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Spanish State

After the general strike

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The first general strike against the adjustment measures of the Partido Popular government, 100 days after its constitution and the day before the presentation of the 2012 state budget containing spending cuts without precedent in the European Unión, was a success.

In the first place because it illuminates and makes possible a change of course in the social movement. The strike of more than 10 million workers and the demonstrations in more than 100 cities involving more than a million and a half people indicate a reversal of the downward trend of the workers' movement, which has meant that in recent years the working class had no adequate means of resistance to the neoliberal attacks initiated with Zapatero and deepened by Rajoy.

Secondly because the participants experienced the day of struggle as a success. This perception is a political given of the first order. And it exists independently of the attacks on the strike and the lies on its success from the government and mass media of the right. This subjective factor, the feeling of strength, is of great importance for the future of the movement. Tens of thousands of social and union activists have experienced March 29 as a day on which there was unity on the picket line and on the street with a shared spirit of unity in struggle.

The third indicator of success has the active participation of thousands of students in the protests. Young people who have come to see themselves as "veteran" activists of the 15 M, the generation of those in precarious work or unemployed and aged between 25 and 35 years, with different forms of action and relation to the labour movement and, in particular, with the majority unions, have been an element of revitalization of the pickets.

In fourth and last place because the government and the employers' organization CEOE have recognized – despite their denial of the evidence and their negations of reality - the unexpected success of the call to struggle. The words of the employers' leader, Rosell, are eloquent: "it is necessary to turn the page, it is necessary to forget the general strike". While the head of news at Telemadrid – which for 24 hours could not broadcast and displayed a test card with a fixed photo of the transmitter building - began March 30 with the announcement that: "The strike has been a failure, normality has reigned in the companies". This time the battle to disparage the strike after the event was lost - there were too many direct witnesses of what happened.

Change of march

The labour reform which emerged strongly from the ballot boxes of the last legislative elections that gave the absolute majority to the PP was weakened in the recent Asturian and Andalusian autonomous elections and delegitimized on March 29 to the eyes of the social majority in the workplaces and the streets of the whole country.

The threats of the hundreds of employers who blackmailed their employees with the threat of the dismissal if they joined the strike didn't matter. More than 70% of employees stopped work. Despite fear and precarity, a great majority showed their support for the strike. And, for the first time in many years, they were joined by the important contingent of five million unemployed who cannot strike because they have no job and who made common cause in the streets with those who still have one.

The tricks of the employers and administration in relation to minimum services, in many cases where lists of those obliged to work had been drawn up targeting well-known union activists, failed. The strike paralyzed transport as well

as education and health to a great extent, while the massive police deployment failed to intimidate marchers.

We have lived through an episode of class struggle in its purest form. Each social “actor” has situated themselves in the social confrontation as if in a script. The proponents of financial, economic and labour deregulation, firm defenders of less public intervention and more corporate self-regulation, have suddenly become staunch defenders of the need to regulate strikes and freedom of trade union information, as well as the firm intervention of the forces of public order. Such are the liberals of today. And such are the diktats of the markets.

This was not a general strike like that of December 14, 2008. The three million small businesses and self employed workers did not support it. It was more a strike of industry than of services. It was stronger on the Cantabrian coast than elsewhere. All this is true, but unlike the 2010 strike against the Zapatero government, this had the support of the broad majority of working people, its aspirations had reason and legitimacy in the eyes of the social majority. And it involved all economic sectors and all territories from north to south.

It was positive that the date chosen by the majority trade union federations who called the strike across the country coincided with the unilateral appeal of the CIGA unions in Galicia, as well as LAB and ELA in Euskadi, for strike action on March 29, the day before the new parliamentary commitment to spending cuts was made in the budget. That allowed for greater support among the nationalities for the strike.

The immediate future

Now new questions and challenges are opened up for the social movement. The first question to address is what to demand from the government. There are two possibilities – complete and unconditional withdrawal of the draft legislation or persistence in the sterile and equivocal line of “reforming the reform” by including some aspects of the AENC (Acuerdo por el Empleo y la Negociación Colectiva – Agreement for Jobs and Collective Bargaining) which until recently had been forgotten by those who signed it and which is completely unknown to the hundreds of thousands of activists who won the battle of the plazas on March 29.

The second question is how to continue the struggle. The government of Rajoy- Merckel- Sarkozy is not going to yield. We have to outsmart it. What happened on March 29 is a first step but the mobilisation should be continued until it is converted into an unbearable pressure for the PP and the CEOE. That implies a full agenda of issues to resolve: forms of sectoral and regional struggle, construction of new forms of participatory organization for workers in the big unions and in the companies themselves, alliances between the labour movement and the social organizations, change of political orientation and economic alternatives on the part of the union leaderships, building of bridges between the culture of 15-M (and in general the alternative world) and the culture of the bulk of the labour movement, identification and recognition of the different sectors which make up the trade union movement itself. We believe that the stakes are too high to continue to ignore all that it is necessary to do.