

*The dismantling of the once-excellent public health, education and other benefits and destruction of labor rights, with no prospect of economic recovery from our deep recession, threaten to overwhelm Spaniards with "pessimism of the intellect". The rising of the indignados, known here as "15-M", is a thrilling example of the only antidote, "optimism of the will" —the determination to change the course of events, as Antonio Gramsci (following Romain Rolland) liked to remind himself and others .*

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### **Spain's *Indignados***

By Geoffrey Fox

Last year's mass movement of *indignados* in Spain, initiated May 15 ("15-M"), and evolving into protest occupations of the central plazas and marches, astonished government authorities and even participants. Inspired by protests in Tunis and Cairo, and encouraged by those in Greece and Portugal, the Spanish mobilization demonstrated further possibilities of democratic action in the Internet age, setting an example for movements as far away as Chile (the huge student protests) or the U.S. (Occupy Wall Street). But "15-M" was also a response to specifically Spanish political conditions.

This was the biggest in a series of volcanic eruptions against the legacy of the Franco dictatorship (1939-75) that began even before the election of the first Socialist party government, in 1983. Franco-ists and their allies have been entrenched in the judiciary, business sectors, and the Catholic Church, which still enjoys extraordinary legal and financial privileges. Democratic demands had erupted in mass mobilizations repeatedly in recent years, for example against military intervention in Iraq, the mishandling of a huge coastal oil spill, and attempts to use the 2004 terrorist bombing at Atocha for electoral advantage. Additional background included a series of corruption scandals, and the removal from office of judge Batasar Garzón, for investigating the current scandals *and* exhuming the crimes of the Franco dictatorship. This was Spain's political drama even as ordinary people endured an economic "crisis" that they blamed on those very corrupt officials and antidemocratic legacies.

Police estimated 20,000 at the initial demos May 15 in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, and 130,000 nationwide, with the biggest gatherings in Barcelona, Murcia, Granada, Seville, Malaga, Alicante and Valencia. One reason for the big initial turnout was the date, exactly one week before nationwide elections for regional and municipal authorities; another was the demo's independence of any party or trade union sponsorship. The heated campaign of mutual blame for the economic crisis by the two principal parties had disgusted many voters with both. The governing Socialists had disappointed their supporters by bowing to pressure from Brussels and Berlin to freeze pensions and cut other benefits; and the right's Popular Party, closely aligned with big capital and banking, offered no credible alternative. One of the popular slogans of 15-M was "Don't vote for them!" and the initiating coordinating committee called itself "Real democracy now!" (*¡Democracia Real Ya!*).

The original protesters included experienced veterans of social action groups but they were joined by many younger "indignados" frustrated by their lack of employment or educational opportunities. In Madrid's spacious Puerta del Sol after the speeches, hundreds of the youth decided spontaneously to stay the night. Their rousing by the police before dawn was the second main cause of the protest's huge success: press and Internet coverage of the rough handling resulted in far larger crowds the next night, and spontaneous encampments in other cities.

The veteran social activists and younger, unemployed "indignados" were quickly joined by a broader cross-section of the electorate, including students and unemployed adults, fully-employed but worried workers and professionals, housewives, and retirees. They were articulate, informed and determined. Participants set up orderly camps, declaring that they would not leave until satisfied that they had accomplished something.

Mobilized by Internet social networks, e-mail, and SMS, not by a parties or unions, the coalition sprouted no leadership that could be pacified with minor concessions. The press sought out the cyber activists, who called

themselves “*Democracia Real Ya!*” — “Real Democracy Now!” — but cyber activists could not and did not seek to control over a mass consensual movement of indignant people, the “indignados.”

The right-wing Popular Party at first imagined that the demonstrations could benefit them electorally, reasoning that *indignados* who boycotted the election would otherwise vote for the left. The right did win big, not just on May 22, 2011 but even more significantly in the parliamentary and presidential elections November 20. However, their political victory has deepened dissatisfaction with the political right and the whole political structure. The Socialist Party sought the protesters’ support, expressing sympathy with their grievances, but with little apparent success. The 15-M crowds had already decided that major parties and the trade unions were too bureaucratized were too embedded in the system to respond to their demands.

But how to create real democracy? The absence of an executive committee or even a “majority rules” consensus prevented the emergence of a unitary of demands; however, there did emerge a broad consensus on what people *did not want*: huge bailouts of the banks, huge cuts in health and education budgets, more bureaucratic, non-representative rule. The term “*indignados*” came from a book written in French by Stéphane Hessel, a *Résistance* veteran. The book’s title, *Indignez Vous!* might be translated literally as “Get indignant!,” but “Don’t put up with it anymore!” would be a truer fit. Indignation is essential as a starting point for protest, but for real, lasting change, as Hessel himself emphasized, *indignados* have to agree on and work for clearly defined goals. To define these goals, one of the many committees that popped up in the Puerta del Sol set up suggestion boxes for proposals, and gathered nearly 14,700. When finally analyzed months later, the demands ranged from “open lists” of candidates, to harsher punishments of corrupt politicians, to nationalization of the banks and even abolition of the monarchy. Here was enough material for several political initiatives, requiring different kinds of actions.

The camp-ins amounted to intense political self-education, including the practical experience of working with diverse people to meet the needs of such an improvised settlement. The camp alumni have taken those experiences back to their neighborhoods and created local action groups to act locally while continuing their debates to develop larger strategies for acting in the whole society. Many of the 15-M veterans again thronged the plazas of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and other cities on the anniversary, on May 12, 2012. The crowds in the plazas were somewhat smaller, and though there were a few late night skirmishes with police, they mostly respected the police order against setting up tents or sleeping bags. This has led some reporters to speak of exhaustion but that prospect is unlikely because the rallies are only the most visible part of a movement that has grown deeper and wider in 2012.

Meanwhile, the larger situation of Spain in Europe and of all of Europe in the world are getting worse, and activists realize that it will take more than mobilizations and neighborhood actions to create employment, restore social services, and realize their many other demands. But, roused from their torpor, the two big union federations and the parties of the left (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Izquierda Unida*, and regional left parties) are now finding common ground rather than spending all their energy competing for the same constituents as in the past. Together they are making broader demands, and introducing more internal democracy. Demonstrations have become almost weekly events, with 15-M and unions joining forces, including in the broad labor-community general strike last march against the rightwing “labor reform” that simplified the process of firing workers, and nullifying labor contracts while reducing economic equality. The *indignados* have not made a revolution, but should it come, they will be better prepared thanks to all their collective work since 15 May 2011.

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