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“No one represents us”: the 15 May Movement in the Spanish State

On 15 May 2011, thousands of people, mainly young, demonstrated all over the Spanish state under the slogans “For real democracy now” and “We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers”.¹ The demonstrations explicitly rejected the participation of political parties or trade unions. A month later, on 19 June, over one million marched in around fifty different cities and towns, mobilised by what now was known as the “15 May Movement” (15-M) or the *indignados*. In the four weeks after the 15 May protest, tens of thousands had been involved in camps and mass assemblies. The supposed passivity and lack of commitment of youth disappeared overnight. Above all, the emergence of the 15-M shows how quickly the situation can radicalise in the context of deepening crisis. To understand how such an explosion has been possible it is necessary to look at both the effects of the crisis and the peculiarities of the Spanish left and trade union movement.

The economic crisis has hit Spain hard. The country’s apparent prosperity since the 1990s was centred on construction and dependent on cheap credit; this came to an abrupt end in 2008. Among the EU15 countries (the core of the “old” European Union before the accession of ten mainly Central and Eastern European states in 2008), Spain already had the highest percentage of temporary contracts and unemployment, combined with some of the

¹ The first part of this text was completed in October 2011, before the general elections of 20 November that resulted in a government led by the conservative Partido Popular, and published in *International Socialism. A Quarterly Journal on Socialist Theory*, no. 133, [<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=757&issue=132>] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

lowest wages and social expenditure. Unemployment now stands at nearly five million people – around 21 percent of the active population – of whom many receive no benefits. Among those under 25, unemployment affects nearly 44 percent, compared with an already high 20 percent in the eurozone as a whole. And those young people who do work are usually hired on short-term contracts and very low wages. Things are made worse by the near complete absence of affordable accommodation, forcing most young people to live with their parents.

The rejection of political organisations by the 15-M reflects the alienation of large sections of the population, particularly the young, from the political system and its representatives. This is understandable, given not only the level of attacks on ordinary people but also the corruption and hypocrisy that can be found in much of institutional politics. However, this does not mean there is less interest in “politics” than elsewhere in Europe. For instance, participation in general elections (over 70 percent) is higher than in Britain.

Disillusionment with the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE) is particularly deep. Massive attacks on working-class living standards and rights at work have undermined the party’s support and aided the right in the recent local elections. The main electoral alternative on the left, the Communist Party-led *Izquierda Unida* (IU, United Left), has hardly benefited from the PSOE’s decline and its share of the vote, apart from a small increase in the local elections of 2011, has steadily declined since the mid-1990s, from 10.5 percent in 1996 to only 3.7 percent in 2008. The reasons for this are diverse. The electoral system, although proportional, is heavily weighted in favour of the two main parties and some voters feel a vote for the IU is “wasted”. More importantly, IU, despite its left-wing rhetoric, has been unable to present itself as a credible alternative due to its tendency to tail-end the Socialist Party or, in some cases, participate in regional and local governments applying neo-liberal policies. A serious electoral alternative left of the IU exists only in the Basque Country and, to a lesser extent, in Catalonia, in

the form of radical left nationalism. The anti-capitalist left is fragmented and weak in comparison with its counterparts in France, Greece, Portugal or Britain.

Nor do the trade unions inspire much confidence. Few workers are members of unions (around 15 percent of the workforce). Rather than through dues paid, unions are principally financed by state subsidies that depend on the number of delegates elected in the workplaces. The fact that all workers vote in these elections, whether union members or not, means many do not see the need to join a union as such. Not even having to depend on their members' dues has made the former Communist-led CCOO (Workers' Commissions) and the Socialist UGT – which control over 85 percent of workplace delegates – particularly top-heavy. Only large workplaces and the public sector systematically elect representatives so young people are unlikely to come across unions in part-time and precarious jobs. This compounds the distance between youth and a bureaucratic structure that appears to spend most of its time making pacts with the government and employers at the workers' expense. It should be added, however, that with a similar union representation system and even fewer members, the French trade union movement has a far better record when it comes to mobilising in defence of workers' interests. Thus when explaining the specific weaknesses of the Spanish trade unions, the limitations of the left need also to be taken into account.

The PSOE government's reaction to the crisis was state intervention to save banks and injections of cash in an unsuccessful attempt to revive the economy, meaning that the negative effects of the crisis passed from the private to the public sector. The deficit then spiralled to over ten percent. As the EU only allows a deficit of three percent, there was soon enormous pressure to reduce public spending. Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero subsequently imposed a five-percent wage cut for all public sector workers. In early 2010, he announced a far-ranging austerity package.

In response to these attacks, the unions called a one-day general strike on 29 September 2010. Over five million workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands demonstrated, fewer than during the previous general strike in 2002, but a real achievement given the effects of unemployment on workers' confidence. However, rather than take advantage of this mobilisation to intensify the struggle against austerity, the union leadership opted to negotiate with the government. The result, only four months later, was a pact that raised the retirement age to 67 over the coming years and a labour "reform", achieved in exchange for a few minor concessions, that made it easier to sack workers. Since then, the CCOO and the UGT have embarked on negotiations over collective bargaining, now from a position of weakness. The end result will probably be to undermine workers' ability to defend themselves even further.

Politically non-aligned mass movements are not new in the Spanish state. For instance, in March 2002, coinciding with an EU summit, a claimed 500,000 people were mobilised in Barcelona against "Capital and War", mostly by an ad hoc committee made up of activists from social movements and autonomous collectives. Then in 2006, *V de Vivienda* emerged after a campaign of text messages led to demonstrations over the high cost of housing. Like the 15-M, this campaign was based on youth and declared itself "apolitical". But the level of class struggle remained low, certainly if compared with France or Greece. The general strike apart, mobilisations by late 2010 were in general small and reduced to the radical left rump. No one expected what was about to happen.

The movement takes off

Like most mass movements, the 15-M was not "spontaneous" but emerged as the culmination of a series of events. The whole experience of the mobilisations of 2002–2004 against the Iraq war and the right wing Partido Popular (PP) government was a starting point for many participants. Similarly, *V de Vivienda* and the student protests

of 2008/09 against the Bologna Plan² provided a nucleus of experienced young activists who would be central to the 15-M. The general strike of 29 September 2010 saw the involvement of youth outside the majority union structures in local assemblies that organised pickets and direct action. Platforms against the cuts continued to exist in some localities after the strike, mainly sustained by the anti-capitalist left. This positive experience of unity, especially in Barcelona, also fed into the 15-M.

Other contributing factors were the publication of the much heralded short book by veteran French activist Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!*, at the end of 2010 and the “Sinde Law” (associated with the minister for culture Ángeles González-Sinde), passed in January 2011 with the aim of stopping illegal Internet downloads. More importantly, the Arab revolutions encouraged the belief that it was possible to fight back. The occupation of Tahrir Square became a particularly inspirational example of resistance. Then in March a “Precarious Youth” appeal was launched on the Internet in Portugal and this led to an extraordinary demonstration of 250,000 people, with half a million mobilised in the country as a whole.

The mobilisation inspired the setting up of the youth movement *Jóvenes Sin Futuro* (“Youth Without a Future”) in Madrid, which organised a 5,000-strong demonstration for 7 April through social networks, under the slogan “Without a job, without a home, without a pension: without fear”.

Meanwhile sweeping cuts in social spending, first by the PP regional government in Murcia and then by the recently-elected right wing Catalan government, provoked an upsurge of resistance by workers. In the Catalan case, protests turned out to be much bigger than expected, with hospital workers ignoring union leaders and blocking roads, causing chaos in Barcelona. Subsequent weeks saw regular protests and marches, more or less independent of the main unions. When the CCOO and UGT called a token protest

² The Bologna Plan aims to unify university education in Europe and make it more market-oriented.

outside the Catalan government headquarters on 14 April, 20,000 turned up. Then, on 14 May, over 50,000 marched against the cuts through Barcelona.

The success of the 7 April protest inspired the *Jóvenes Sin Futuro* to call further demonstrations for 15 May, in alliance with the “*Democracia Real Ya*” (“Real Democracy Now”, DRY) group. The latter’s programme centred on the need for an electoral reform aimed at eliminating corruption in politics and increasing citizen participation. 15 May was chosen to coincide with the run-up to the local elections of 22 May. Like the 7 April protest, the 15 May demonstrations were bigger than anyone expected (20,000 in Madrid, 15,000 in Barcelona).

The following day, there was a small occupation of the central Puerta del Sol to protest arrests during the Madrid demonstration. When the participants were violently evicted by the police, hundreds responded to calls for solidarity and the first camp was established. By the end of the week, there were an estimated 120 such camps around the country. Daily mass assemblies ran the camps, with decisions, in most cases, being taken on the basis of consensus. Commissions were established to organise everything from food, medical assistance and cleaning to legal advice, the spreading of the movement and the drawing up of demands. The numbers involved were far greater than those associated with any previous local assemblies or platforms: in Barcelona and Madrid there were meetings of over 10,000. The international situation weighed heavily on the camps. An Egyptian flag flew over the Madrid camp, while in Barcelona the Plaça Catalunya was divided into three areas: “Iceland”, “Palestine” and “Tahrir”. Greek flags would become common on protests.

The reaction of the political establishment has been mixed. The PSOE opted for a low-key approach, perhaps hoping not to aggravate further a situation in which they were widely expected to lose the local elections on 22 May. Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, who will head the party’s electoral lists in November, has since gone further,

speaking of the need for electoral reform and higher taxes. The right first saw the movement as helping them, assuming that it was based on potential voters of the left who would now abstain. However, this benevolence changed when the dimension of the movement and its clear critique of the existing political and economic system became clear. The PP was soon calling for the movement to be repressed.

The first challenge to the movement came when the central electoral board ruled that the camps would have to disband before Saturday, 21 May, as they were seen as interfering with the electoral process. By midnight on 20 May, tens of thousands had congregated in the squares where the camps had been set up. The authorities were incapable of implementing their ban. This victory further strengthened the movement; according to opinion polls, it was now supported by up to 80 percent of the population.³ The right's victory on 22 May failed to weaken the movement or demoralise those sections of the left enthused by the 15-M. The movement had also become international, with pickets of Spanish embassies and other protests organised mainly by Spanish youth living abroad. Most significantly, similar camps were now established in Greece.

While the Madrid camp attracted most media attention, it was in Barcelona that the movement most directly challenged the authorities. Early in the morning of 27 May, riot police began to evict the hundreds of mainly young people camped in the Plaça Catalunya, with the excuse that the square needed to be “cleaned” and “dangerous material” removed in advance of the Champions League Final the following day. The people in the square tried to resist peacefully but were attacked by the police. As the morning went on, hundreds of youth gathered around the square, eventually retaking it. The effect of this victory was electrifying, both in Barcelona and the rest of the state. That evening, at least 20,000 people gathered in and around the square in support of the camp and to participate, even if just passively, in a memorable and emotionally charged mass assembly.

³ This has since “dropped” to around 65 percent.

Meanwhile activities were increasingly being organised away from the camps. In particular, activists from the 15-M were mobilised to stop the increasing number of evictions due to unpaid mortgages. Where initiatives were taken to link with workers in struggle or organise protests in working-class neighbourhoods or outside unemployment exchanges, the response was excellent. In Barcelona, marches by hospital workers, teachers and fire fighters all ended at the central camp; 24-hour camps were set up outside five different hospitals in Barcelona on the eve of the now weekly protests against cuts. There were also lively protests outside town halls when the new local governments were inaugurated.

By early June, it was widely accepted that the camps could not sustain themselves indefinitely. More importantly, the majority of activists had been won to the argument that the 15-M needed to embed itself in the neighbourhoods, away from the city centres, so most camps were disbanded.

The next great test came on 15 June, when the Barcelona movement encircled the park where the Catalan parliament is located to prevent MPs from entering and thus vote in favour of a drastic 16-percent reduction of public spending – 4,000 protesters obstructed most entrances and forced the Catalan president and other ministers to arrive by helicopter. Other MPs had to run the gauntlet of taunting demonstrators; most opted to slip in through the back door of the nearby zoo. A number of minor incidents, some provoked by plainclothes policemen, were subsequently blown out of all proportion by both the Catalan government and the media, in an effort to criminalise the movement.

Outraged by the attempted blockade, all parties (left and right) signed a motion denouncing this “assault on democracy”. Everyone from the liberal-left press to the rabid right now announced the end of the movement whose supposedly peaceful methods had been exposed as a front for violent extremism. But on 19 June the movement showed, in the most dramatic fashion, that it was far

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from divided, let alone finished. At least one million demonstrated, including over 200,000 in Barcelona.⁴

Politics and class

Young people make up the overwhelming majority of the activists of the 15-M. The core activists tend to be university or ex-university students, often unemployed or underemployed, in their mid to late twenties. However, the movement is much broader than just this sector. Claims that it is “middle class”, apart from misunderstanding class as such, ignore the fact that most of the youth involved have little hope of finding anything but badly paid temporary jobs.

Talk of what some autonomists refer to as a “precariat” does not help locate the class basis of the movement either. The relationship with the core working class is fluid. Apart from the high level of unemployment, 67 percent of young people who work do so on temporary contracts (by far the highest percentage in Europe), but they do not live in a vacuum. The support the movement receives and those present at the demonstrations represent a broad spectrum of working people. In both Madrid and Barcelona, the largest columns that arrived in the centre of both cities on 19 June were from outlying working-class districts. This in turn is a reflection of the move of the 15-M to the neighbourhoods and the links made with workplaces.

What should be discounted is the idea – defended by some of those involved and by sectors of the media – that the movement is “apolitical” and therefore “neither left nor right”. The reality is that the movement is deeply political, if we understand “political” as referring to the struggle to change the balance of power in our everyday lives. A significant minority of participants, 38 percent, describe the movement as representing a “break” with the present system; this rises to 43 percent among those involved in the organ-

⁴ For a list of demonstrations, see [www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=25201] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

ising commissions. The rest preferred the term “reformist”. Even the most cursory glimpse at the demands raised by the 15-M shows its left wing credentials.⁵

Autonomist ideas dominate the 15-M. The rejection of “parties”, insistence on self-organisation and consensus-based democracy are commonplace, as are notions of the Internet having generated a “new social legitimacy”.⁶ At a very general level, there are three – in no way mutually exclusive – trends reflected in the movement. The majority trend, especially among the activists, is broadly anti-capitalist as reflected in the slogans at demonstrations and the demands emerging from the camps and assemblies. There is also a more hardline autonomist tendency that saw the camps as an end in themselves and, in the case of both Barcelona and Madrid, ignored the majority decision to wind them up and move into the neighbourhoods. This tendency is strong among sectors of the squatter movement, a minority of newer activists and the homeless who gravitated towards the larger camps as the movement developed. A third tendency can be identified as centring more on electoral reform; this is the case of the DRY and is most evident in Madrid.

The DRY calls for an “ethical revolution” and proposes the suppression of parliamentary privileges, a society based on equality, “free access to culture”, environmental sustainability and “the welfare and happiness of all”. More specific demands coming out of the Puerta del Sol camp include: cancellation of all bailouts to banks and financial institutions; higher taxes for the rich; taxing of speculative transactions; rejection of privatisation; defence of quality public health, education and transport services; revision of labour legislation favourable to the bosses; sharing of work and maintenance of salaries and pensions.⁷

⁵ When questioned about political self-identity, on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being “extreme left”, the average was 2.84 among 15-M supporters, compared with 4.56 for the population as a whole in 2008: Público, 17 July 2011.

⁶ An Requena et al., *Las Voces del 15-M*, Barcelona: Los libros del lince, 2011, pp. 41–42.

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The Barcelona camp was generally considered more radical than its Madrid counterpart and its first programme announced that it was “completely changing the world”. Its list of “minimum demands” included: nationalisation of the banks under “social control”; withdrawal of the Immigration Law; participatory budgets to be approved by citizens; obligatory and binding referendums for issues of “great magnitude” (including EU directives); and that the economy should be at “the service of the people”.⁸ All these general demands were accompanied by more detailed measures, as was the case with similar programmes emerging from other camps.

At the centre of the 15-M’s demands is the call for “real democracy”. Quite rightly, the movement continually draws attention to the fact that the PP “won” the local elections with the support of just 23 percent of the electorate (37 percent of the vote). The capitulation of the PSOE before the demands of the “markets” makes a mockery of their insistence that the only democracy possible is the liberal model. Real democracy does not just mean the end of corruption and privilege but the ability of ordinary people to control their representatives and intervene in the daily running of society. Despite what some activists appear to believe, no such democracy exists. “Real democracy” has only existed on a large scale, albeit briefly, in the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and at other moments of revolutionary upheaval.

The struggle goes on

The conditions that led to the emergence of the 15-M are likely to worsen. Even after the government’s onslaught on the public sector and workers’ living standards, the deficit of 2010 stood at 9.2

⁷ Carlos Taibo, *Nada Será Como Antes. Sobre el Movimiento 15-M*, Madrid: Catarata, 2011, p. 42.

⁸ Raimundo Viejo (ed.), *Les Raons dels Indignats*, Barcelona: Pòrtic, 2011, pp. 58–65.

percent, only two decimals below that of 2009. However, it has to be reduced to three percent by 2013. In this context, and with its support plummeting, the PSOE has brought the general election forward to 20 November. This could well lead to a PP government that will impose more austerity and be even more unlikely to make concessions to the 15-M or the trade unions.

All the indications are that the movement, in turn, is extremely buoyant. Its activities have multiplied during the summer. On 23 July, five marches from all over the country converged on Madrid. The following day thousands demonstrated under the slogan “It’s not a crisis – it’s the system”. So the central question is whether the 15-M can both maintain itself and win any of its demands. This poses the questions of how these demands can be won and which social agency could achieve this.

For the movement to move forward, it needs a strategy that puts pressure on the state and centres of economic power. This means a campaign of civil disobedience that disrupts the functioning of the system, targeting financial institutions and the main political parties. In this context the insistence on peaceful resistance when confronted with the police has won the 15-M wide support. But there is a danger that the movement has become too defensive over the question of “violence” (for instance after the attempted blockade of the Catalan parliament), so it is important to insist that those responsible for violence are the state and its security forces. More to the point: what is “violence” if not being jobless and homeless, the closing of hospitals or the degradation of the environment for the sake of profit?

Moving forward also means developing a programme or list of demands that are as uniform and precise as such a multiform movement can allow. Such programmes are in place in most assemblies but, as far as it is feasible, certain demands should be pushed to the fore. It is essential, for example, to insist on the cancellation of the debt, the return of the money given to the banks and not only an end to cuts but also the reversal of those already made.

For the movement’s demands to be won, civil disobedience alone is not sufficient. The move into the neighbourhoods and the growing orientation towards the workplaces could thus prove decisive because they open the real possibility of rooting the movement in the working class.⁹ The 19 June demonstrations also represented a clear turn towards such an orientation. By demonstrating specifically against the Euro Pact, “a project [...] designed to finish with what is left of the welfare state in Europe”, the movement moved decisively beyond questioning the legitimacy of the main political parties at the polls.¹⁰ The anti-capitalist left has been at the forefront of defending such an orientation as it has with the call for a general strike – now a central slogan of most protests.

On the face of it, the demand for a general strike without trade union support has no chance of going beyond, at best, propaganda or, at worst, an ultra-left stunt. However, given the dynamics of the movement and its mass base, such a call is not far-fetched. Moreover, it opens up the whole question of agency and forms of organisation. Many activists have accepted in principle that such a stoppage will be impossible without organised workers; a general strike “without unions” is clearly absurd. But the type of generalised stoppage that is called for would have to be very different from the top-down bureaucratic one-day general strikes that have been organised in the past. The need to involve masses of people, many of them young, in such a protest means that local assemblies and other forms of organisation outside the workplace would have to play a key role in supporting the strike and making sure it spreads. This way, the 15-M could be drawn into such action and at the same time link the movement very concretely with the workplaces.

The leaderships of the main trade unions have, so far, rejected calling another general strike. This is due as much to their innate

⁹ Joel Sans, *De la Indignación a la Revolución: Los Retos de un Nuevo Movimiento*, [www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16057] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

¹⁰ Jaime Pastor, *El ‘Estado de Rebelión’ Llegó para Quedarse*, *Viento Sur*, 115 (2011).

conservatism as to their fear of not controlling a mobilisation with the 15-M as protagonists. Fear of damaging the PSOE's chances in the forthcoming elections, despite all their supposed anger with this party's record, is another reason for their caution. However, such is the opposition to austerity and support for the 15-M that there is real pressure building up on the bureaucracy to act. Thus it is necessary to get rank and file members and local organisations of the CCOO and UGT to demand such a stoppage – something that is now happening.

The potential of the movement to inspire workers' organisation from below is very real. An assembly of teachers in Madrid in late July, for instance, attracted nearly a thousand people, despite the fact that the holidays had started. The militant atmosphere was clearly influenced by the 15-M, and it was proposed to start the next academic year with a strike against cuts.¹¹ While the call for a general strike provides a focus for the movement and would mean a massive step forward in terms of taking on the government, it cannot become a panacea. It is important that the 15-M continues to organise other forms of action. In this sense, the growing campaign against evictions is a very visible and effective way of combating the effects of the crisis, as are the camps outside hospitals threatened by cuts or closure.¹² The increasing use of the riot police to impose evictions can only radicalise the movement further, especially given that this involves violent attacks on local people supporting neighbours. Likewise actions stopping police raids on immigrants, like those in the Madrid neighbourhood of Lavapiés, need to be generalised.

Finally, the question of political leadership will also need to be posed, even in a movement supposedly without "leaders". It is essential to clarify what is meant by "political" and by "leadership". The idea that "politics" is alien to the masses and only serves the

¹¹ Sam Robson, *Defensa de la Educación Pública en Madrid: 'Este año el curso no empieza'*, [www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16260] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

¹² Óscar Simón, *Las Victorias del 15-M*, [www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16250] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

system has an important historical precedent in Spain, namely anarchism. The experience of the revolution of 1931–1937 is replete with lessons for anyone claiming that it is possible to be above “politics”: from the disastrous insurrectionary policy and electoral abstention defended by the anarchists prior to the civil war to the leaders of the “apolitical” anarcho-sindicalist trade union CNT collaborating with the rebuilding of the bourgeois state in 1936. It was not “leadership” but the “politics” of this leadership that led to defeat. In the case of the 15-M, “leadership” exists in the form of the democratic decisions of assemblies and the proposals of the organising commissions, specific collectives inside the movement or individuals.

The loss of credibility suffered by both parties and unions is such that there has emerged the idea that if you go to demonstrations with organisations’ banners, you are being forcibly “represented” by someone beyond your control. So while the union-led demonstration in Barcelona on 14 May brought an impressive 50,000 people out onto the streets, the 19 June demonstration called by the 15-M – with similar demands, but without direct involvement of the union or main left parties – had the support of five times that number and was far more militant. Participants in the demonstration included the base of the very left parties and unions being disowned with chants of “No one represents us!” It is a paradox that the anti-capitalist left has to come to terms with.

Organised revolutionaries thus have to find the way to intervene in a constructive way in a movement which appears hostile to them. This means being open about our ideas while not becoming fixated on the visual presence of a set of initials. It means combining hard work in favour of the movement with independent interventions (distribution and sale of material, the organising of public meetings and discussions ...), without encroaching on the movement’s structures and methods.

Leadership thus means trying to shape the movement, not manipulate it, through argument and proposals, to shape it in the sense of raising the central question of who is the agent of social

change, that the precarious are not somehow separate from the working class. The 15-M's demands for no more support for the banks, the defence of public services and making the rich pay for their crisis pose the need to take on the system in its entirety. The prolongation of the crisis and threat from the right mean that the situation remains explosive.

October 2011

Epilogue: the 15-M movement since the summer

Five months after having written this text, and following the elections of 20 November, won by the right with an absolute majority, the movement still exists, albeit at a lower level. Dozens of local groups continue to be active, although they now dispose of fewer and more dispersed forces: a situation compounded by a lack of large scale mobilisations that could pull activists together.

After the summer break, there was a resurgence of activity. Local assemblies began to meet again. Over the following weeks, activity focused on the international mobilisation planned for 15 October. The demonstrations on that day were once again impressive and showed the spread of the movement at an international level (most clearly with the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street Movement). Over a thousand protests were held in 82 countries, under the slogan "United for Global Change". In the Spanish state, there were about sixty demonstrations, with 300,000 protesters in Madrid and 200,000 in Barcelona. Five months after the emergence of the movement, the numbers mobilised were very similar to those on 19 June. What stood out this time was the presence of organised workers with their own contingents: for instance, in Madrid there was a massive presence of striking teachers, while in Barcelona, teachers, health workers and students were very visible. Moreover, the protest in the Catalan capital ended with the occupation of a hospital, a university faculty and an empty block of flats by demonstrators, an action involving families previously evicted from their homes.

However, after the success of 15 October, the movement has not been able to maintain the same level of activity and mobilisation. Prior to the general elections of 20 November, attempts to generate new protests and emulate what happened in the week prior to the local elections in May did not achieve the same level of involvement. There were a few occupations of public squares, but in general these were small and failed to make an impact. Since then, the movement's downturn has intensified. There are still many local assemblies, but where hundreds of people participated before, there are only dozens involved now. It has also proven difficult to coordinate joint actions between the remaining assemblies.

When trying to understand the movement's decline, it is necessary to take into account various elements that we already commented on above. In particular, the movement has still not managed to base itself around a more reduced and manageable list of demands. In addition, there is the lack of any defined strategy. Although it is clear that the varied and multifaceted nature of the movement was central to its initial success, as the months have gone by, it has become the principal source of its weakness.

By dismantling the camps and going into the neighbourhoods, the movement broadened its support, but it has not been able to maintain the level of coordination that stemmed naturally from the occupation of public spaces in every town and city. In part, this lack of coordination has been due to the localist view of a sector of the movement which has centred its work on social problems in their neighbourhood, thus losing a more global vision.

But the dispersion of the movement has not just been geographical; it has resulted from the preference for different types of interventions as well. The local nuclei that have maintained themselves have been involved in a variety of interventions. Evictions have continued to be stopped, in cooperation with the local tenants' movement. Participation by the movement in workers' protests in defence of public services has increased, especially in Catalonia, where many local 15-M assemblies have occupied health centres

and hospitals in protest over health cuts. Another part of the movement, which identified most with the need for electoral reform, is drawing up a new constitution. In Madrid, the 15-M has given rise to the “I won’t pay” movement against the increase in public transport fares, involving mass non-payment protests in the subway. In Barcelona, a popular referendum is being organised over whether cuts should be made and the debt paid, as well as over what to do with public money handed over to the banks.

Obviously, all these initiatives are very positive; the difficulty has consisted in being able to combine the local initiatives with a line of joint work. The existence of diverse, parallel orientations has led at times to frenetic activity.

Demoralisation caused by the victory of the PP in November has been compounded by the 15-M not having a visible presence during the elections. However, the idea that “all parties are the same”, common among activists, has been undermined by the right’s victory. The 15-M reacted to the right’s electoral victory by correctly pointing out that a government based on an absolute majority in parliament is not representative in and of itself. It has confronted this parliamentary majority with the fact that only 32 percent of citizens have voted for the PP.¹³ But this observation has proved insufficient for avoiding the disorientation of many of those in and around the 15-M in the weeks following 20 November.

Lastly, a very important element to take into account is the relationship between the 15-M and the organised working class. In a situation of enormous economic crisis and massive cuts, a social movement outside the workplaces has a limited capacity to exert pressure on governments. Thus in various cities the movement has attempted to converge with workers’ struggles. The mood generated by the 15-M has allowed some activists from a trade union

¹³ See for example the communiqué of the Assembly of Granada: 32% no es mayoría absoluta, [<http://www.kaosenlared.net/component/k2/item/1214-asamblea-de-granada-movimiento-15m-manifiesto-32-no-es-mayor%C3%ADa.html>] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

background to promote workers’ assemblies based on the type of direct democracy seen in the occupied squares.¹⁴ The most impressive example of this has been the case of the Madrid teachers. During September and October, the workers in the sector mounted mass assemblies that managed to push the unions into organising strike action. A total of ten separate days of strike action took place. The rhythm of the strikes was determined by the workers, who organised themselves on the basis of assemblies in the schools.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the strike movement ended because the unions kept postponing assemblies and blocked a proposal for an indefinite weekly three-day strike that had emerged from mass meetings in many schools.

Such examples of a link between the 15-M and workers’ struggles have been limited in scope. The goal of the major unions continues to be that of reaching agreements with the bosses and the government at any price, avoiding the calling of strikes despite the intensity of cutbacks at so many levels. The movement as a whole has neither had the mechanisms nor the orientation necessary to break the deadlock by encouraging mobilisation in the workplaces and generating enough pressure to push the union leaderships into calling protests. The slogan “no one represents us” has led to broad sections of the movement adopting a sectarian attitude towards the CCOO and the UGT. One of the most recent examples was the refusal of the DRY to participate in the 50,000-strong demonstration in Barcelona on 28 January, organised by the Catalan Social Forum. The refusal was justified in terms of the participation of the CCOO and the UGT in the demonstration. Such an attitude is an obstacle to the 15-M’s militancy influencing the workers’ movement on a broader basis.

¹⁴ This is the case of the company Rueda5000. See the following interview with Eduard Fuentes: “Compartimos la idea de asamblearismo y la de unidad de los y las trabajadoras con el 15M”, [<http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16533>] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

¹⁵ Sam Robson, Profes en pie de guerra: tres días de huelga a la semana hasta la victoria, [<http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16366>] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

In general, the anti-capitalist left has played a positive role in trying to overcome these difficulties. It has encouraged the drawing up of a concrete list of demands and tried to get the movement to converge around more defined areas of activity. But the weakness and the uneven implantation of this left have made it difficult to help sustain the movement after the first months of euphoria. Once the initial moment of energy and optimism had passed, the strategic problem of how to achieve real victories began to be posed, as happens with many social movements and mass campaigns.

At present, the movement finds itself far from the highpoint of last May/June. However, it would be a mistake to think that hardly anything remains. The 15-M has received a great deal of support, the basis of which remains intact. Over the last ten months, around 8.5 million people are estimated to have had some sort of contact with the movement's activities.¹⁶ A network of local groups remains active. While it involves less people than during the summer, such a network did not exist at all a year ago. The 15-M has forged a whole layer of new activists that are sustaining other movements. This is happening, for example, in the local neighbourhoods and, most notably, in the student movement. Also, as with the Madrid teachers or the health sector in Catalonia, the movement's energy and militancy have inspired some workers' mobilisations. Finally, the emergence of the 15-M has also led to political radicalisation. As the political scientist Carlos Taibo points out, many people in the movement "have moved on from demands that reject only certain elements of the system and call for limited reforms to more general anti-capitalist positions."¹⁷ It could be said that the move-

¹⁶ See the following interview with Carlos Taibo: "El 15-M ayuda a que algo esté empezando a cambiar en la cabeza de la gente", [www.kaosenlared.net/componen-t/k2/item/3353-carlos-taibo-el-15-m-ayuda-a-que-algo-esté-empezando-a-cambiar-en-la-cabeza-de-la-gente.html] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

¹⁷ Carlos Taibo, "Muchos de los jóvenes indignados han pasado del ciudadanía al anticapitalismo", [<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=141711>] (retrieved 21 February 2012).

ment has matured, albeit ambivalently. On the one hand, it is now clear that things will not be as easy to change as was initially believed. The experience of participating in mass assemblies with an enormous capacity for self-organisation seemed to suggest that what had previously seemed impossible was now no longer so. This is no longer the case: a certain activist “innocence” has been lost, making it more difficult to mobilise. On the other hand, the experience of the 15-M has shown that the occupation of the squares was insufficient. New questions about how to change the world and associated strategic questions have become more central.

Today, the socio-economic crisis is even deeper than on 15 May of last year. The Spanish state is in a recession that will cause economic growth to decline by 1.7 percent in 2012, according to the IMF. Unemployment is now at 23 percent, with more than five million people and 44 percent of those younger than 25 affected; it is expected to increase by another half million people this year. Real wages are dropping and public services are increasingly being eroded, while the cuts by the central and regional governments will intensify. In addition, there has been the imposition of a drastic reform of labour relations in early February, the most serious attack on workers’ rights since the demise of the Franco dictatorship. So the underlying social problems that led to the explosion of the 15-M are even more pronounced today. Given the widespread anger over these attacks and the mood created by the 15-M, the potential for new mobilisations in the coming months is very real – even if it is impossible to predict the forms they will adopt.

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