goals are to “expand democracy” and “build a country for the coming decade”.

The project was launched in a manner typical of this type of platform: Díaz, herself a long-time member of the Communist Party (PCE), travelled around the Spanish State to begin a “process of listening” to the public, while sectoral working groups led by independents were set up to develop an agenda and ideological framework for an apparatus whose form and direction, we can only guess at today based on Díaz’s political activity to date.

Yet even if the platform's concrete agenda remains fairly nebulous for the time being, Díaz's background and the key messages that crop up in her rhetoric reveal much more about her objectives than is immediately apparent.

## **LEFT-WING PARTIES AND PROGRESSIVE CITIZEN MOVEMENTS**

Díaz's insistence on setting Sumar apart from traditional parties serves several purposes. The first is to appeal to the anti-political sentiment that has dominated Spanish public opinion since the last general election in 2019, after negotiations between the Socialist Workers' Party (SPOE) and Unidas Podemos following the July 2019 election fell through. Indeed, this sentiment is directly linked to growing disillusionment among the public since the end of the 15M movement and the stagnation of Unidas Podemos as a vehicle for mobilization political change.

It is telling that, even amidst the energy crisis and social disruption triggered by the war in Ukraine, the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), a public research and polling institute headquartered in Madrid, continues to identify political issues as the second-most important concern among the Spanish public. This trend has remained stable over the last three years after peaking in January 2020.

That said, there is another facet to the anti-political sentiment present in the Spanish State: citizen mobilization has been at a low ebb since a few months before the pandemic began. This represents a major concern for Díaz, as her approach to political organization relies heavily on a bottom-up approach. In a recent interview with Jacobin, she emphasized that one of her project's main challenges was to "mobilize the public" in a way that would echo recent events in Chile and Colombia.

The Minister of Labour's second objective with the Sumar platform is to build a solid organizational structure to be used as a springboard by other political groups in the country, such as Podemos, Izquierda Unida, Catalunya en Comú, Compromís, and Más Madrid. Pablo Iglesias appointed Yolanda Díaz as leader of Podemos and Deputy Prime Minister when he stepped down, but did not inform her in advance of his decision. With

this tactical move, the former leader of Podemos hoped to ensure that the party would be at the heart of any reshuffling within the broad left-wing camp. Instead of accepting these conditions, however, the new Deputy Prime Minister made it clear from the outset that she would take over as leader provided that she would be free to decide on her own team and project.

These diverging intentions have led to visible tensions within the party. Yolanda Díaz's emancipation and increasing proximity to figures who left Podemos, such as Íñigo Errejón from Más Madrid, have not been well-received among the Podemos rank-and-file, which boasts of having brought the left wing of the PSOE to power in the Spanish government for the first time since the Second Republic. Díaz, who was leader of Podemos in Galicia at the time, opposed the repeat election that finally forced PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez to accept the conditions imposed by Pablo Iglesias.

Far from establishing the "broad front" or coalition of parties advocated by Unidas Podemos, Yolanda Díaz is offering members of other political parties the opportunity to set their party affiliations aside and join Sumar on an individual basis. It is clear, however, that none of the organizations invited to join will agree to disband — something Díaz knows very well. Sumar's objective in this initial phase is probably to gain members and build organizational strength, allowing it to negotiate with the other parties and avoid creating another patchy coalition like the one that failed miserably in the recent elections in Andalusia.

The differences between Podemos and Yolanda Díaz's approach go beyond electoral considerations, however — they also extend to how the Left participates in government. Whereas Díaz demonstrates a degree of loyalty to Pedro Sánchez on key matters such as foreign policy, Podemos leader and current Minister of Social Rights Ione Belarra has opted to publicly clash with him in an attempt to set out her party's distinct political identity from the actions of the government as a whole.

Díaz shies away from controversies of this kind, instead highlighting measures she has introduced despite the difficulties she faces in office, and thereby positioning herself as

an all-purpose leader rather. Her strategy is supported by Alberto Garzón, Minister of Consumer Affairs, and Enrique Santiago, PCE Secretary-General and a member of Spanish Congress of Deputies for Izquierda Unida.

## **EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF SPANISH DEMOCRACY**

When Yolanda Díaz speaks of expanding democracy, she is referring to two main factors: firstly, defeating political challenges to Spain's parliamentary democracy established in the late 1970s in a period known as "the Transition", and secondly, extending the scope of formal democracy to include economic democracy, with class-based unions taking a leading role.

In order to understand the Minister of Labour's relationship with the revival of democracy in the Spanish State, it is vital to take into account her family roots and her previous career as a labour lawyer. The leader of Sumar is the daughter of Suso Díaz, a prominent Galician trade unionist and leader of the Comisiones Obreras union, who was imprisoned in the latter years of the Franco dictatorship. He forms part of a tradition linked to the mobilizations for democracy in the Spanish State, whose members have always disapproved of certain sectors of Podemos downplaying the victories achieved during the Transition. Whereas new generations on the Left view the Transition as a process of incrementalism, whereby concessions were made to the former Franco regime, the members of the main trade unions and Santiago Carillo's Communist Party are proud of their role in achieving that social consensus.

Whether this is due to her family ties or her own activism in the PCE (where she has always been more closely aligned with the views espoused by Julio Anguita than Santiago Carrillo), it is clear that Díaz's relationship with the Left that was involved in the Transition is very different to that of Pablo Iglesias or Íñigo Errejón. Díaz discourse, does not seek to break away from 1978, but rather to demonstrate links to the democratic impulses present at that time. She proposes a new social contract in which this legacy is respected and pensioners play a key role.

In line with this approach, the two main measures introduced by the Ministry of Labour under Díaz's watch — the ERTE furlough scheme and the new labour reform — were based on dialogue with business associations and trade unions, extolling the essence of the political culture during the Transition: consensus. This stance, which has underpinned her leadership, has given her a cross-class appeal and an heir of competence, boosting her popularity to such an extent that she is now the most highly regarded member of Pedro Sánchez's government.

The role of the main trade unions, the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), in Sumar merits further attention. Trade unions were not spared by the crisis of representation or the 15M movement's critique of the political establishment, and they were never a key part of Podemos for this reason. Instead, under Pablo Iglesias's leadership, the party focused on new forms of class organization linked more closely to the so-called "precarariat" and social movements, which were highly critical of traditional trade unionism.

A decade later, trade unions — especially CCOO, as well as new forms of labour organization — are among Yolanda Díaz's most important sources of support. The leader of Sumar has made workplace democracy and workers' rights the main pillars of her political project. In a conversation with well-known economist Thomas Piketty, Díaz advocated involving workers in companies' decision-making and bringing an end to Spain's corporate model, which she described as "monarchical". Now, as inflation threatens to spiral out of control, she can regularly be heard discussing the importance of trade unionism in winning pay raises for workers.

This new political architecture, which is very different from the more disruptive movement Podemos originally sought to build, has been defined by some commentators as a "new labour movement". Labourism as a political tradition has its roots in the United Kingdom and few proponents in the Spanish State. One of the reasons for this is that Spanish trade unions have never been purely "class-based", as they have always played a political role, ranging from the Transition to the right to decide on Catalan independence.

Besides the general public as a whole, it is clear that the universal subject to whom Díaz seeks to appeal are workers, moving away from the deeply populist construction of the “people” employed in the past by supporters of Íñigo Errejón in particular. In the aforementioned interview with Jacobin, the Minister of Labour said: “We are all workers: researchers, doctors, cleaners... we are all workers. This breadth of composition, this universality when compared with the much more limited figure of the rentier, pushes us towards a shared agenda and reflections to build our strength. This is why I put my faith in trade unionism.”

## **BUILDING A COUNTRY FOR THE COMING DECADE**

Like its other stances, Sumar’s call to build “a country for the coming decade” is intended to transcend a mere election manifesto and avoid direct references to party-building. This approach pursues two primary aims: first, to establish a political horizon that looks beyond the current BALANCE of forces within the Spanish government, and secondly, to encourage hope and optimism in the face of widespread pessimism at a time of pandemic, war, and crisis.

In this regard, Yolanda Díaz has adopted a tone far closer to that of Manuela Carmena, former mayor of Madrid, than that of Podemos and Pablo Iglesias, especially since the 2016 general election. Whereas the former party leader made the slogan “telling the truth” his hallmark, developing a direct style and criticizing the power of the mainstream media, his successor has opted to channel discontent among the population through a narrative that she describes as “in support”. In this way, she adopts Íñigo Errejón’s belief that the radicalness of an organization is measured not by the harshness of its words or its ability to “awaken minds”, but by the scope of its measures and the breadth of its discourse in order to appeal to as many people as possible.

Yolanda Díaz represents, without a doubt, the last chance for the space opened up by Unidas Podemos to survive and resist the return of the two-party system predicted by

all the latest polls in the Spanish State. At this stage, it is clear that the handover from Pablo Iglesias will not take place peacefully with the parties uniting in a “left-wing front”. Instead, if successful, the movement will be re-founded around the Sumar platform.

It is too soon to identify the precise political and ideological foundation of this political project. Nevertheless, Díaz’s bottom-up approach challenging anti-political sentiment, the central role of labour and class-based unions in defining a universal subject to which to appeal, and the desire to transcend boundaries based on identity by avoiding direct clashes with the Socialist Workers’ Party appear to be here to stay.

What we do know, as do Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE, is that the success of this new venture will determine not only the survival of his coalition partner but also that of the left-wing government itself, which has seen the Right emerge as the leading political force in every poll published in recent months.