

Epilogue: the 15-M movement since the summer

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Five months after having written on the 15-M movement in Spain⁸⁸, and following the elections of 20 November, won by the Right with an absolute majority, the movement still exists albeit at a lower level. Dozens of local groups continue to be active even though now involving less, and more dispersed, forces; a situation compounded by a lack of large scale mobilizations that could pull activists together.

After the summer break, there was a resurgence of activity. Local assemblies began to meet again and activity over the following weeks focused on the mobilisation of 15 October. The demonstrations on that day were once more impressive and showed the spread of the movement at an international level (most clearly with the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street Movement) with over a thousand protests in 82 different countries with the slogan of "United for Global Change". In the Spanish State there were around 60 demonstrations, including 300,000 in Madrid and 200,000 in Barcelona. Five months after the emergence of the movement, the numbers mobilised were very similar to those that turned out on 19 June. What stood out this time was the presence of organised workers with their own contingents: for instance, in Madrid the massive presence of striking teachers in their green T-shirts; while in Barcelona, teachers, health workers and students were very visible. Moreover, the protest in the Catalan capital ended with the occupation by demonstrators of a hospital, a university faculty and an empty block of flats, an action involving families previously evicted from their homes.

However, after the success of 15 October, the movement has not been able to maintain the same level of activity and mobilisation. Faced with the general elections of 20 November, attempts to generate new protests, emulating what happened in the week prior to the local elections in May, did not reach the same level of involvement. There were a few occupations of public squares, but in general these were small and failed to make an impact. Since then, the downturn in the movement has intensified. There are still many local assemblies taking place, but whereas before hundreds of people participated now there are only dozens involved. It has also proven difficult to coordinate joint actions between the remaining assemblies.

When trying to understand the movement's decline it is necessary to take into account various elements that we already commented on in the original article; in particular the movement has still not managed to base itself around a more reduced and manageable list of demands. Added to this has been the lack of any defined strategy. Although it is clear that the varied and multifaceted nature of the movement was central to its initial success as the months have gone by, it has become the principal source of its weakness.

By dismantling the camps and going into the neighbourhoods the movement broadened its support but it has not been able to maintain the level of coordination that stemmed naturally from the occupation of public spaces in every town and city. In part this lack of coordination has been due to the localist view of a sector of the movement which has centred its work on social problems in their neighbourhood, thus losing a more global vision.

But the dispersion of the movement has not just been geographical, but also, as a result of differing types of interventions. The local nuclei that have maintained themselves have been involved in a variety of interventions. Evictions have continued to be stopped in conjunction with the local tenants' movement. Participation by the movement in workers' protests in defence of public services has increased, especially in Catalonia, where many local 15-M assemblies have occupied health centres and hospitals in protest over health cuts. Another part of the movement, which identified most with the need for electoral reform, is drawing up a new Constitution. In Madrid, the 15-M has given rise to the "I won't pay" movement against the increase in public transport fares, involving mass non-payment protests in the metro. In Barcelona a popular referendum is being organised over whether cuts should be made, the debt paid and what to do with public money handed over to the banks.

Obviously, all these initiatives are very positive; the difficulty has been in being able to combine these local initiatives with a line of joint work. The existence of diverse, parallel, orientations has led at times to frenetic activity due to the saturation of actions and protests.

⁸⁸<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=757&issue=132>

Demoralisation caused by the victory of the PP ⁸⁹ in November has been compounded by the 15-M not having a visible presence during the elections. However, the idea that "all parties are the same" among activists has been undermined by the right's victory. The 15-M reacted to the right's electoral victory by correctly pointing out that a government based on an absolute majority in parliament is not representative in of itself. It has counter posed this parliamentary majority with the fact that only 32% of citizens have voted for the PP ; albeit this observation has proved insufficient to avoid the disorientation of many of those in and around the 15-M in the weeks following 20 November.

Lastly, a very important element to take into account is the relationship between the 15-M and the organised working class. In a situation of enormous economic crisis and massive cuts, a social movement outside the workplaces has a limited capacity to pressurise governments. Thus in various cities the movement has attempted to converge with workers' struggles. The mood generated by the 15-M has allowed some activists from a trade union background to promote workers' assemblies based on the type of direct democracy seen in the occupied squares.⁹⁰ The most impressive example of this has been the case of the Madrid teachers. During September and October, the workers in the sector mounted mass assemblies which managed to push the unions into organising strike action. A total of seven separate days of strike action took place. The rhythm of the strikes was determined by the workers organised on the basis of assemblies in the schools⁹¹. Unfortunately the strike movement finished because the unions kept postponing assemblies and they blocked a proposal that had emerged from mass meetings in many schools for an indefinite weekly three-day strike.

These examples of the connection between the 15-M and workers' struggles have been limited in scope. The orientation of the main unions continues to be that of reaching agreements with the bosses and the government at any price, avoiding the calling of strikes despite the intensity of cutbacks at so many levels. The movement as a whole has neither had the mechanisms nor the orientation necessary to break the deadlock by encouraging mobilisation in the workplaces and generating enough pressure to push the union leaderships into calling protests. The slogan "no one represents us" has led to a sectarian attitude inside wide sections of the movement towards the CCOO and the UGT. One of the most recent examples was the refusal of the DRY to participate in the 50,000-strong demonstration organised on 28 January in Barcelona by the Catalan Social Forum, headed by the social movements, because these two unions were going to participate. Such an attitude is an obstacle to the 15-M's militancy influencing the workers' movement on a wider basis.

In general, the anti capitalist left has played a positive role in trying to overcome these difficulties by encouraging the drawing up of a concrete list of demands and by trying to get the movement to converge around more defined areas of activity. But the weakness and the uneven implantation of this left have made it difficult to help sustain the movement after the first months of euphoria. Once the initial moment of energy and optimism had passed, as happens with many social movements and mass campaigns, the strategic problem of how to achieve real victories begin to be posed.

At present the movement finds itself far from the highpoint of last May-June. However, it would be a mistake to think that hardly anything remains. Although indirectly, the 15-M has received a great deal of support, the basis of which remains intact. Over the last ten months around eight and half million people are calculated to have had some sort of contact with the movement's activities⁹². A network of local groups remain active, which although involving less people than during the summer did not exist at all a year ago. The 15-M has forged a whole layer of new activists that are sustaining other movements; as is happening, for example, in the local neighbourhoods and, most notably, in reinforcing the student movement. Also, as with the Madrid teachers or the health sector in Catalonia, the movement's energy and militancy has inspired some workers' mobilisations. Finally, the emergence of the 15-M has also led to political radicalisation. As the political scientist Carlos Taibo points out, many people in the movement "have moved on from demands

⁸⁹See for example the communique of the Assembly of Granada: *32% no es mayora absoluta* <http://www.kaosenlared.net/component/k2/item/1214-asamblea-de-granada-movimiento-15m-manifiesto-32-no-es-mayor%C3%ADa.html>

⁹⁰This is the case of the company Rueda5000: interview with Eduard Fuentes: *Compartimos la idea de asamblearismo y la de unidad de los y las trabajadoras con el 15M*, <http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16533>

⁹¹Robson, Sam: *Profes en pie de guerra: tres días de huelga a la semana hasta la victoria*, en [enlucha.org](http://www.enlucha.org), octubre 2011. Available at: <http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/16366>

⁹²Interview with Taibo, Carlos: *El 15-M ayuda a que algo est empezando a cambiar en la cabeza de la gente* www.kaosenlared.net/component/k2/item/3353-carlos-taibo-el-15-m-ayuda-a-que-algo-est-empezando-a-cambiar-en-la-cabeza-de-la-gente.html

that reject only certain elements of the system and call for limited reforms to more general anti capitalist positions”⁹³.

It could be said that the movement has matured, albeit ambivalently. On the one hand, it is now clear that things will not be so easy to change as was initially thought. The experience of participating in mass assemblies with an enormous capacity for self-organisation seemed to suggest that what had previous seemed impossible was now on the agenda. This is no longer the case: a certain activist ”innocence” has been lost, now making it more difficult to mobilise. On the other hand, the experience of the 15-M has shown that the occupation of the squares on its own was insufficient. New questions about how to change the world and subsequent strategical questions have become more central.

The socioeconomic crisis today is even deeper than on 15 May last year. The Spanish state is in a recession that according to the IMF will lead to the decline of the economy by 1.7% during 2012. Unemployment is now at 23%, over 5 million people (44% of those under 25) and it will grow by half a million more during the coming year. Real wages are dropping and public services are increasingly eroded, while the cuts offensive of the central and regional governments will intensify. Added to this has been the imposition of a drastic reform of labour relations in early February that amounts to most serious attack on workers’ rights since the demise of the Franco dictatorship. So the underlying social problems that led to the explosion of the 15-M are even sharper today. Given the widespread anger over these attacks and the mood created by the 15-M, and although it is impossible to predict forms they will adopt, the potential for new mobilisations in the coming months is very real.

⁹³Taibo, Carlos: *Muchos de los jvenes indignados han pasado del ciudadanismo al anticapitalismo*, Declaraci en les jornades llibertries de la CGT de Valncia, 15 de desembre de 2011, <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=141711>