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Catalonia

“The popular classes must intervene with their own tools of mobilisation”

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The one-day general strike on 3 October 2017 in Catalonia was the biggest mobilisation in more than forty years on this territory. It was called by the Intersyndical Alternativa de Catalunya (IAC, an inter-professional federation of combative Catalan trade unions), the Confederació General del Treball (CGT, of libertarian tradition), the Sindicat de Comissions de Base (a split from the Workers’ Commissions) and Intersindicale – CSC. The idea of a political strike against police repression and for public liberties has had a decisive impact in the pro-independence process. Alex G. of *l’Anticapitaliste* spoke to Lito, a member of the IAC and Anticapitalistes, about this historic mobilisation.

How was the 3rd of October strike prepared?

The coordinating space of the Catalan trade union left, together with student coordinations and unions, immigrant organisations, feminist associations and left political organisations, allowed a response to the repressive actions of the Spanish government. [1] This space also included Omnium and the Assemblea Nacional Catalunya (ANC), two associations of Catalan civil society which are relays of the pro-independence majority of the Generalitat (the Catalan autonomous government). The convening of a strike also exerted pressure on the CC.OO (Workers’ Commissions) and the UGT (the two biggest union federations in the Spanish state), who have set up the Taula per la democràcia (Committee for Democracy), with, among others, associations of entrepreneurs in small and medium enterprises, the Catalan Association of Public Universities and the ANC. Initially this space did not wish to call for mobilisations on 2 or 3 October, but rather a halting of activity (“aturada”) for 5 October. In the end, all of these organisations called for a mobilisation on 3 October, but with nuances. All the alternative unions envisaged a strike, with the related rights, the Committee for Democracy spoke of a “stoppage of the country’s activity”, a sort of lock-out or of a strike negotiated with the Catalan institutions and enterprises. Because, for the CC.OO and the UGT, the word strike is politically loaded. For the more moderate, indeed right-wing sectors involved in the independence process, the lock out formula was more agreeable.

How were the committees for the defence of the referendum and the “Escoles Obertes” (“Open schools”) initiative involved in the preparation of the strike?

In a confused and partial manner. “Open Schools” have been more linked to the Committee for Democracy in the promotion of a stoppage of activity in the country. The defence committees were more centred on the strike and the empowerment of the working class. These territorially constructed committees could not as such generate strikes in workplaces, but they opposed it to the lock-out. In some places, notably Barcelona, they have led actions going in the direction of strike action, demonstrating to close the workplaces, blockading the main roads, explaining the reasons for the strike. And now the strike is over, the defence committees want to continue organising. As in Poble Sec, a neighbourhood in Barcelona, where meetings continue after having organised the defence of the polling stations on Sunday and the strike on Tuesday. This space of territorial coordination is necessary because it allows the intervention of the popular classes in the independence process to increase disobedience in relation to the state and to bypass the leadership of the independence movement.

How was the strike respected in the workplaces?

It was an “abnormal” strike which cannot be understood according to the classical criteria. Social and work-related demands were certainly manifested. But in general, the demands were democratic: against police repression, against the Spanish government, for the acceptance of the referendum results. The 3 October mobilisation combined

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elements of a lock-out in the small and medium enterprises with features of a strike and closure of administrations by the Catalan institutions. For example, most teachers went on strike, but the teaching institutions were closed by the Generalitat's secretariat of education. Also, the universities were closed, but the students held meetings. While the dockers struck massively, in the metal workers sector for example, influenced by the CC.OO and the UGT, the stoppage of production was relatively weak. However, millions of people were on the streets throughout the day. For example, in Manresa, a town of 70,000 inhabitants, 40,000 demonstrated. For the Generalitat, closing the administrations has been a means of controlling this mobilisation and highlighting its own role. But all this led nonetheless to a bypassing of the leadership of the independence process.

What impact did this general strike initiative coming from the trade union left and the social movements have on the independence process?

Its interest lies in the clear linking of democratic and social demands. Until now, it has always been the pro-independence right which has led the process. But on October 3rd, popular and democratic slogans appealing to the memory of class struggle have allowed the link to be made between defending democracy and changing society.

What is interesting is to see how the strike has allowed sectors of the population who do not organise through trades unionism to mobilise. The space of coordination of the general strike, with the feminist movement, the questions of the workplaces, the rights of immigrants, has allowed a transversal approach and debates. The people have had a mass experience allowing the discovery of the meaning of a strike of carers led by women, understanding why immigrants participated in the strike, or that people with Spanish flags also mobilised. On the other hand, the people have had the experience of disobeying the state, occupying the squares, blockading the roads or closing down commerce.

How can the working class and the social movements become the protagonist of the independence process?

The popular classes and the working class must intervene with their own tools of mobilisation, whether classic or more modern: the strike, the neighbourhood defence committee. Until now, the majority leadership of the process had a “citizenship” vision. But the referendum defence committees introduce an embryonic element of social and territorial councils.

In recent days those mobilised are talking more than ever of politics in class terms. The coordination of combative trades unionism, the social and left political movements allow unity of the popular classes beyond the acquiescent leadership of the independence process.

Thus, a space where most of the sectors calling for the general strike can be found is the March of Dignity. This coordination has proposed a Charter of Social Rights for Catalonia. [2] In the event of a hypothetical proclamation of the Catalan Republic, it will be necessary to debate what type of Republic we want to construct: health and education systems, labour relations, women's rights policies. This charter is a tool for debating the key elements of the possible construction of a new society, by combining local questions and connections at the level of the Spanish state. Concretely, this allows already having a debate with the concrete sectors of the working classes and going into the villages, where the social and associative tissue is weaker, where the pro-independence right is hegemonic and where a certain passivity exists, to explain and present this programme and our demands in terms of class.

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[1] In addition to the four unions mentioned and two student organizations, the feminist association Ca la dona, the Peasants' Assembly, Firefighters in Struggle, Barcelona Dockers, the Pensioners' Tide, March of Dignity, CUP (Candidates for popular unity, anti-capitalist independentist left), Podem, Constituent Process, Revolta global (Anticapitalistas ijn Catalonia) called for a general and social strike. The document calling for demonstrations supports the Charter for Social Rights which “values ??all the experiences and practices accumulated by the various social movements in recent years: from the social and solidarity economy to food sovereignty, from the defence of territories to feminist struggles and against macho violence. From movements for peace to recognition of the rights of migrants”. It also condemned “the austerity policies that have made our lives more precarious in recent years and have dismantled the public sector in favor of rescuing banks.”

[2] The Kellys, a movement of waitresses and cleaning women fighting for a collective agreement, the migrant movement "Documents for All", the Asambleia groga (community assembly education in defense of public, secular, Catalan and democratic education), were present at the first meeting to define this charter, among other organizations already mentioned.