

From general strike to social strike: movement alliances and innovative actions in the November 2012 Spanish general strike¹

José Antonio Cerrillo Vidal

On November 14th 2012, six southern European countries (Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Malta and Cyprus) were summoned to the first coordinated and multinational general strike of the 21st century, with solidarity actions organized across the rest of the EU. But how successful was this first attempt? In this note I would like to draw attention to the Spanish wing of this historic event, since movements of other countries can learn some important lessons about the possibilities of the strike as a form of protest in our times.

I think most people will agree that globalization has weakened labour and strengthened capital. The opening of China, India, Southeast Asian and former Warsaw Pact countries to foreign investment has allowed multinational corporations to take advantage of differences in wages and labor protection legislation across the world. This has driven governments to an endless competition to reduce the costs of labor force as a way to prevent the loss of jobs across borders and attract investment: facilities to fire employees, tax cuts for companies, new forms of temporary hiring and all the well known prescriptions of the neoliberal agenda (Castells, 2000: 77-354; Harvey, 2007).

Thus, workers, and the unions that still aim to represent them, have been forced to adopt a defensive position, accepting in many cases the reduction of their rights and wages as a lesser evil. In these circumstances, going to strike has become increasingly difficult for more and more people: the reduced wages hindering the loss even of one pay day, precarious workers' fear of losing their jobs, the menaces of bosses, the possibility of the company taking the factory to a cheaper and less conflictual place... going on strike is not an easy choice for millions of workers.

Despite the large amount of research that has attempted to warn them of those problems in recent decades, most unions have failed to react to this change of scene. And without the much needed adaptation to the new reality of global capitalism, the loss of the unions' power has been progressive but unavoidable (Recio, 1997). In Spain, this process has been even worse due to the loss of most of the country's industrial base in the 1980s, the lack of a strong advanced services sector and the importance of low added value sectors (agriculture, construction, tourism, etc.) in the national economy. Not by chance, Spain

¹ I would like to thank Laurence Cox and Cristina Flesher Fominaya for their useful comments and suggestions, which have helped improve the text considerably.

presents the highest rates of temporary² employment and unemployment³, and one of the lowest rates of unionization (Visser, 2006) in the EU-15, even before the current crisis broke out.

Nevertheless Spain has a strong tradition of organizing general strikes. The first one was called as early as 1855 (Manzanera, 2005), with the revolutionary general strikes of 1917 and 1934 being the most important of our history (Romero Salvadó, 1996; Vega García, 2000). Since the end of General Franco's Dictatorship, the country has seen nine general strikes, plus three other half-day strikes and several others at regional level, especially in the Basque Country (García Calavia, 2008; Jodar, 2006). However, the September 2010 strike, called against the neoliberal turn from then ruling government of the Socialist Party, showed how much power have the unions lost since the previous one, in 2002.

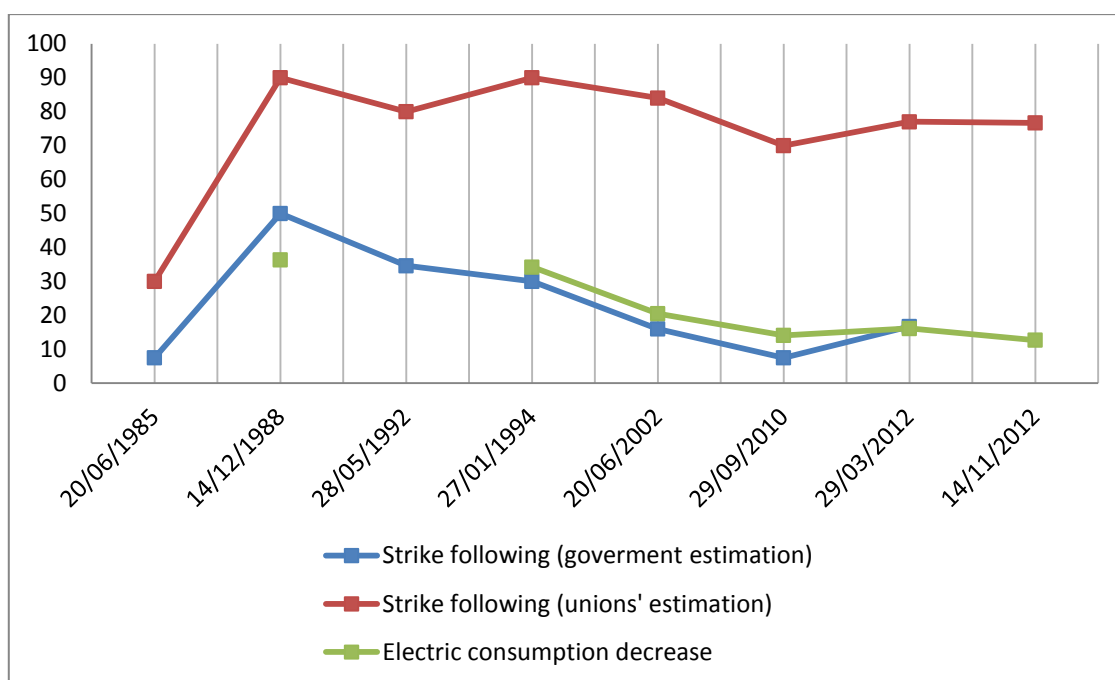


Figure 1: Participation in general strikes in Spain since 1985

² Eurostat, Employees with a contract of limited duration (annual average), <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00073&plugin=1> (last visited May 7, 2013).

³ Eurostat, Harmonised unemployment rate by sex, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=teilm020&tableSelection=1&plugin=1> (last visited May 7, 2013).

DATE	Strike participation (government estimation)	Strike participation (unions' estimation)	Electricity consumption decrease
20/06/1985	7.50	30	
14/12/1988	50	90	36.34
28/05/1992	34.60	80	
27/01/1994	30	90	34.20
20/06/2002	16	84	20.50
29/09/2010	7.50	70	14.10
29/03/2012	16.71	77	16.10
14/11/2012		76.70	12.70

Table 1: Participation in general strikes in Spain since 1985⁴
Blank spaces indicate that data are not available.

Source: <http://www.20minutos.es/graficos/las-huelgas-generales-de-la-democracia-12/0/>

But in 2012 things have changed notably. Despite rising unemployment and the deterioration of the living and working conditions caused by the huge economical crisis the country is suffering, the overall impression is that the two general strikes called that year (on March 29th and the mentioned November 14th) have achieved far more success. Are the unions reversing their declining trajectories? No. Are the loss of rights and the worsening of living conditions motivating more Spaniards to going on strike? Partly. Is it the fact that there is a conservative and not a social democrat party governing the country? To some extent. The true cause of the relatively greater success of the 2012 strikes is the involvement of the M-15 Movement.

This is not the place to delve into the main features and evolution of the Spanish M-15 Movement⁵. Suffice to say, the eruption of the "Indignants" the past 2011 has completely shocked the political life in Spain. The last two years have seen the spontaneous birth of a lot of new collectives in different spheres, inspired by the energy, grassroots spirit, democratic claims and the rejection of the establishment of the M-15 Movement. Such is the case of the "Marea" ("Tide") movements, collectives of both state employees and users in defense of public

⁴ : The difficulty of measuring the real impact of a general strike is well known. The three indicators presented in the Table and the Figure 1 (strike participation estimated both by unions and by government and the decrease in electricity consumption compared to the average of a normal day) are certainly questionable. However, I think they are useful to illustrate the progressive loss of support to general strikes in Spain in the last three decades and the relative improvement of the last two compared with the 2010 strike.

⁵ Actually, there isn't a clear agreement about what exactly the M-15 Movement is, or who can be included inside. In my view it is more a methodology of organization and mobilization than a movement itself. I've talked about this in another text (Cerrillo Vidal, 2011).

services threatened by government cuts, using a different color each one (white for the health system⁶, green for education⁷, yellow for public libraries⁸ and so on). Another example is the Platform of those Affected by Mortgages⁹, where many people who have their houses foreclosed by banks (or are close to it) are organizing themselves to find solutions to the eviction problem at both the individual (providing legal assistance, trying to block evictions) and the social level. Or the "iaioflautas"¹⁰, a collective of elderly people who are leading many actions with high media impact, mainly occupations of bank offices and public administrations. Many other groups are pushing for alternatives in economics¹¹, against cuts to the science budgets¹², conducting citizen audits of public debt¹³, and many others¹⁴. Even the institutional left has been forced to follow some of those initiatives, neither born nor controlled by any party or union, and indeed transcends them.

In the first stages of the Movement, there were significant resistances to any form of coordination with the unions, which were seen by many participants as part of the establishment that was being challenged¹⁵. But once key collectives of the M-15 decided to support the general strike summoned by the unions¹⁶, the contribution of the movement has not been limited to helping in the organization in traditional ways (picketing, spreading propaganda, etc.). Beyond that, the M-15 Movement started a debate about the possibilities of the strike in the 21st century and formulated many innovative proposals to ensure everybody could take part in the protest independently of their particular conditions. The collective blog Madrilonia, one of the key sites in the spreading of discourse and strategies for the M-15, posted a very interesting article regarding the March

⁶ <http://mareablancasalud.blogspot.com.es/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

⁷ <http://mareaverdemadrid.blogspot.com.es/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

⁸ <http://www.biblogtecarios.es/biblogtecarios/marea-amarilla> (last visited May 7, 2013).

⁹ <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹⁰ <http://www.iaioflautas.org/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹¹ <http://econonuestra.org/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹² <http://cienciaconfuturo.com/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹³ <http://www.auditoria15m.org/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹⁴ For other interesting examples check Gutiérrez (2013).

¹⁵ Actually, there was a long history of mistrust between unions and social movements in Spain, especially in the bigger cities of the country (Flesher Fominaya, 2007). As Aguilar Fernández & Fernández Guibaja (2010) show for instance, one of the main reasons of the failure of the movement for decent housing (a direct antecedent of the M-15, which conducted some important demonstrations in 2006-7, when the housing bubble was about to explode) was its inability to establish broad alliances between autonomous collectives and more established organizations, such as the bigger unions and left parties.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, the M-15 and the collectives that identify themselves with it preferred most of the time to take distances from the main unions (CCOO and UGT), proposing separate actions. For instance, they went to the alternative demonstrations summoned by smaller unions like CGT, CNT, USO or SAT rather than to the bigger ones summoned by the two big unions.

29th strike (Madrilonia.org, 2012), asking for an "inclusive strike" where the unemployed, students, precarious workers and every social subject could be a part of it. And this would be possible only if the movement was able to create new kinds of actions that engage those who can't go to strike in the classic sense of the expression.

As a movement that works as a distributed network, many people took up the challenge and almost immediately lots of ideas began to flow. The slogan "Take the Strike"¹⁷ was popularized quickly, and has been used to name a collective web¹⁸ that distributes useful information to anyone interested in participating in the protest. Proposed by consumer associations¹⁹, the idea of a consumption strike gained a lot of support, since it allows the participation of everyone: perhaps you can't miss your work, but you can always stop yourself from buying. From the feminist sections of the Movement, a care strike was proposed as well²⁰, as a form of making visible the unpaid domestic and care work that is still mainly done by women, especially in a country like Spain with a poorly developed welfare state (Duran, 1997: 94-113, 2000, 2002; Navarro, 2009). A few days before the November 14th strike, the "Precarious Office" (another very active collective) came up with the idea of giving orange ties to everyone who support the strike but are not able to follow it, so they can express their backing to the protest²¹. Joining the international initiative Theatre Uncut (a project born in London in 2010 to denounce public spending cuts through theater²²), several theater groups across the country held critical readings, parades and free performances in the streets (Henríquez, 2012). Road blocks, cyber attacks to official webpages, boycotts to the companies that pressure their employees not to go on strike, and so on: dozens of suggestive ideas. And all in a single year, in a single country.

Are we witnessing a change of paradigm? I think so. The struggle centered in the workplace, and especially those made by the unions, have remained anchored for too long in the Fordist imaginary and methods, particularly in Western Europe, where the labor movement was more important and had more strength in the past²³. But the labor movement no longer commands the struggle for

¹⁷ This was a reference to "Take the Square", the main slogan of the M-15 Movement since its birth in 2011.

¹⁸ <http://tomalahuelga.net/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

¹⁹ <http://www.facua.org/es/noticia.php?Id=7174> (last visited May 7, 2013).

²⁰ <http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2012/11/09/el-14n-huelga-general-huelga-de-cuidados/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

²¹ <http://www.oficinaprecaria.net/2012/11/14-n-huelga-general-huelga-precaria.html> (last visited May 7, 2013).

²² <http://www.theatreuncut.com/> (last visited May 7, 2013).

²³ Anyway, there have been some attempts to test new forms of labor protests adapted to the precarious work era. Among these we can quote the unemployment movement that had some strength mainly in France, and to a lesser degree in Italy and Germany (Giugni, 2008; Thé, 2000); the movement against temporary work agencies in Spain (Cerrillo Vidal, 2009), and so

justice. The new social movements in the 70s and 80s, the social forums and the counter-globalization movement in the 90s and the first decade of the 21st. century, and now the Indignants/Occupy movements have been displacing it from the center of the battle for democracy. Now wide coalitions of movements united under identities that are more inclusive, but respectful of diversity ("the citizenship", "the 99%"), have taken over. The labor movement is necessary, but not sufficient²⁴.

Thus, as our repertoires²⁵ have been changing in the last decades, it was only a question of time until the work oriented struggles end up doing so as well, going beyond the scope of work to expand the protest in a multidimensional combination of actions. So, it seems that in the near future the idea of a "social strike" will prevail over the old "general strike".

After all, the main goal of the general strike was always to show the unity and strength of the working class and to visualize the social conflict by the interruption of normality. And that was what happened in November 14th in Spain, not only in the massive demonstrations or the few riots that erupted that day. There has been a lot of debate around the real following of the strike using traditional tools like electricity consumption²⁶. It doesn't matter at all. The real success of the strike was in seeing all those innovative actions progressively implemented and, of course, the transnational character of the protest. Don't miss the real point: the road to the future has already been opened.

on. But these efforts were scattered, poorly coordinated or synthesized and in many cases had little social impact. For most people, the work-centered protest remain linked to the classical methods of the labor movement, and thus, progressively unavailable in the new conditions of the deregulated labor market. See also Flesher Fominaya (2007, 2010) and Katsiaficas (1997).

²⁴ As Angel Calle (2007: 11) has pointed out, each movement has left a "democratic footprint" on the general struggle for justice. The "material critique" of the labor movement introduced the social rights and the need of redistributive measures. The "expressive critique" of the new social movements appeals to our everyday practices, languages and identities. The counter-globalization/social forums movement brought the claim for a radical democracy culture and the need for a repertoire that takes care both at the local and the global scales. I think the present Indignants/Occupy movements seems to have incorporated this entire heritage in a more coherent and unified frame, but it's very soon to assert that have been successful in doing so. Time will tell.

²⁵ In the classic sense proposed by Charles Tilly (2006): a complete set of actions and tools of organization and protest.

²⁶ See for instance <http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/huelga-general/20121114/54354475464/huelga-general-caida-consumo-electricidad.html> (last visited May 13, 2013).

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About the author

José Antonio Cerrillo Vidal is a sociologist, Research Technician in the Institute for Advanced Social Research (IESA/CSIC) and Assistant Professor in the University of Córdoba. He is a member of the Council for European Studies' European Social Movements Research Network and an ATTAC Spain activist. He can be contacted at: jacerrillo AT iesa.csic.es