

Spain's many currents of protest

The unbearable pressure of economic collapse is sparking mass responses across the European Union, ranging from the xenophobic fascism of Greece's violent "Golden Dawn" to the utopian socialist nostalgia of the Lisbon crowds singing the anthem of their "Carnation Revolution" of 1974, while passing through the "virtual politics" experiments with new media exemplified by Beppe Grillo's "5 Star Movement" (M5S) that has thus far paralyzed parliamentary business as usual in Italy. Throughout the EU, but especially in its most vulnerable southern states, protest has burst its traditional containers of trade unions and the established parties of the left, destabilizing these and challenging the whole political structure of the union.

Spain is one of the countries hardest hit by the ever more severe "austerity" measures imposed by Brussels and Berlin. Massive layoffs of teachers, administrators, technicians and other public employees, terminations of subsidies for start-up businesses, loss of scholarships, cuts in pensions and other benefits contribute to the failures of many businesses in an ever faster downward spiral. Unemployment is approaching 27% nationwide, and for youth, it's already over 56%. Those that are not (yet) laid off, whether from government employment due to cutbacks or from failing businesses and closing industries, are seeing their salaries and benefits cut.

One of the most sinister effects of unemployment has been evictions of families unable to pay their mortgages. These have reached a rate of 517 a day and last year were the cause of 34% of the suicides in Spain, according to PAH, the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* ("Platform of those Affected by Mortgages")— one of the newly invented, nontraditional protest associations that has become most effective in pressuring for change. (Website: <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/>). Bank scandals in which thousands have lost their life savings due to deceptive clauses in their investment contracts, while the directors of failing banks have rewarded themselves with multi-euro bonuses, have driven other big waves of protest, with different motives but also against the same banks that are evicting families. And deep cuts in healthcare, education and other public services, etc. are affecting the quality of life even of those who have still held on to their jobs and homes. This whole ball of disasters has stirred up what reporter Luis Gómez in *El País* has called, with only slight hyperbole, "1,100 ways to protest" (31 March 2013). These range from marches and demonstrations (almost daily, noisy occurrences in Madrid and Barcelona) to many new approaches.

The proliferation of new protest initiatives, bypassing parties, trade unions and even the older NGOs, got its most dramatic boost with a call by radical bloggers for a rally in Madrid's central square, the Puerta del Sol, on 15 May 2011. This was just one week before regional parliamentary elections. Those who might normally have voted left felt betrayed by the government of the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) which had bowed to pressure from Brussels and Berlin to freeze pensions and cut other benefits, and many of them felt that if they wanted a credible alternative to either the socialists or the rightwing opposition party, they would have to invent it.

The 15th of May movement, or "15M", blossomed into a nationwide, multifaceted protest movement of the "indignados", or "fed up" citizens of all ages and backgrounds, workers, professionals, pensioners and students or unemployed, many of them living in

tent camps in central plazas of cities across Spain. By the end of the summer, when the main groups finally disbanded, they had invented dozens of proposals, committees and initiatives, which they took back into their neighborhoods while some of them maintained enough contact to coordinate actions whenever necessary.

Meanwhile, the Socialists lost both the regional elections in May and then in November the national elections — too many of their usual voters had given up on them and either stayed home or had become engaged with the 15M debates and actions. The new government of the conservative Popular Party thus, with fewer votes than in previous elections, gained its current absolute majority in Congress, meaning that it doesn't have to negotiate with any other party to pass legislation, an unusual circumstance in Spain. It has broken all its campaign promises of protecting employment, pensions, etc., but — under pressure from the European Central Bank and Berlin — has instead realized even deeper cuts, made it easier and cheaper to lay off workers, and protected the banks and their managers in the face of huge losses and evidence of deceptive and even larcenous practices.

The people mobilized by 15M, with no effective national coordination, have gone off in many directions. The most familiar is marches and demonstrations, in which Spaniards have a long tradition, which as we said are now almost daily events in Madrid and other cities. But Spaniards have found other ways.

One of these is the lightning demonstrations in front of homes where families are about to be evicted. One especially bleak consequence of unemployment is that people who bought houses or apartments in the boom years prior to 2008 are now unable to keep up mortgage payments on homes have plunged in value; even if evicted, the debt remains, because in Spain, unlike the United States and other countries, it is not canceled when the bank repossesses the home, but increases because of interest. So a local group of neighbors attached to the Platform of the Affected by Mortgages, PAH, will rush to the family's defense. They interpose themselves between the police and front door, shouting slogans and waving signs and, of course, summoning the press. According to the PAH website, they have thus managed to stop 612 evictions, a small fraction but significant. They can at least delay eviction, and the delay and public pressure sometimes embarrass the bank sufficiently and induce politicians to intervene to work out a solution, such as agreeing to let the family remain at an accessible rent — the bank has no interest in repossessing an unsalable home, but is reluctant to forgive the debt.

Far more theatrical have been the *flamenco* invasions of banks, which have spread from the *flamenco* heartland of Andalucía to the usually less *castañuela*-snapping cities of Madrid and Barcelona. Mixing art, humor and politics, inconspicuously dressed musicians and dancers enter the bank during regular business hours, mingling with normal customers, and suddenly break into performance — with a video cam, so you can see and hear them performing, other customers surprised and laughing, the guards perplexed and the bank officers grinning in embarrassment as the *cantaor* sings comical but stridently antibank and anticapitalist lyrics. (See links at end of this article.)

On another front, and with potentially greater consequences than the flamenco outcries or even the local anti-eviction squads, the Platform of Affected by Mortgages (PAH) managed to gather over a million signatures to present a citizen initiative as a proposal of law in the Congress, the first time ever any group had achieved anything like that number. To gather this many, PAH enlisted all the support it could get from other organizations, including the two big labor federations, who didn't want to be left behind.

Formally known as the *Iniciativa Popular Legislativa* or ILP (“People’s Legislative Initiative”), the PAH’s proposed law includes three demands: 1, that repossession of the home will satisfy the debt (as in most other advanced countries); 2, that evictions must be stopped for a family’s main residence when the failure to pay is due to unavoidable circumstances (such as illness or layoff); 3, that the former mortgagee be permitted to remain as a renter for up to 5 years, at a rent of no more than 30% of his or her income.

And a lawyer in Barcelona has won a suit, on behalf of an unemployed Moroccan client, in the European Court of Justice against Spanish mortgage practices, which up to now have allowed banks to evict without court intervention, even if the original mortgage included “abusive” clauses, including ballooning interest rates for late payments.

The conservative Popular Party government, availing itself of its absolute majority in the face of all the other parties in parliament, has rejected the *Iniciativa Popular*, to the enormous disappointment and disgust of the citizens. And it is doing everything it can to delay bringing the law in line with the European Court’s decision, because it is very reluctant to upset the banks, whose directors include many of the party’s biggest contributors. Frustration with this delay has brought protest from an unexpected quarter: the judges, who have gathered and agreed in many districts to halt eviction proceedings without a hearing between the bank, the affected debtor, and the judge.

And the frustration has given rise to another dramatic protest tactic by the ever inventive PAH: the “*escrache*”, a word and practice imported from Argentina, where it was used for demonstrations in front of the homes of known torturers from the 1976-83 military dictatorship, to make sure their neighbors know they were there. In Spain, demonstrators show up in front of the house of Popular Party politicians to get them to change the law. They wave big signs — “Yes you can” (that is, change the law) say the ones in green, “But you won’t” say the ones in red — and chant. As an expression of anger, this is pretty mild by Spanish standards, but it has been enough to terrify Popular Party chieftains who have labeled the *escraches* “Nazi-type violence” and fretted about the innocent children who see such actions from the windows of their houses. As though throwing innocent children and their families onto the street, as happens at a rate of over 500 per day in Spain, were not violent.

When last year the two biggest labor federations sought to bring protesters together to coordinate strategy, they found they had to deal with over 150 umbrella organizations with over 950 established groups, associations and “platforms”, meaning supporters of one or another set of proposals. Some of these had designated leadership and hierarchies, but others were, and are, fluid assemblies where authority shifts from person to person depending on the immediate issue and who has the latest bright idea. And new “platforms” with their support groups and demands appear constantly.

This fluidity may be a virtue in what Zygmunt Bauman has described as our “liquid society”, where conditions are changing constantly and rapidly — as indeed they are in Spain and other countries of the EU, where banks and jobs and pensions are suddenly disappearing, the decision-makers are ever more isolated from their victims, and their protestations of “democracy” and “justice” echo as empty verbiage. New conditions demand new responses. But it is a shock to the nervous system of the trade unions, which have long imagined themselves as disciplined columns marching for workers rights, under democratically elected but unquestioned officers.

Even so, Spain's two major union federations have been able to absorb the shock better than the leftwing parties they have generally been aligned with. UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, founded over 120 years ago by the Socialist Party) and *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO, begun in the 1950s as a clandestine, anti-Franco organization aligned with the Communist Party) used to be fierce rivals, but in recent years have coordinated their actions, and both have long experience and expertise in organizing demonstrations, marches and strikes. This involves them constantly in discussions with their membership and potential new members and keeps them relatively flexible and responsive to new demands.

The political parties, however, are more rigid. They are organized to get out the vote for their closed lists of candidates — Spanish voters do not get to vote for individuals, but for the party list, which means that an aspiring politician's career depends less on what his or her constituents want than on the favor of the leaders making up the lists. The winning party then “governs” almost without further consultation of voters until the next election. This is why the new protesters have gone ahead without them, but the savvier members of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español and the smaller, Communist-led Izquierda Unida have become aware that they are going to have to be more open and responsive, and more militant in opposition to the government's drastic “austerity”, or become irrelevant.

The parties and the trade unions are growing aware that they cannot remain rigid in the face of a range of problems they have either never before confronted or have forgotten. In Spain 14 April 1931 is remembered as the beginning of the Second Republic — the exuberant and optimistic effort to modernize and democratize western Europe's most backward country, in the midst of a worldwide depression and in the face of ferocious opposition by landowners, clergy, the military and monarchists. This year, with demonstrations, the tricolor flag, and many published essays and videos, it has been an occasion to remind the left of those ideals.

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Here is a series of video clips taken in banks across Spain, with printed subtitles (in Spanish) of the verses: *Protestas Flamenco*,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohzdnplkw4g>

And, without subtitles, but for those who understand spoken Spanish, in “Desahucio” singer Fernando Caro gives a polished flamenco performance with lyrics and images summing up the issues that has become very popular and is offered as ring tone for your cell phone: <http://www.dicelacancion.com/video-desahucio-fernando-caro>