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Iberian Peninsula

# Massive mobilisations against austerity

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**In the Spanish state, tens of thousands of people attempted to “encircle” the seat of parliament in Madrid, on September 25, 2012. Amid cries of “Democracy kidnapped!”, “Government resign!” the demonstrators first organised massive popular assemblies, before heading for Neptune square, facing Parliament.**

The government of Mariano Rajoy (Popular Party, PP) decided on confrontation. The leaders of the PP compared the initiators of the demonstration – Coordinadora 25S and Plataforma “En Pie!” – to the fascists responsible for the failed coup of February 23, 1981. More than 1,300 special anti-riot police officers were mobilised. They charged, firing rubber bullets, leading to confrontations which continued through the night, leaving more than 60 wounded with at least 35 arrests.

However, next day on September 26, thousands again gathered before the Parliament. And the government, conscious of its growing social discredit, began to see that neither its campaign nor the police deployment had succeeded in intimidating the tens of thousands of people who denounced the sequestration of the presumed “seat of popular sovereignty” by the “dictatorship of the markets”.

In Portugal, on Saturday September 15, 2012, a million people demonstrated against the austerity imposed by the troika and applied with zeal by the government led by Pedro Passos Coelho. A mobilisation on a scale not seen in the country since May 1, 1974, forcing the government to manoeuvre – by announcing the withdrawal of the recent tax measures (to prepare others, equally vicious, aimed at workers, pensioners and the unemployed).

## The challenge of the new movements

These two recent events show the mounting of popular rejection of the austerity measures. In Portugal and Spain, these great popular mobilisations have been initiated by new social movements and not by the big trade unions or political parties of the traditional left. This represents a significant change. Already on May 15, 2011, the indignants of the Spanish state had raised the slogan: “no party, no union represents us”. This was not a passing phenomenon. It is not about a “crisis of the party form” or the “trade union form”, or even the “organisational form”. On the contrary, the appeals of the initiators of the mobilisations mentioned stressed the indispensable need to organise. But this amounts to a new stage of the rupture with the historic organisations of the workers’ movement, locked into conservatism and increasingly clear in their heated defence of the status quo, and thus, in the eyes of a growing mass of those in revolt, useless if not hostile organisations.

It is also a challenge for anti-capitalist activists and organisations as for all those in the traditional workers’ movement who do not accept this situation. Their history and experience, in short their *savoir-faire* is rooted in the past. With the current crisis of capitalism, this past becomes ever more obsolete. Not that past experiences are not useful today. In particular, the power of the dominant class, increasingly losing its legitimacy, appears every day more reliant on brutal force. The apparatuses of domination – the states and their national and international institutions – indicate clearly that they cannot be “improved” or “reformed”. The very term “reform” has changed side – today it increasingly means challenging the gains made by the masses.

But what is also changing, with variable speeds according to the country, is the links between the masses and the “workers’ organisations”. The legitimacy of the latter declines, following the loss of legitimacy of the institutions in

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which they are installed, There is then a growing space for the new social movements. The challenge for committed activists is to be capable of helping to build them, without preconceptions or attempting to impose “solutions” derived from books, starting from their starting point: indignation. As Daniel Bensaïd put it, “indignation is a beginning. A way of rising up and starting a journey. You are indignant, you rise up and then you see what happens”.