

Spain: Beyond the general strike*

EDITORIAL TEAM OF THE CATALAN ID GROUP

Abstract

The paper explores the problematique of the general strike against the neoliberal cuts recently promoted by the Spanish government and focuses its reflections on the autonomous movement which emerged in Barcelona.

Introduction

The measures imposed by the Spanish government in recent months in the form of welfare cuts are the biggest threat to the rights of workers, pensioners and other popular sectors since Franco. These cuts are one more step in the process of marketisation in which we have been immersed for over 200 years and, also, a step for the full integration of the Spanish economy into the neoliberal globalisation imposed on EU members through the Maastricht, Lisbon Treaties, etc. Effectively stopping this process implies nothing less than replacing the market economy and representative “democracy,” the twin pillars of the current system that has led to the growing concentration of power in the hands of a privileged minority, for new institutions that ensure the equal distribution of economic, political and social power among all people. The general strike of 29 September, and particularly the social mobilisation conveyed through the Barcelona Assembly, may be a starting point for many people to go beyond the struggle for reformist demands and advance a social paradigm shift that enables the construction of a new form of social organisation.

The rise of the Barcelona assembly

After the citizens of some European states in recent months, and in particular Spanish citizens, have suffered one of the biggest welfare and labor cuts in history (undermining of social controls on labor markets and particularly the employers’ right of dismissal, the relentless erosion of collective bargaining, salary reduction, freezing of pensions, etc. —all in the context of the “four freedoms” introduced by the EU Treaties mentioned above), on 15 June the UGT and CCOO trade unions called for a general strike on 29 September. Seizing the opportunity of this call and taking into account the well known inefficiency and venality of these unions in defending workers’ interests, various social sectors were involved in establishing the Barcelona Assembly. This initiative to launch an autonomous and truly combative movement, organized outside the trade unions, that goes beyond a single day of striking and to become an outcry against the ruling elites and their socioeconomic cutbacks, was a very important step in bringing power back to the people from the various

bureaucracies controlling it.

The Barcelona Assembly has set the goal of building horizontally, bringing together all those affected by the crisis (students, unemployed, pensioners, workers, etc.), a response that effectively expresses the people's opposition to government cuts. In the first meeting, held on 29 June there was an agreement to *"seek common points which enable the implementation of resistance measures against the attacks on the working class, not bowing our heads and fight for the rights of workers organizing the response with district, town and workplace assemblies, etc."*. From this first meeting several assemblies have been organized at the district, workplace and university levels as well as some general assemblies to prepare for the strike and face the struggle beyond it. One such assembly celebrated in mid September, attended by more than five-hundred people, decided the schedule for the upcoming demonstrations, as well as the date of the next assembly. The Barcelona Assembly has adopted a democratic functioning that calls for the participation and solidarity of everyone from the local level, through coordinated delegates of the neighborhood and workplace assemblies.

The day of the strike and its aftermath

The occupation of a major bank's abandoned building at the very center of Barcelona some days before the general strike encouraged many people to participate in the movement against the neoliberal measures. At the top of the occupied bank, passers by in Barcelona could see a huge banner on which was written in large letters: "Banks suffocate us. Employers exploit us. Politicians lie to us. CCOO and UGT trade unions sell us. Come on!" Several assemblies, activities and debates took place in that building, which became a meeting place and a bulwark of the movement towards the general strike.

The day's development of the general strike was different according to the regions and working sectors involved. In Catalonia, where the participation was the highest in Spain, since the early morning, various pickets were organised in several cities and towns. A coordinated team of alternative radiostations, TV's, newspapers and websites were created to inform people about what was happening in the streets. The Assembly of Barcelona and the movement that emerged from the Bank's occupation organised a common picket at midday in the center of Barcelona in the context of which several direct actions took place. Some of these actions (particularly the burning of a police car) were the excuse for the illegal eviction of the Bank's occupiers, as well as for the criminalisation of the autonomous movement organised outside the mainstream trade unions' bureaucracy, as we shall see below. At the end of the day, the mainstream trade unions qualified the strike as a "success" talking about a participation of 70%, especially in industrial areas and factories. However, for the government, the strike had a very "uneven" response and a "moderate effect"!

The days following the general strike were marked by the media's effort to underplay, depoliticize and criminalize the social mobilisation. Focusing the public's attention to the destructive direct actions that took place in the center of Barcelona, and presenting them as irrelevant to the reasons of the strike or the political, economic and social situation in general, the local mass media tried to preclude the significant political debate that was spreading among the population. The mayor of Barcelona threatened to close some reputed alternative

news websites unreasonably accusing them of encouraging violent direct actions. The political and media lynching was so extreme that after a few weeks more than 100 Catalan university professors released a manifesto against the criminalisation of social movements.

The movement which emerged in Barcelona has lowered its intensity after the strike. The Barcelona Assembly continues to meet and participation in the district and workers assemblies is still alive, but the lack of an antisystemic view and its exclusively reformist character turns this movement into a purely defensive movement, or a kind of platform for the coordination of protest and support: actions or campaigns in favor of public transportation or public healthcare, in defense of the workers that suffered reprisals for their participation in the strike, in support of the people who are losing their homes, jobs, etc.

The government's response to the general strike has been, as usual, to totally ignore the will of the people. The mainstream trade unions keep criticising the labor reforms and calling for demonstrations, but they do not even want to hear about another general strike! Neoliberal measures continue to be imposed: recently, the Spanish president, after a meeting with 37 powerful employers, presented a set of new measures which include the effective privatisation of the employment offices, airports, air control and the elimination of the financial aid that 700,000 unemployed people with family burdens receive.

Against what do we fight?

In view of the above, the crucial question raised before the strike and, even more so after it, was: against what do we fight? What causes the precariousness of our labor conditions and the oppression of our lives? The determination of "not bowing our heads" is undoubtedly correct, but it is necessary that it is matched also by our determination that we, ourselves, form these questions and reflect deeply on them to avoid, as far as possible, sapping our strength in futile efforts.

It is usual to accuse politicians (Zapatero and others) or specific institutions that control the system (Spanish government, banks, corporations, etc.) for adopting measures that promote business profit against the welfare of the majority of citizens, leading to the labor and social crisis; therefore, it is also common, as UGT and CCOO trade unions always do, to ask the same privileged elites for solutions. But as it is being made increasingly clear, these politicians and institutions are a cog of the machinery of the international market economy: neither Zapatero nor Rajoy, nor the so-called parliamentary Left, have any real power to take decisions going beyond the dynamics and imperatives of the neoliberal consensus.^[1]

Neoliberalism grew as a political and ideological movement promoted by the elites in order to "justify" and institutionalise the opening and liberalisation of all markets necessitated by capitalist globalisation, as a result of the massive expansion of multinational corporations since the 1970s, which by now control world production and trade. Within this economic framework countries are forced to increase their competitiveness, otherwise their products within the context of open markets, cannot survive the competition from imported commodities, whereas their exports decline. In turn, the need of the system to become more competitive leads to more growth as capitalist firms have to expand continually to improve their competitive position. This fact precludes that one state can stop —let alone reverse— a process that is being reproduced around the world: the dismantling of social controls on the

market mechanism and the resulting cuts in labor rights. This process becomes necessary within the current institutional framework in order to secure the free flow of human resources at a minimum cost and, thus, to achieve the maximum competitiveness that, as we have already said, is a structural imperative of the current economic system.

During a brief interlude in the process of marketisation and as a result of the intensification of the social struggle it was possible to introduce certain social controls on the market mechanism which have led to the rise of the welfare state (labor protection, full employment measures, public services, etc.). Such controls were feasible at the time due to the low degree of internationalisation of the economy and the fact that markets were not open but were still socially controlled —a crucial precondition which allowed these kinds of “concessions” to society. However, since the 70's of the last century, the internationalisation of the economy and the need to liberalise all markets fully so that economic growth could be maximised have imposed imperatively around the world, with increasing force, the dismantling and erosion of the policies that characterised the welfare state. This has led to a new stage in the marketisation process: neoliberal modernity. Thus, we can note how the social-democratic approaches have failed miserably: first, they pursued partial reforms as gradual steps towards socialism; then, they settled for welfare and full employment within capitalism and finally, in recent decades, they have accepted the gradual reduction of the former and the total collapse of the latter, becoming an integral part of the neoliberal consensus.

We should keep in mind, therefore, that in case we face, as at present, a tough and arduous struggle to stop the neoliberal measures that the government intends to implement, even if this struggle was able to protect labor and social rights, this could only provide a slightly slower pace to the dynamics of the system in which we live, whose aim is always to increase the marketisation of our lives, with all the adverse effects that this causes: unemployment, precariousness, exploitation, alienation and inequity, apart from its social and ecological effects which threaten life itself. The meager victories that can be achieved within the present institutional framework will be temporary until the next attacks, and these are becoming every day more forceful and relentless. Thus, it is necessary to fight against the very system in which we live, which is the root of the problem. The way to do it is not protesting just against its effects, but directly challenging its own institutions and struggling to replace them with a new form of social organisation. This does not mean that it makes no sense to speak out and stand up when they want to crush us. It means that the way to do it is by building the alternative that can overcome the present system. Resisting the current systemic crisis while accepting the same ways of thinking and institutions that have created the problems we suffer, without the explicit goal of overcoming them, is like a drop in the bucket. It is therefore obvious that either we replace the system with genuinely democratic institutions like those proposed by the Inclusive Democracy project or we will be dragged down to a new Dark Age which, in an era of high technology will be much darker than the old one —assuming, of course, that humanity will survive it!

Beyond reform

Although there are some anti-capitalist ideas discussed by participants of the Barcelona Assembly, the main objectives of the struggle and the proposals made so far would only go in the direction of promoting social mobilisation to stop the cuts, and not in the direction of building an alternative society. Accordingly, the Barcelona Assembly has not overcome the

reformism of the mainstream trade unions and maintains the same goal: to stop the cuts. In our view, the form of struggle and the organisational structure adopted by the Barcelona Assembly is appropriate. However, we believe that *this democratic organisation should not only be a means but also an end*. It is not just about changing the way of organizing the fight with respect to the trade unions against the established system; it is also necessary to change the *aim*. It is time to go beyond the level of protest and demand-raising because, as we have seen, they can not, by themselves, undermine the systemic root of the crisis. Clearly, it is time to begin the process of transition towards a new form of social organisation based on equality and autonomy at all levels, of which the Barcelona Assembly could be a significant starting point. This shift in the orientation of the struggle is especially important and urgent in the present context, which is characterised by the accelerating worsening of the multidimensional crisis (economic, ecological, social and political).

The general strike is a good way to show the opposition to the loss of rights and to the social cuts, but it is necessary to move on from simple resistance to start building the institutions of an alternative society. Thus, the creation of a new political consciousness and new institutions based on a project of systemic change towards a genuinely democratic and truly ecological form of social organisation should be promoted, catalysing the transitional movement that will lead to it. We think that the process of catalysing this movement could involve all those who are aware of the systemic nature of the present multidimensional crisis and understand that protesting against its effects is not enough until we seriously consider and effectively build an alternative social organisation.

The organisational dynamics that are being set in motion through the Barcelona Assembly and the district assemblies can become the model of new democratic political institutions. Starting from the local level (district, municipality), we can begin weaving a confederation of assemblies that grows territorially forming a new pole of popular power. Small assemblies (at the local level) can choose revocable delegates with the function of transmitting their voice and will to the geographically broader confederal assemblies of delegates (for example the city's or county's assembly), in order to coordinate, manage and implement the decisions taken by local assemblies (but never take decisions "in their name" as it happens in the representative "democracy"). In this way we can open a new public sphere where citizens can deliberate and decide with equal voice and vote on everything which seems appropriate to them (not just on one issue, as in the case of the current Barcelona Assembly, which focuses only on social mobilisation against the cuts).

Worker's Assemblies that are being established can also become an integral part of this new emancipatory movement. Just as the Confederal Citizen's Assemblies (based on district/municipal assemblies) can become the political alternative to the oligarchic system of representative "democracy". Worker's Assemblies can become the alternative to hierarchy at the workplace. This should be accompanied by the parallel gradual shifting of economic resources (labor, capital, land) away from the market economy and the introduction of a new demotic economic^[2] sector, owned and controlled by local assemblies through the Demotic/Confederal Citizen's Assemblies. In the case of Catalonia, there are many projects advocating for another economy (cooperatives, exchange networks, etc.). They could be an integral part of this new movement if they shared its general program of social transformation and, consequently, they aimed at becoming demotic projects, explicitly involving themselves with the democratic movement for systemic change and, therefore, adopting the Demotic/Confederal Citizen's Assemblies as the sovereign institution that

expresses the general interest of the citizenship in the new form of social organisation under construction. To the extent that the demotic economic sector materialises, problems such as unemployment, underemployment and alienation in the workplace would disappear. At the same time, this demotic economy would also allow us to gradually leave behind the dynamic of the market/growth economy in which we are immersed that is leading us directly to social, economic and ecological disaster, and replace it with the aim of satisfying human needs in a framework of harmonious relationship with the environment[3].

Social paradigm shift

However, the crucial issue raised by the above is how we move from here to there, i.e. how we move from the present institutions of representative “democracy” and the internationalised capitalist market economy to an Inclusive Democracy.[4] Below, we will summarise some of the main elements of the ID transitional strategy.

The creation of a new world order based on an Inclusive Democracy involves the building of confederations of local, regional and national inclusive democracies. In fact, the fight to create confederal IDs in our area, Southern Europe, could start here and now, given that many people are already wondering whether the ultimate cause of the present crisis in Southern Europe is EU/EMU itself, which has to be replaced by a confederation of European peoples with similar economic, political and social problems as a step towards the creation of a confederal ID.

Starting point in the ID transitional strategy is that if there is one lesson History taught us, this is that the basic cause of failure of previous, revolutionary or reformist, attempts aiming at a systemic change was exactly the significant unevenness in the level of consciousness, in other words, the fact that all past revolutions had taken place in an environment where only a minority of the population had broken with the dominant social paradigm. However, for a revolution, to be truly successful, a rupture with the past is presupposed, both at the subjective level of consciousness and at the institutional level. Still, when a revolution in the past was “from above,” it had a good chance to achieve its first aim, to abolish state power and establish its own power, but, exactly because it was a revolution from above, with its own hierarchical structures etc., it had no chance to change the dominant social paradigm but only formally, i.e. at the level of the official (compulsory) ideology. On the other hand, although the revolution “from below” has always been the correct approach to convert people democratically to the new social paradigm, it suffered in the past from the fact that the uneven development of consciousness among the population did not allow revolutionaries to achieve even their very first aim of abolishing state power. Therefore, the major problem with systemic change has always been how it could be brought about, from below, but by a majority of the population, so that a democratic abolition of power structures could become feasible. The ID strategy does offer a solution to this crucial problem.

Thus, the main aim of direct action, as well as of the participation in local elections, the two main forms of activity suggested by the ID project, is not just the conquest of power, but the rupture of the socialisation process and therefore the creation of a democratic majority “from below,” which will legitimise the new structures of Inclusive Democracy. Given this aim, it is obvious that participation in national elections is a singularly inappropriate means to this end, since, even if the movement for an Inclusive Democracy does win a national election, this will

inevitably set in motion a process of “revolution from above”. This is because the rupture in the socialisation process can only be gradual and in continuous interaction with the phased implementation of the program for the Inclusive Democracy, which, for the reasons mentioned above, should always start at the local level. On the other hand, an attempt to implement the new project through the conquest of power at the national level does not offer any opportunity for such an interaction between theory and practice and for the required homogenisation of consciousness with respect to the need for systemic change.

So, the ID strategy involves the building of a mass programmatic libertarian political movement, like the old socialist movement, with an unashamedly universalist goal to change society along genuine democratic lines, beginning here and now. Therefore, such a movement should explicitly aim at a systemic change, as well as at a parallel change in our value systems. This strategy would entail the gradual involvement of increasing numbers of people in a new kind of politics and the parallel shifting of economic resources (labour, capital, land) away from the market economy. The aim of such a strategy should be to create changes in the institutional framework, as well as to value systems, which, after a period of tension between the new institutions and the state, would, at some stage, replace the market economy, representative “democracy,” and the social paradigm “justifying” them, with an Inclusive Democracy and a new democratic paradigm respectively. This is because, as systemic change requires a rupture with the past, which extends to both the institutional and the cultural level, such a rupture is only possible through the development of a new political organisation and a new comprehensive political program for systemic change that will create a clear anti-systemic consciousness at a massive scale.

However, the creation of a new culture, which has to become hegemonic before the transition to an Inclusive Democracy could be effected, is only possible through the parallel building of new political and economic institutions at a significant social scale. In other words, ***it is only through action to build the new institutions that a mass political movement with a democratic consciousness can be built.*** Such a strategy creates the conditions for the transition, both the “subjective” ones, in terms of developing a new democratic consciousness and the “objective” ones, in terms of creating the new institutions which will form the basis of an Inclusive Democracy. At the same time, the establishment of these new institutions will crucially assist here and now the victims of the concentration of power and particularly, the victims of neoliberal globalisation in solving the problems of inequality created by it. The objective, therefore, of an ID strategy is the creation from below, of “popular bases of political and economic power,” that is, the establishment of local inclusive democracies, which, at a later stage, will confederate in order to create the conditions for the establishment of a new confederal Inclusive Democracy. Therefore, a crucial element of the ID strategy is that the political and economic institutions of Inclusive Democracy begin to be established immediately after a significant number of people in a particular area have formed a base for “democracy in action” —***something that, most probably, could only be achieved at the massive social scale required through winning in local elections under an ID program.*** Contesting local elections does provide the most effective means to massively publicise a program for an Inclusive Democracy, as well as the opportunity to initiate its immediate implementation on a significant social scale. In other words, contesting local elections is not just an educational exercise, but also an expression of the belief that it is only at the local level that direct and economic democracy can be founded today, although of course local Inclusive Democracies have to be confederated to ensure the transition to a confederal democracy. It is

exactly because the *demos* is the fundamental social and economic unit of a future democratic society that we have to start from the local level to change society. Therefore, participation in local elections is an important part of the strategy to gain power, in order to dismantle it immediately afterwards, by substituting the decision-taking role of the assemblies for that of the local authorities, the day after the election has been won. Furthermore, contesting local elections gives the chance to start changing society from below, something that is the only democratic strategy, as against the statist approaches that aim to change society from above through the conquest of state power, and the 'civil society' approaches that do not aim at a systemic change at all.

Thus, once the institutions of Inclusive Democracy begin to be installed, and people, for the first time in their lives, start obtaining real power to determine their own fate, then the gradual erosion of the dominant social paradigm and of the present institutional framework will be set in motion. A new popular power base will be created. Town by town, city by city, region by region will be taken away from the effective control of the market economy and statist forms of organisation (national or international), their political and economic structures being replaced by the confederations of democratically run communities. An alternative social paradigm will become hegemonic and the break in the socialisation process—the precondition for a change in the institution of society— will follow. A dual power in tension with the statist forms of organisation will be created which ultimately may or may not lead to confrontation with the ruling elites depending on the balance of power that would have developed by then. Clearly, the greater the appeal of the new institutions to citizens the smaller the chance that the ruling elites will resort to violence to restore the power of the state and the market economy institutions on which their own power rests.

Conclusion

Today, therefore, we have immense work to do. Perhaps more than ever before that quote of Thucydides that says "*We must choose: either to rest or to be free*" acquires its full meaning. We hope that the combative and autonomous initiative that has been generated by the Barcelona Assembly transcends the partial claims against the socioeconomic cuts to trigger the creation of a new movement that advocates for the overcoming of the current system, building a form of social organisation designed to serve the people and controlled by them. In other words, the creation of an ID movement that will play the role of a catalyst in assisting people in organizing demotic assemblies and workers' assemblies. Such an assembly movement initially will necessarily be at a small social scale, but once the new paradigm becomes hegemonic, the new institutions, through local elections, could become the institutions reflecting political, economic and ecological democracy at the local level first, and then, through winning more local power, at the regional and confederal levels on the road to create a new Confederal Inclusive Democracy.

* The following paper is based on an article which was published in the first issue (Fall-Winter) of DEMOS, a four-monthly publication edited by the Catalan ID Group that was distributed on 29 September during the Barcelona demonstrations. <http://democraciainclusiva.org/txt/vaga.pdf>

[1] The term “neoliberal consensus” refers to the set of policies that have been implemented around the world since the mid 1970 by political parties of all persuasions in power (as a result of the opening and “liberalisation” of markets imposed by neoliberal globalisation), which implied the huge increase in the power of those who control the economy through the drastic reduction of social controls over markets. The main trends of the neoliberal consensus are the following: market liberalisation, privatisation of state companies, reduction of the welfare state into a safety net and a parallel stimulation of the expansion of the private sector towards social services (health, education, pensions, etc.) and the redistribution of taxes in favor of higher income groups. See Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy: The Crisis of the Growth Economy and the Need for a New Liberatory Project* (London & NY: Cassell, 1997), ch. 1. <http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/fotopoulos/english/brbooks/brtid/brtid.htm>

[2] “Demotic” is an adjective referring to what belongs to the demos,” i.e. the basic institution of classical democracy, a Greek word that means community or people organized as a general assembly of all citizens in the community.

[3] For a detailed description of the economic functioning proposed and the transition towards it, see *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*, chapters 6 and 7.

[4] See for a full treatment of the ID transitional strategy , T. Fotopoulos, “The transition to an Inclusive Democracy,” *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2010), The Barcelona Talks, ID meeting (April 11, 2010), http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/vol6/vol6_no2_takis_ID_meeting_Barcelona_2010.htm