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Spanish State

The return of the social question

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One of the objectives of neoliberalism has been to avoid the “social question” - i.e. conflicts caused by capitalism, based on social injustice and inequality - not only in the political field, but also in terms of civic consciousness, including that of the majority of the working classes.

To contribute to this objective, particularly in the Spanish State, there has been the aptly named “social dialogue”. That is, the building of a consensus based on the systematic search for a mutual interest between employers and trade unions. This “social dialogue” has become a fundamental standard to manage relations between capital and labour. The result has been economically devastating: a reduction of the share of wages in GDP and record and sustained growth of corporate profits. With respect to the trade union and associative fabric, the disaster has been similar: a decline in membership of the majority of employees in unions and a parallel decline in militant practice. In political terms, this has led to a consolidation of a bipartisan PSOE-PP governance and the hegemony of the PSOE in terms of votes considered as those obtained by the left.

1. The general strike of September 29, 2010 seems to have succeeded in ensuring the return and the visibility of the “social question”. I say “seems”. Indeed, there is no doubt that as of September 30 we are still too close to the event to draw general conclusions. There is a clear risk, in this context, of confusing expectations with reality. What the general strike has achieved is still embryonic and fragile. The results of this strike have more to do with opportunities and expectations than with effective and consolidated conquests. However, there are concrete, reasoned, facts which allow us to establish with some degree of certainty that this necessary and vital revival of the “social question”, so vital in this period of systemic capitalist crisis, is taking place.

2. The general strike has been a political success through the opportunities it opens more than by what it has actually conquered. It would be criminal not to appreciate this fact. But it is also important to recognize the weaknesses, what remains to be done so that, resting on this first step, it is possible to move forward. And, this, so as to approach objectives which, although certainly distant, are absolutely necessary for radical change at both the economic and political levels.

For example:

- We need to review in detail the results of the strike of September 29 both in the economic branches and according to region, especially where the strike was unable to reach a sufficient level to be effective as such: banks, healthcare, education and, moreover, as usual, the commerce sector specifically in supermarkets.
- It will be necessary to debate the slogans used whose content was to say the least ambiguous: “rectify [the reform]”, “not in this way”, or claims regarding the need for the renewal of “social dialogue”.
- It will be necessary to be wary of the “monopoly” of the Workers’ Commissions (CC.OO) and the UGT over the strikes. There have been other unions who have worked in favour of the strike and with recognized results, as evidenced by the mobilisation initiated and directed in Madrid by the CGT [a minority but very active, class conscious union advocating self-management, and originating from a split in the libertarian CNT]; which was the broadest demonstration that this union has ever called. This is one more reason to feel that its participation in the mobilization of the UGT and the CC.OO would have had a greater impact than the call to a parallel demonstration. However, there were original, effective contributions that can be used as examples for the future: unitary platforms in the regions, bicycle demonstrations, actions in the world of culture (although, in this case, less broad than other types of mobilization).
- And, finally, we should consider something more serious: ELA and LAB [two trade union organizations in the Basque country - Euskadi] rejected the appeal and, moreover, impeded actions and strike pickets. This is not a question that can be dealt with in a few lines. It stems from much more general and older problems, and it is hard to

see how it would be possible to overcome such obstacles.

In summary, the term “political victory” has an intrinsic meaning: a demonstration of collective force, a feeling of having defeated those who predicted with determination that the strike would be a failure; the ability to change the “common sense” of those at the bottom who were, until now, marked by scepticism and resignation. Therefore, a beginning of the recovery of a trade union activist base among the majority unions in many places. And in addition, beyond the trade union sphere. In the future, it will not be possible to conduct economic and social policy in closed meetings with the “agents of the market” and in the corridors of Parliament. Now it is necessary to take account of the street, whose presence has destabilized the established government line of march.

3. A breach was opened, but only a breach. The optimistic discourse of those who convened the strike (“all the general strikes have experienced success”, “sooner or later, Zapatero will change” and so on) can be understood if we place it in the perspective of organising the preparation of a strike. But, today, we must face reality, admittedly with hope, but without illusions.

Because it is not true that “all general strikes” have ended in triumph. They have achieved partial results, of unequal importance, but no substantive changes in socio-economic policies. If you want, they have won the “rectifications” of which union leaders speak, but this in a perspective of very partial changes of very unequal magnitude (withdrawal of a law that goes out the door, but comes back through the window).

But this time, we have not only legislation but also an economic policy that would require a very significant margin of “rectifications”. We are faced with a policy of iron, a “structural adjustment” subject to standards, such as the dictates of the markets, like those cemented within the EU to which the Zapatero government has subordinated itself as a vassal.

The only rectification that makes sense is to change the foundations of the economy and of politics, to free ourselves from the “markets” and, therefore, confront their attacks. This still lacks an effective social fabric, a subject which, is constructed from below, inside the depths of society. In other words, the formation of an alliance where the social and political converge, over a prolonged period of resistance and experience of new forms of action and organization. Progress on this path involves strengthening a “left of the lefts”, which puts an end to the current political configuration of the institutional left, one of the worst legacies of the Transition [from Francoism].

4. Has a new political cycle opened? As of now, the possibility exists. And, therefore, we need to open it.

All of us who placed our confidence in this strike and did everything for it have won. Some more than others certainly. However, it would be highly advisable that those who emerge from this strike strengthened and with the attributes of political authority, primarily the CC.OO, look around them and remember that they were not alone, least of all on the picket lines. And also remember that on the picket lines coexistence between people from different currents was much easier than what might be implied by confrontation between organizations. In all cases, September 29 also represents a possibility, a novelty in the past twenty years, of developing a plural, radical and unitary trade union left linked to the social movements on a daily basis.

There is also a new space effectively won by the anti-capitalist left together with many other activists, organized and unorganized. Currently, it has moved into action with ambition and humility. The key to the future resides in knowing how to struggle for unity and action and doing so through a linkage with anti-capitalist objectives specific to the current daily struggles.

And, among other things, the decisive elements of the present phase reside in the ability to link all those who, during

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the mobilizations that crowned the strike, have become convinced that we need new strikes, that will take work to be well prepared, well led and that that will, certainly, be still stronger than that of September 29. 2010.

Miguel Romero, September 30, 2010.