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Spain

The Crisis in the CC.OO

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Understanding the recent crisis in the Spanish trade union confederation, the CC.OO (Comisiones Obreras - Workers' Commissions) - or to be more precise, the crisis in its majority leadership - is not an easy task; the underlying differences are not clear or explicit and it is difficult to predict the consequences and the changes that may take place in the CC.OO.

In order to explain the crisis that has led to the dismissal of the second-in-command in the union hierarchy, organization secretary Rodolfo Benito, it is necessary to go back to the 7th Congress, held in April 2000, and also not to forget the outcome of the 6th Congress. In this latter, a 'Critical Sector' emerged which demanded a turn to the left and a revival of democracy and pluralism inside the union. Although the Critical Sector obtained a third of the vote and the posts on the Confederal Executive, they were effectively expelled from the leadership of the union during the four years prior to the 7th Congress.

At the latter, the Critical Sector again argued for a reorientation of union activity to confront and mobilize against a rightwing government that is implementing a severe and regressive neoliberal policy, without any trade union or political opposition worthy of mention. The Critical Sector, in spite of intense repression, practically replicated its result at the previous congress with 30% of the votes.

But the main objectives of the Congress were: the carve up of the majority's monopoly of power among its various factions; a very regressive reform of the statutes, severely limiting constitutional rights; and deciding on the succession to the outgoing general secretary, Antonio Gutiérrez.

Three candidates emerged, with possible minor political differences, but all defending the same documents on trade union strategy and the same anti-democratic attitudes. By common accord and with the blessing of Gutiérrez it was understood that the new general secretary would be whoever enjoyed the greatest support among the majority. The strongest turned out to be Ignacio Toxo, secretary of the metalworkers' federation, and Benito, secretary of the Madrid federation. In third place and far behind was José Maria Fidalgo, a member of the Confederal Executive, whose support was limited to that provided by the central 'apparatus' and the 'presidential' designation that Gutiérrez had conferred on him. The latter, on seeing the results of the 'primaries', contravened the previous commitments he had made and demanded the resignation of the other two contenders.

Fidalgo was the candidate who best guaranteed the continuity of the policy of Gutiérrez. He was the most rightwing candidate, albeit in a close-run competition with Toxo, the weakest and, therefore, the most easily manipulated. Benito yielded first, in exchange for a privileged position in the union and an excellent position (organization secretary) to prepare for a later assault on the post of general secretary. Toxo resisted, but in the end surrendered in the hope of launching a subsequent challenge from his power base in the metalworkers' federation. And thus the ideology-free Fidalgo (his point of honour is that he has never been a member of any political party), without firm support, with his power based to a great extent on the balance of forces, but in any case very rightist in conception, managed to become general secretary.

In his first two years Fidalgo has fulfilled scrupulously the expectations he had raised, accepting government policy without resistance, even applauding it, and negotiating and signing pacts with the Popular Party with an enthusiasm worthy of a better cause.

The union seemed in line with this strategy, but this was more apparent than real. In the first place, there is the

anomaly represented by the situation of the Critical Sector, with almost a third of the union being excluded from the confederal leadership. Secondly, the 7th Congress had ended inconclusively. Toxo and Benito have not ceased to manoeuvre and prepare themselves for the assault on the general secretaryship at the next Congress. Still, nobody could have predicted the current crisis, its characteristics or the new alliances that have been forged. Suddenly, Fidalgo and Benito fell out, the first faulting the loyalty of the second. Toxo took his revenge, demanding the dismissal of Benito, which Fidalgo finally carried out, leading to the resignation of three Benito supporters from the Executive.

There have been no political explanations for what happened, apart from the stammerings of Benito. The crisis has not publicly had any component of ideological confrontation. Some glimpse the hand of Gutiérrez, accused of conniving with Benito out of spite because Fidalgo had displayed too much autonomy. The Critical Sector has maintained a correct position: opposition to the line of the union, rejection - which in no way implies support to Benito - of purges carried out over legitimate disagreements and demands to restore integration, plurality and democracy in the organization.

Independently of its origins or shadowy aspects, the crisis of the CC.OO majority will have important repercussions, internal and external, although the outcome is uncertain, because an unfinished process has opened and its causes are not too clear.

Internally, the old majority will end up either very divided (indeed it is already) or will simply break up; this depends ultimately on whether the followers of Benito choose the path of resignation or confrontation. If they decide to fight, they need to develop their own discourse and to demarcate themselves to some degree from Toxo's majority. We say Toxo's majority, because Fidalgo, although general secretary, has in the crisis lost his power which was sustained by the old balance of forces, and he has become a mere puppet of the metalworkers' secretary.

The new situation can be used to clarify positions and to open a debate in the union, on questions of concrete management as much as strategic areas. In short, it could help the Critical Sector emerge from isolation. But all these are possibilities, since the union has degenerated in its practices and ideological positions to such a dangerous degree that it is possible to ask if with the present framework, the present bureaucracy and the apparatus, it is possible to recover it.

At the external level, the most positive aspect of the crisis is Fidalgo's loss of authority and the weakening of the majority. Their willingness to agree to the PP's demands is so intense that the PP itself no longer sees the general secretary and the majority as representing the whole of the union, so that it will demand less of them and distrust more their ability to deliver the membership when signing regressive pacts or agreements.

It does not seem that the crisis can be resolved through an extraordinary Congress and it cannot be ruled out that the internal confrontations will get worse. A climate of increased political tension in the union would be positive after the miasma that the bureaucracy has imposed lately, but this can only happen for sure if the affiliates and the workers can pressurize leaders who are mired in routine administration, political resignation, manoeuvres and dirty games, obedience, docility and the cultivation of their own interests. Of course, the much more difficult task will be using this crisis to generate the change of policy and internal practices that this union federation needs in the adverse conditions imposed by global capitalism and the Europe of the Maastricht.