

## **Mutating mobilisations during the pandemic crisis in Spain**

**Miguel A. Martínez (April 27<sup>th</sup>)**

For a social movement and urban scholar, these are not the best days for conducting fieldwork on the streets. Off-line demonstrations, protests with gathering bodies and banners, deliberative assemblies and the like have been on hold for a long period in countries such as Spain. The coronavirus pandemic and the stringent measures taken by the government have set an unprecedented situation in terms of social life and politics, especially for the generations who did not live under the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1978), where surveillance and repression determined daily routines and anti-regime mobilisations. The current ruling coalition between the social democratic party, PSOE, and the more leftist Unidas Podemos, had opened up a promising term for, at least, some progressive policies since they took office in January 2020. However, the sudden economic crisis that the pandemic is unfolding has abruptly undermined even the least optimistic prospects.

As a regular online observer of bottom-up organisations, campaigns, and collective actions, as well as a follower of the debates that stir and flood the political sphere in Spain, I was surprised by some of the innovative ways of continuing to protest during these difficult times of home confinement, starting March 15, 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency. Obviously, online protests are not new at all but, in this short period of time, activists explored appealing forms of articulating discourse and campaigns. Grassroots mobilisations for social justice have included practices and challenges to the authorities previously unforeseen. In particular, the following selection of experiences resembles the context of the 2008 global financial crisis, although some dimensions have changed too. Hence, this preliminary analysis aims at understanding what seems like the first stage of an emerging cycle of mutating mobilisations.

### **Solidarity and mutual aid**

From the first days of the lockdown, most grassroots politics focused on discussing how the most vulnerable people, those without a home, could be sheltered, how those with casual jobs would face their contracts being terminated immediately, and how those in overcrowded prisons and migrant detention centres would cope with the new risks and rules. This was the beginning of a powerful campaign of solidarity that was increasingly widening its range in order to include concerns for the elderly, disabled, and people otherwise at risk; concerns over domestic gender violence, and the situation of workers on various fronts, as well as children. An enhanced meaning of the term solidarity has thus entered the mainstream public discourse: “mutual aid”. In addition, “support and care networks” organised by many grassroots

organisations and neighbours who were not involved in politics before, added practices of reconstructing urban communities in a very different way from charities and NGOs, although many of these have also been involved (sometimes also in alliance with local governments, as showcased by the platform “*Frena la Curva*” [Halt the Curve]). Furthermore, long-term campaigns of solidarity towards migrants and refugees continue to focus on the extreme vulnerability, racism, and criminalisation that these groups experience, aggravated by their irregular administrative situation.

Examples of the above are:

- Networks for care and mutual aid in order to help with daily errands and shopping, to call an ambulance, company for hospital visits, doing homework with children, providing basic supplies, taking care of pets, etc. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Food banks, especially for those without formal jobs. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Psychological assistance over the phone or via radio programmes. [\[link\]](#)
- Hand-clapping every day at 8pm from windows and balconies to express support and gratitude towards key workers, especially those in the public health system, subject to increased risks and pressures during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Racialised street vendors and women (such as the *Sindicatos de Manteros* and the *Xarxa de Dones Cosidores*) produced masks and other textile equipment to be donated to health workers. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Hackers and makers from autonomous and squatted social centres produced medical equipment. [\[link\]](#)
- A campaign asking for an extraordinary regularisation of all undocumented migrants and asylum seekers (estimated to be around 600,000 people) was widely supported with more than 1,000 Civil Society Organisations co-signing the campaign. [\[link\]](#)
- Demands to shut down all the migrant detention centres (CIEs), successful in many cases with the release of most inmates. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)

## **A “white” tide 2.0**

Very early on too, this solidarity was translated into a renewed focus on the public health system. Due to the privatisations and the severe cuts to this system in many regions of Spain (a policy that was mainly but not only led by Madrid and Catalonia), the pandemic revealed the shortcomings of the available resources and triggered a widespread cry to recover this essential pillar of the welfare state, if there is still time. Even right-wing politicians, who accelerated and benefitted from the privatisations of hospitals, changed their public discourse to pretend they were the first supporters of the public health system.

Like a reminder of the so-called “white tide” that took to the streets around the uprisings of 2011 (the 15M movement), calling for a defence of public health services and infrastructures, the pandemic has once more united large sectors of the population under the same banner. This time, its main manifestation is the regular applause heard every night at 8pm from the balconies of most cities across the country. This repertoire of protests is new, and the scope of the supporters is even broader than during “the white tide” one decade ago, but the anti-neoliberal content of the mobilisation is not that different. The massive staging or ritual performance of hand-clapping addresses all the workers of the health system trying to save lives and handle the serious medical consequences of the pandemic.

### **Rent strikes**

A third strand of mobilisations, symbolising an important shift from previous militant trajectories, covers all the ongoing rent strikes. An estimated 16,000 tenants have joined the strike that began on April 1 [\[link\]](#), although it is expected to widen on May 1 in line with similar international calls. To date, around 80 “strike committees” have been established in different neighbourhoods and municipalities across Spain. Rent strikes by tenants are not historically new, but the last one that took place in Spain was in 1931. The present ones are a consequence of the previously strong housing movement led by the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) as a response to the 2008 global financial crisis and the wave of housing dispossessions that led to the eviction of more than half a million households. Tenants unions were also set up some years later in a number of major cities, especially following the recovery of the speculative housing bubble around 2015, when many international investment funds and short-term platforms such as Airbnb led to unbearable rises in rents and massive displacements from gentrified urban areas. Tenants unions and other housing organisations had been pressing for the central government to change the rental laws and implement rent controls measures.

However, the coronavirus crisis deepened and worsened an already strenuous housing situation. During the pandemic, the government has ruled that home evictions are forbidden and the payment of rents and mortgage can be postponed, but not cancelled. Moreover, energy and water supplies cannot be cut if the bills are not paid during the same period (six months after the state of emergency). Unauthorised occupations (squats) are not covered by the decree though. These measures are considered insufficient by activists and not help alleviate the hardship of those who have become unemployed and impoverished over the last weeks. If they pay rents later or apply for loans now, they may even increase their levels of debt and their financial default in the aftermath of the pandemic.

## Who will pay for this crisis?

Many predictions estimate that unemployment will escalate to 30%. A similar proportion is expected in terms of the average decrease of household income. This adds to the already 12 million people living under the poverty threshold, including the International Labour Organization's accounts of 15% "poor workers", as well as the 3.2 million unemployed people [\[link\]](#). Another recession is going to devastate the living conditions of the working class even more. This economic shock indicates that labour mobilisations will rise at higher rates than the ones observed over the last six weeks, once the appeasing policies are no longer viable (in the absence of any unconditional rescue by European powerholders, which is unlikely to occur). Although the following list hints towards the nascent labour protests:

- Workers' strike in the Nissan factory because the company is using the crisis as an opportunity to fire workers. [\[link\]](#)
- Workers' strike in the Airbus factory due to the controversial decision made by the government regarding the license for non-essential productive activities to reopen operations. [\[link\]](#)
- A similar motivation behind another strike at the Aernnova factory. [\[link\]](#)
- Workers forced the Mercedes company to halt production due to the lack of safety measures during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#)
- Threat of workers' strike in Glovo, Deliveroo, and UberEats due to the worsening conditions and payments during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Also, as a reaction to highly precarious labour conditions, waged and self-employed workers in the culture and arts sector called to various strikes because of the lack of support from the government, and the cancellation of events *sine die*. [\[link\]](#)

The reaction of the government has consisted in subsidies to the temporary regulations of unemployment (ERTEs) that have the immediate effect of a 30% income loss for workers affected in the short-term, but there is no certainty around how long these subsidies will last. Domestic and care workers, especially those with no formal contract (around 200,000 people, mostly racialised and migrant women), will experience higher losses, ending up with wages of no more than 500 Euros per month.

In this context, campaigns for a universal and unconditional basic income have resurged [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#). They have been alive for many decades, but hardly reached the ears of the authorities. Once a key promise of political party Podemos, at its birth in 2014, universal basic income programmes became later replaced by less ambitious plans. However, the pandemic crisis has brought it back to the table, despite the initial reluctance of the PSOE. The negotiations between both parties concluded with an agreement of a conditional "minimum income" that will alleviate only the poorest households with no less than a 500 Euros subsidy, although yet to be rolled out.

In fact, a universal basic income was one of the starring demands of the *Plan de Choque Social* [Social Emergency Plan] [[link](#)] [[link](#)], a comprehensive list of demands called for by more than 200 civic organisations (many trade unions included) in order to press the government. Among them, activists demanded a state takeover of private hospitals without compensation, special resources to protect workers who are “sustaining life” (in elderly homes, social services, transport, cleaning, food supply chain, pharmacies, and so on), and the promotion of medical supply production. They also suggested higher taxes to capital and the funds of bailed-out banks during the 2008 crisis should be used to pay for the new expenses [[link](#)]. The alternative is to fall into the same nightmare of austerity and financialisation that the troika (EC, ECB, and IMF) imposed ten years ago.

### **No time to lose**

To conclude, a few preliminary lessons may be learned.

First of all, the above-mentioned mutating mobilisations show the often long-term effects of social movements. A range of movements – 15M, housing, feminist, antiracist, and migrant movements, to name a few – created the social connections, the practical knowledge, and the discursive frames that made many of the present mobilisations possible. Many of the previous activist networks, despite their weakness and fragmentation since 2014, are now linked to new ones. There is an ongoing and renewed wave of activist recruitment. Different grassroots platforms are converging with one another, and sometimes also with more institutional organisations and public authorities. On the other hand, the current urgency and political momentum might be temporarily relegating other areas of concern, such as the environmental movement. The success of some grassroots organisations and protests may be seen as poor at the short-run. Arrested migrants and impoverished tenants, however, would think otherwise. Anyhow, the persistence of so many initiatives from below, striving for social justice, continues to show their ability to mobilise large parts of society and, albeit perhaps too slowly, erode the pillars of the main hegemonic powers.

Secondly, another round of anti-neoliberal movements and campaigns are a sign that it is not just about asking for “more state”. This would be an overly simplistic conclusion, in my view. On the contrary, I read these expressions as a direct opposition to the key operations of the neoliberal alliance between global corporations and political elites. This is the case with the privatisation of health systems, with devastating and tremendous consequences to life and societies, as this pandemic is showing. On the one hand, the for-profit health industry had neither the interest nor the means to assist the high number of people affected by the pandemic. This realisation paved the ground for more positive views of financially-strong, state-owned health systems of a universal and non-profit nature. Hence, this second “wide tide” is an emergent movement that questions, above all, the commodification of health and the segregated benefits it offers

those who can afford it. On the other hand, the emerging defence of the public health system is claiming state accountability for previous privatisations, cuts offs, plans, and mismanagement. In my view, it goes beyond the replacement of the market by the state, although it stems from a general cry to defend and improve essential state services. Capitalism and public health have proven to be quite conflicting during the past weeks.

A third observation is that radical actions like rent strikes are possible in exceptional situations, such as the prohibition of off-line demonstrations, pickets, boycotts, and other forms of contentious and embodied actions. Compared to workers' strikes, the right to rent strike is not legally acknowledged in Spain. If tenants do not pay their rents, they may be swiftly evicted, and it is difficult to find affordable housing in a market that has been so overheated due to the intervention of global investors such as Blackstone and other vulture firms such as Airbnb. The timid moves of the government, however, opened up the opportunity for the housing organisations to take the risk of calling for a strike. In particular, the fact that home evictions are officially forbidden during six months after the state of emergency leaves enough time for the strike committees to organise and negotiate favourable agreements. All of this is done online, which is significantly novel compared to other virtual campaigns not so performative in terms of producing true radical practice.

Furthermore, more mobilisations are expected because a deeper economic recession is in fact taking place, with higher unemployment rates to come. New alliances between labour and social (and urban/housing) syndicalism are being forged, as the *Plan de Choque Social* [Social Emergency Plan] suggests. The notion of solidarity, usually an exclusive label for established NGOs, has been broadened and replaced by the vibrant, self-organised and fully bottom-up “networks of care and mutual aid”.

Finally, right-wing agitators are investing more and more in online mobilising. This has not been in the scope of this account, although there are many indicators that the extreme right is also on the rise. Their fake news campaigns, their rampant stigmatisation and dehumanisation of vulnerable people and leftist organisations, and their vicious attacks on any progressive measure taken by the government, are above all, very robust financially speaking. Less clear is how their legitimacy can last and how they can effectively counter their opponents without winning elections. Once they achieve this, however, as we recently saw in Poland and Hungary, for example, their dismissal of parliamentary control is the first step towards implementing their authoritarian and exclusionary political agenda. In this regard, it is worth noting that the social support that the far-right was not able to garner during the 2008 crisis in Spain has shifted towards a different scenario during the time of the pandemic, because one of such parties (Vox) won 15% of the parliamentary seats in the last general elections and is actively poisoning the political debates in many social and mass media networks.

### **About the author**

Miguel A. Martínez is professor of housing and urban sociology at the University of Uppsala (Sweden). He is interested in social movements, housing, migration, and activist research. He is the author of *Squatters in the Capitalist City. Housing, Justice, and Urban Politics* (New York: Routledge). Most of his works are available at [www.miguelangelmartinez.net](http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net)