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Spanish State:

14N, the day after

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All correspondents, whether habitually optimistic or pessimistic, have agreed that the demonstrations of November 14, 2012 (14N) were among the biggest seen until now in the Spanish state. Huge, enthusiastic, young (and very young), many improvised placards, imaginative slogans, a mixture of acronyms in the processions and, where there was no unitary march, a de facto convergence of alternative and official gatherings.

All this without great preparation by the organisers, so that the “climate” still seemed quite cold the evening before. Yet hundreds of thousands of people came onto the streets knowing that there were not – in the short and medium term – perspectives of change, that it would be necessary to continue to suffer the “cuts” and to resist come what may. All this can only be the expression of a deep, powerful and lasting wave. The spokespersons of the government and the employers can thus repeat that “the policy of reforms will continue” and the media can speak of the “failure” of the mobilisation. The day after the general strike, “El País” opened its pages to Emilio Botin [the CEO of Bank Santander] to explain that “there is no plan B”. It is true. However, the dominators begin to fear the social resistance which they face. This much we have won; it will be consolidated with difficulty, but it would be a crime to lose it.

If demonstrations count, what meaning does the general strike have? To begin with, they formed part of the general strike: without this, they would not have had the same success. But above all, the battle to paralyse economic activity and radically reorganise social life – the natural and specific objectives of a general strike – continues to be a space of fundamental political conflict between those at the top and those at the bottom. That is why it is necessary to make a balance sheet of what has worked well or not so well on the ground, the advances and the setbacks, and what needs to be taken into account for the future.

Obstacles to overcome

November 14 showed that there are some “black holes” which have not been resolved, the main one being the banking sector. At a time of growing financialisation of the economy, it is worrying that class based trade unionism is so weak in the banks, as shown again by 14 N. We are beginning to get used to the fact that strikes hardly affect this sector. Yet in the 1980s, this trade unionism was among the most combative. It was weakened politically and morally from the interior; the Workers' Commissions (CC.OO.) bear a heavy responsibility for this. We should today sound an alarm signal: we cannot resign ourselves to leaving the banks in the hands of corporatist trades unionism.

Commerce is another “black hole” but an advance seemed to take place with the participation in the strike by small traders. This was not the case with large scale retail, on the other hand, and there has been no information on actions in the department stores. In any case, we hope that the consumption strike – an initiative which corresponds to objectives very much present at the assemblies of 15M – had some influence and that it can contribute to the citizen based character of the strike and to its extension.

However, there seems to have been a setback in transport, a sector where we see the damaging consequences of “minimum services” when the latter are not self regulated but established by the regional governments, with the objective of weakening the strikes and not guaranteeing essential services – which are being destroyed on a daily basis by privatisation. The unions commit an error in appearing to agree to these “minimal services”, generally abusive, on which they have practically no margin of negotiation. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) has done well to reject them. Better to let the administration impose them directly without linking hands with it.

It's about who gives the orders

The political meaning of a general strike does not fundamentally reside in the character of its demands. In an explicit or implicit way, it brings out a conflict of power: for a time, and in a limited context, it is about who gives the orders. For this reason, the political result of a general strike is not very well measured in quantitative terms, although they have their importance. What is fundamental is knowing who is weakened and who is strengthened politically, the strike movement or its adversaries.

The established powers have well understood this and that is why the “regulatory” mechanisms for strikes are ever more coercive. For the old trade union s movement: “the best strike law was one that didn't exist”. A wise adage, confirmed by experience. But the consensus linked to the social state, strengthened by the practices of “social dialogue”, has ended up in creating a more oppressive regulation where the control of the government over the development of strikes has improved, and where the strike movement has renounced its right to self regulation. To this direct regulation is added other instruments of anti-strike coercion by the government and the employers, from police repression to government fines, to threats of dismissal and so on.

The aim is to politically demotivate the strike, to stop it succeeding in weakening the established powers. That is why, for a general strike to be a success, it must be based on its own legitimacy and must inevitably clash with legality. That presupposes taking on significant individual and collective risks and being in a position to protect those who take it. It was not by chance that, in the big mobilisations of October 2010 in France, all the alarm signals of the system targeted the strike in the refineries: a legitimate action, illegal because it radically rejected the idea of “minimum service”, left the petrol pumps dry and opened a new front in the struggle for control of transport. The majority trade union federations recoiled before this test of strength. And this ended up weakening the strike movement.

The legitimacy/legality conflict should be a central, practical question in the preparation of future general strikes. So it is necessary to organise from today an effective rejection front against any anti-strike legislation concocted by the government and the employers, a protection for the victims of legal repression already in force, but also against the coercion of employers at work, invisible, yet very effective: these threats begin well before the strike day and should thus receive an early response. But beyond these immediate tasks, we cannot avoid a major political challenge: no significant victory can be won by submitting the social struggle to legal provisions. That is the lesson of the struggle of the Mortgage Victims Platform (PAH).

The challenges of “the day after”

An area in which there has undoubtedly been a significant advance, preceded by others in the same direction, was in the social extension of the mobilisation, the consequence of movements like the “tides” which develop in the sectors targeted by the most serious attacks against public services, in an autonomous manner, by learning to resolve their specific difficulties and teaching us how to face our common problems (for example, with the incorporation of the A.P.A. [Association of Parents of Pupils] in the “green wave” mobilisations [against cuts in public education]).

This extension also expresses the political maturity of 15M [the movement of the indignant], which has definitively emerged from stagnation, particularly starting from the demonstrations of “encircling the parliament” at the end of September. We should also note a pleasant last minute surprise: the support of Euskal Herria Bildu [the Basque left nationalist movement] for the demonstrations called on November 14 by the ESK, CNT and CGT unions and other collectives in the big Basque cities. Comrades from this region will tell us if this sign and others could indicate a modification of the approach of the nationalist left in relation to mobilisations of national scope.

This has created a paradoxical situation where social indignation grows, despite the lack of political perspectives in favour of significant changes in relation to the dominant socio-economic orthodoxy. Such conditions could lead to the passivity of a majority of the population, but for now indignation is stronger than resignation. That will not last forever. The challenges of the “day after” are then still more urgent

What will the CC.OO. and UGT do? Continue to advocate the dead end of a referendum [on the budget cuts]? If we wish to fix a central theme against governmental policy, why not centre on the refusal to pay the debt? That would be a magnificent objective for a new Iberian action, or even for a European mobilisation.

With the general strike of 14N, a step has been made and it is necessary to prepare the following one. This is not a cheerful perspective, but it is unavoidable. We have already lived through five years of crisis. The situation will not change from one day to another. But there are indications that things are moving, of very diverse kinds: from Syriza in Greece to 14N in the Spanish state, via the courageous experiences of the “green tide” and now the “white tide” [against health cuts]. It is about learning from our experiences, recognising their limits and working to transcend them.

For example, the CCOO and UGT made a huge error in accepting the pensions reform of the Zapatero government. Now, Rajoy relies on the latter to prepare a new offensive against the right to a decent pension a basic right for those who work. The CCOO and UGT now have a magnificent opportunity to rectify the error.

The European strike and the construction of a political alternative

14N did not work so well at the European scale, even if this initiative sent a signal in the right direction, which should have led to some concern in the salons of the Troika. In reality, it remained an Iberian strike. The news coming from Portugal is quite good: broad popular sympathy; an impact for the strike similar to that in Spain, with a better impact on public transport. The demonstrations were smaller, but the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP) does not have the tradition of linking demonstrations and strikes, and if did so this time, it was in part under the pressure of the Left Bloc; on the other hand, only two days ago, there were big demonstrations against the visit of German chancellor Angela Merkel.

We can understand that 14N had no great echo in Greece, after the strikes of November 6 and 7. The biggest concern is the very slender impact of 14N in France and its restriction in Italy to vanguard actions. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) will certainly draw triumphalist balance sheets, but we are still very far from the European general strike. To organise it, much more than a date and a press release – the only things we can expect from the ETUC – are needed. It is an urgent task to create adequate tools to advance in the convergence of social struggles in the EU, using all the opportunities which arise, including ETUC initiatives.

As for the political left, we are also far from the “Syriza model” which with time, seems to cast off opportunist temptations to respond to the basic question - how to build unitary left alternatives which break from the bipartisan corset and create attempts at radical and credible change inside society? This need is not long term, it is an immediate political question. The necessary change in the relationship of social forces will take place without a change in the political relationship of forces inside the left. These are intertwined processes, but relatively autonomous, with specific tasks and responsibilities in each area.