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Spanish state

“Nothing will be as it was before”

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Interview with Miguel Romero, member of the Anti-capitalist Left (“Izquierda Anticapitalista”, section of the Fourth International in the Spanish state) and editor of the magazine “Viento Sur”. Interview conducted by Daniel Tanuro, May 21, 2011

What was at the origin of this extraordinary mobilisation which is shaking the Spanish state?

To understand, we need to go back to the general strike of September 29, 2010, against the proposed pensions reform. In relation to what we had known in previous years, the strike had been a success. Around a quarter of the population participated. You should be aware that the number of strikes has fallen in recent years in the Spanish state; there is a permanent dialogue between the trade unions and the employers on wages and all the other questions. The strike marked a social remobilisation then.

But a media offensive was immediately launched presenting the movement as a setback. The union leaderships were strongly affected by this campaign and the mobilisation remained without follow up. It is not certain that a new strike call would have met with success, but it would have sent a message of determination and courage: “we remain opposed to the project of the government”. Instead of that, the unions negotiated with the government and accepted the pensions reform in return for some minor modifications.

The balance sheet was very heavy for the world of labour: those now active aged 40 -45, when they retire, will draw a pension 20% lower than the current one. This agreement sowed frustration but also passivity in the workers’ movement. However, it led to anger among the youth who had supported the strike, solidarised with the pickets and so on. The idea spread that there was nothing to expect from the majority union. As to the minority unions, like the CGT, they have little weight. They would have the strength to become a point of reference, but their sectarian line prevents them doing this. They are content with a declaration. The conditions were thus met for an initiative to emerge from the youth themselves.

What sectors are at the base of the movement?

In early 2011, you could sense a certain tension in the universities. But at the level of the anti-capitalist left, we were fairly pessimistic. We noted above all the absence of perspectives: the social impasse continued. In March, in Portugal, a “Precarious Youth” appeal was launched on the internet and led to an extraordinary demonstration of 250,000 persons, in Lisbon. The demonstration had very little political content: “We are humiliated”; “We are the best trained generation and we are unemployed or in precarious jobs”. But the number of demonstrators was impressive.

This example had an immediate effect in the Spanish universities, notably in Madrid. We should say that unemployment affects nearly 20% of the population, or 4.9 million people. Unemployment among those under 25 is 40.5%. Most young people between 20 and 30 survive thanks to little jobs, on 600 euros per month. They are not then in a situation to have a life independent of the family.

Thus around a hundred students formed the group “Jovenes sin future” (“Youth without a future”). The platform described itself as an initiative of youths “Sin curro, sin casa, sin pension, sin miedo” (“Without job, without house, without pension, without fear”). The most important in this list is “sin miedo”. I interviewed these youths at the time, for “Viento Sur”. These are intelligent and modest persons. Their platform called for a demonstration for April 7. A few hundred people were expected. There were 4,000 to 5,000.

The success of the demonstration of April 7th led the organisers to call another, for May 15. Meanwhile another group appeared: “Democracia real ya” (“A real democracy now!”). Its platform was very weak politically. At the social level, they condemned unemployment, the dictatorship of the market, and so on. But at the political level they described themselves as “neither right nor left”. On the radical left, this initiative appeared as very suspect, because today in the Spanish state we face a very aggressive right. Moreover, nobody knew the initiators of this group.

Initially, “Democracia real ya” was exclusively Madrid-based. Appeals were also launched in other towns. Rallies were very modest elsewhere, but in Madrid the demonstration drew 20,000 to 25,000 people. It was a very combative and joyous cortege, very different from traditional demonstrations, which are boring. The demonstration ended at Puerta del Sol, with speeches very much to the left, very critical of the majority unions, made not by youths but by personalities, notably Carlos Taibo – a libertarian academic.

There was a small group from the black blocks in the demonstration, as is often the case. They provoked incidents. But the repression was very strong. Fourteen of them were arrested. That led to an immediate solidarity against the police. At that point a series of people, totally unknown, unorganised, had a fantastic idea: organising a camp the next day at Puerta del Sol. The initiative was very inspired, but it could seem bizarre. There were barely twenty or thirty people remaining on the ground. Yet the initiative snowballed. Initially dislodged from the square by the police, the morning of May 16, about a hundred people were brought to court. In the afternoon, several hundred, in fact several thousand people gathered at Puerta del Sol.

Sympathy from the people was huge. The rallies every evening at 8 pm swelled: 15,000, then 20,000 people. Immediately, the electoral campaign was completely transformed. Rallies were organised in more than a hundred towns. A town like Valencia, which is rather right wing, saw a rally of 10,000 on May 20. This hasn't been seen for a very long time. Recently there were 15,000 demonstrators in Barcelona, 30,000 in Madrid – so many that access to the square was no longer possible.

The rally on Friday was forbidden by the Electoral Board. The minister of the Interior then gave the order to disperse people but it wasn't possible. This minister, Rubalcaba, is a politician without principles, but intelligent. He was close to Felipe Gonzales and was at the origin of the GAL [\[1\]](#). He said “in reality, the function of the police is to resolve problems, not create them. Dissolving a demonstration of 30,000 people is to create a still bigger problem. The police should intervene only in case of conflict. Indeed, there is no conflict”. Rubalcaba acted intelligently while playing his personal card, since he was a candidate at the elections. The people feared an expulsion of the demonstrators after midnight. At 2 am, the police withdrew: there was an explosion of joy. Another fact to note is that there were solidarity rallies in 538 towns around the world!

Who leads this movement? Is its content now clearer? What is the role of women? And that of immigrants?

The coordination involves around 60 people. They were aged from 25 to 28. These are graduates with good professional qualifications, unemployed, precarious, suffering poor work conditions, without political experience or affiliation. There were no students among them. In the rallies, there were very few youths from the popular neighbourhoods. To avoid giving the image of being a city centre movement the Madrid coordination decided to go into these neighbourhoods. As for the Manifesto it was quite good. It favours the nationalisation of the banks, the protection of the unemployed and so on. It also opposes the electoral law. It is a programme of democratic and social reforms. Ecology is there, though in a marginal way. There is no huge anti-capitalist consciousness. The slogan “a-a-a-anticapitalista” is often taken up in the demonstrations, but without great ideological content.

A lot of women are involved in the movement but the feminist movement is absent as are feminist demands: there

are many posters or cards relating to May 68, but not one on a feminist question. It is worrying. It is perhaps a result of the fact that the feminist movement in Spain has over the past 30 years turned around specifically women-related questions. The word “woman” is even absent from the Manifesto. The same goes for the young immigrants: there are many in the movement, but not in the coordination. All the spokespersons are native to Spain [2].

How do you see the perspectives of the movement?

Barring a surprise, the elections will give a big victory to the right, who will win in numerous regions and municipalities, and thus a defeat for the PSOE. It will be interesting to see the results of Izquierda Unida (IU). IU has tried to appear as the political expression of the movement. It is very opportunist, because IU is an institutional left, and not anti-capitalist. The polls give IU 6 to 8% of the vote. If they gain more than 8%, it will be an effect of the movement. IU plans a meeting with the leadership of the movement. There is a certain danger there. IU has no possibility of hegemonising the movement, because it is not an activist organisation, but rather a sectarian and institutionalist one. But the institutional weight could appear interesting to the leadership of the movement, who could believe that they will thus have a voice in Parliament. That would represent a risk for the independence and radicalism of the mobilisation. The unions have also requested a meeting. In fact, the movement has become a political reference for everyone.

A question which will be posed now: “What next for the camps?” It needs to be raised, but it will be the subject of a debate, and other initiatives should take up the impetus, notably initiatives aimed at the popular neighbourhoods. The media say “it’s over”, as do the sociologists. They shouldn’t be believed. I am perhaps too optimistic, but it seems to me unlikely that the movement will disappear. It involves too many people, too many youths who think that this is “my movement”, and who wish that “the struggle continues”.

In Portugal, the big demonstration of 250,000 was not followed up. Here, the originality is that of a movement in an electoral period, whose most popular slogan is “PSOE, PP, la misma mierda es” (PSOE, PP, it’s the same shit”), and which becomes a reference point for the majority of people. The enthusiasm is huge. The (correct) idea is that “nothing will be as it was before”, that all will be better than before. For our current (young, non-sectarian, non-doctrinaire, closely linked to the social movements) it is an opportunity. But to continue will be difficult.

A key condition for the movement to continue is that it grows and makes links with other social movements: the women’s movement, the ecologist movement and of course the workers’ movement. That requires a medium term perspective, an accumulation of forces, and inputs from outside of the movement. We had a negative experience in 2009, with a very strong movement on the housing question: it could not continue due to internal dissensions provoked by sectarians. Movements of this type can only last if they are unitary.

Has there been any input from trade union sectors?

There is no left current in the big unions and the CGT [3] is marginal. There is then nothing other unhappily than the statements of leaders in favour of the movement (they could not do otherwise). There have been no communiqués of solidarity from the workplace committees or from workplaces on strike. Thus the movement is completely new, without any link with existing mobilisations [4].

What is the impact of the Arab revolutions? One notes a certain resemblance in the forms of action...

There is certainly an echo of the Arab revolutions from the viewpoint of the occupation of public space and the means of communication. The courage of the demonstrators is also something which has been impressive. But while a comrade has spoken to me of “Tahrir Square in Barcelona” we should not exaggerate: there is no comparison from

the viewpoint of the toughness of the struggle!

How should anti-capitalist activists act?

We have been present at the rallies since the beginning. Before, we were already present in “Jovenes sin future”. On the contrary, we were completely outside “Democracia real ya”, like all other political currents. We have then participated in the drawing up of the Manifesto. We have very good relations with the non-sectarian autonomous current, which is very present in the movement. In a general way, it is necessary to be very prudent and reserved, notably in relation to self-affirmation: flags, stickers and so on.

[1] 1. Clandestine paramilitary groups responsible for assassinating activists and sympathisers of the Basque pro-independence group ETA

[2] Miguel Romero has informed us that from May 21 onwards, there was a very significant presence at Puerta del Sol of persons of immigrant origins, Moroccans, Saharans and Latin Americans

[3] [a libertarian trade union federation

[4] The CGT has issued several communiqués in support, as has the CCOO in Catalonia. In Asturias, the occupations have spread from the two main cities of the region, Oviedo and Gijón, to the small towns of the mining basin with strong traditions of working class struggle.