

# Spanish State: We do not fear! - 15 May has opened a breach

Monday 23 May 2011, by [CAMARGO Raúl](#), [FERNANDEZ Joseba](#), [URBAN CRESPO Miguel](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2011).

**This article, written for the *Viento Sur* website, locates the movement's origins not just in the economic crisis and austerity measures of the Zapatero government, but the impasse created by the trade union leaders' decision to back off from confrontation with the government and agree to the cuts after the General Strike last year. It also has some strong words about the relative failure of the radical Left (of which the authors are a part) to have responded as well as it should, yet points hopefully to the way forward [Dc Tad, translator].**

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15 May has opened a breach. Of that there is no question. It is a movement that opens new paths and that presupposes, bluntly, an inflection point in the social response to the crisis in Spain. Whoever in the Left can find no reason for celebration and joy, beyond the current uncertainty, has a serious problem. They have been, then, in an offside position.

This text will offers some explanations of the success of the movement (and its continuation), the special relevance of social insecurity [precariedad] and young people, and the significance of this event-movement as a destabilizing factor in the mobilization against the crisis. [[1](#)]

## **Antecedents: the breeding ground, the dereliction of duties of some and the impotence of the "alternative"**

Expanding once more about the factors that explain the profound deterioration in social, economic, environmental and all of political life in Spain does not make much sense. It's well known how the capitalist economic crisis smashed into Spain's growth model and how that has affected millions of people. The model of exit from the crisis has also tailed the elites — a dynamic "class struggle from above" that, dictated by the EU and IMF, has left a trail of victims and created a scene of crushing victory for banks, big capitalists and certain types of speculators.

The balance that has emerged from the break in the Spanish economy is an appalling one. Financialization of the middle classes, the "wealth effect" and the stupefying dream of an

“ownership society” and “social ladder” had worked perfectly, as illusory mechanisms for the peaceful evolution of this country’s developmental model. However, the bursting of the various bubbles that gripped the Spanish economy has blown up this scheme of fictitious capitalism. A society partly euphoric at the credo of growth has been transformed into a society without social handles to grip. And, without venturing into psychological holes, it has gone from a citizenship based on networks of trust to a society suspicious of the social and political institutions on which the regime sits.

But this change was rapid. The knockout punch, suffered by the majority of the working classes, was administered and digested through different phases and moments. No one goes from euphoria to fear — and from there to outrage and mobilization — in a short and mechanical sequence. But, clearly, this was the “breeding ground” that would produce the “outbreak” the 15-M movement was constructing, little by little, and covertly. And, in recent months, it was being constructed outside of the channels and structures that were expected to star in any comprehensive opposition to the social emergency and coup being carried out against the lived economy and political sovereignty.

However, a previous breach had opened a few months earlier. It was 29-S [the general strike on 29 September 2010]. That day (and in the weeks of preparation beforehand) the real possibility of extending the framework of resistance and popular responses (from the world of work, and well beyond) was reaffirmed in the call for and fallout of the General Strike. For the social Left and anti-capitalist politics the conditions of continuity of the strike were a given: Neighbourhood platforms, new socialised work initiatives, collective learning for new activists, etc.

The winding up of the unions’ oppositional, conflictual approach and the major unions’ decision to commit to social dialogue and agreement presumed an inability to take advantage of a real political opportunity to intervene from these actors, an inability to follow a different model — the accumulation of forces in a social response to crisis. The damage caused by the pact over pensions to the morale of many activists, and the real (and deserved) delegitimation that the union leaders have suffered as a result explains why they cannot be perceived, at this time, as effective instruments through which the “general malaise” can be interpreted and channelled.

Neither, on balance, has what we call (broadly and diffusely) the alternative and anti-capitalist Left been much better. Obviously it hasn’t played a role of legitimiser or stooge of the farce of social peace. But, yes, at least in its inability to express what could be the alternative in the street. While “resistance-ism” [*resistencialismo*] has been marked, organizational incapacities, narrow-mindedness, a real disconnection from those who are the core activists or, simply, the use of repertoires of action attractive and appealing for a different public face have led to demonstrations that, while necessary and relatively successful, could not initiate a cycle of mobilisation. Thus, the alternative unions, the more radical and coherent social movements and the radical political Left haven’t been able to break from the circle in which they have moved. While it is true that the Left has expanded in recent months, its role as a catalyst for the battle in the streets has always had a ceiling on it. But it is also true that small initiatives that have been punctuating recent months and years have generated part of the discourse that today is drawing in more sectors of the now-mobilized.

### **Imitation effect and resistance in the world of the dispossessed**

This lack of practical references, symbolic and identity-bound, has held back the possibility of social responses in recent months. Knocking at our door have been other people’s experiences and new forms of self-organisation, in the form of riots, rebellions and revolutions. It was the Portuguese

youth in their struggle against the IMF; Italian students against Berlusconi, job insecurity and cuts in education; the Greek trade unionists and youth against debt and EU blackmail; universities occupied and mobilized in the United Kingdom; France rebellious and insubordinate against the loss of social rights. And there have been, like an unexpected miracle, the uprisings for dignity and against tyranny in the Arab nations. The youth of Tunisia and Egypt and many other countries, their social and political organizations, have in recent years heroically resisted economic and political dictatorships and have shown that it is possible to reach heaven by direct struggle, even in the worst conditions. And somehow, it is we who were afraid!

Now the contagion effect that these riots and revolutions have had on the planet can't be overestimated — how they are helping to transform many things and supposedly unchangeable realities in the management and governance of capitalism and imperialism on a global scale.

It is more difficult to demonstrate how they have specifically impacted on the awakening of instinctual rebellion in Spain. To not only two things: at the level of discourse and of forms of organization (management of social networks and symbolic force and real public space) they seem to have been an authentic inspiration.

### **Youth: an empty signifier yet full of content**

Inigo Errejón said in a recent article in the mobilization of 7 April, "Youth Without Future" the concept of youth had been managed, successfully, as an "empty signifier" which encapsulated much of the social reality and collective imagination able to legitimise a protest of this type. It is an accurate analysis that, as we can see, is still working and will continue to do so.

Again, as already happened in the cycle of 1968 although in a completely different conditions [2], the youth, in various pockets of resistance, are acting as a true "tactical vanguard" in the context of an overall movement. We don't enter an opinion here on such thorny issues as the concept of "generations" itself or on the available objective and subjective conditions for the mobilization of youth today. We simply assert its importance as an initiator of social antagonisms. And it is very uneven across demographic (Arab v European) and political (policies at movement level) contexts.

However, the focus of discourse and practice that hinges around insecurity is still being shown as an asset when it comes to uniting wills. The accumulation of experiences and counter-hegemonic discourse in universities in recent years is not negligible. The launch of an initiative with so much potential as "Youth Without Future" is just a sign of how sections of student activists have recognized that it is a discourse with the capacity to combine and refine mobilisation practices with a capacity for social impact.

In this sense, one can't understand 15-M without 7 April. And it may mean a movement in the streets without the special intervention and ownership claims, discourses and practices of groups such as "Youth Without Future." The alarming statistics of youth unemployment and insecurity were already signs of concern for sociologists linked to the PSOE and José Felix Tezanos or the IMF itself that has, more recently, dared to mention the risk of a "lost generation" in Spain.

### **The victories of 15-M and its risks: against the dictatorship of the markets, a rising movement**

Something has changed since 15-M. In Madrid you can breath the atmosphere of mobilisation. Of

what is (or should be) a demonstration: take to the streets, connect with ordinary people, expand the space as you can. Lose the fear. That we were told weeks before on posters of “Youth Without Future” [3]. And it was collectively shouted in the streets of Madrid (and in many other cities): “Without fear”. A fear that only we can shake off from the common, from the community. The great triumph of neoliberal politics has been its penetration into individual problems (in fear of work, of the future, of banks, of social disconnection). Only through collective channels, away from false individual solutions, can fear give way to other states of mind. And part of that fear has shaken us. That is the lesson that, collectively, we have lived. Surely, it has been the experience that many people do not participate in the rituals of protest and various expressions of the Left. And that is a gift to the radical Left: the possibility of politicization of new layers.

The keys to the success of the protest, and its continuation, are circulating, and are starting to be widely recognized. Despite some ambiguous and contradictory statements in the posters that had circulated in the days prior, it was perceived that there was a possibility of widening the social spectrum, to reach so-far demobilized sectors.

The tension between organization and spontaneity is shown, again, insoluble and false. There is no scope for strengthening the mobilization and grounding of organised experiences without a space for spontaneity; but there also isn't room for it without prior organizational work that is also open to the unexpected.

In Madrid, the work and vision of “Youth Without Future” has allowed this platform to become the essential reference pole right now — for its dynamism, its fighting spirit and its ability to forge alliances. A public and media appearance, tolerated so far, but we fear a change of sign in the short term.

But 15-M has also not been a youth movement or a false signal of intergenerational conflict. It was the coming of what may be a new citizens' movement — diverse, with apparent contradictions, but with even more possibilities. A movement, even one difficult to characterize, that was necessary and that breaks the inertia of defeat and pessimism that had overtaken the broader social Left.

And if it's exciting for the number of people who have gathered (the largest demonstrations against crisis since the General Strike), it's because most of the speeches are typical of words that the Left has been insistently repeating long before the outbreak of the crisis: the dictatorship of the markets and banks, against the social cuts, against this model of “democracy”. And that is a victory: socializing on the street are the flags of the anti-globalization movement, of students, of teachers and health workers in struggle over recent years, of honest and militant unionists.

One might say that the narrative is not finished, is not complete. Of course not. It lacks many things: analyses of environmental destruction, of the energy crisis, of the finitude of the planet. Also of patriarchy and the crisis of care. Or a story on immigration, immigration law or CIEs. That is what is missing. And many other things.

But it is a discourse and practice that must be kept company, which it is possible to construct along the road. The sectors that have built the resistance — from schools, workplaces, from the environmental movement, from feminism — should (and should be able to) fill in the content.

The 15-M movement and the grounded platforms that are emerging are a possibility that the Left and social movements can use to expand the audience for their ideas and practices. Because these movements, fortunately, don't arise from agreements between apparatuses, they are not experiences for discussion among the most conscious. It is, finally, an ongoing experience for the movement. It is, paraphrasing Brecht in his polemic with the “identities”, an experience that has “legs” and not

“roots”. These are the convergences that have a future: those who have “legs” (of marchers) and no “legs” (of a table).

The answer to this phenomenon of institutions and accommodation of the Left is symptomatic of the very success of the movement [4]. The stigmatization of the protests, the labels put on them, their underestimation and repression, are all palpable evidence of the concern they are causing. Some progressive intellectuals voices’ have asked us to be indignant and react. When we do, we should not offer alternatives to anti-systemic violence. It’s always the same story with those stuck in being “politically correct”.

The outlook for what comes after 15-M is uncertain. Of that there is no doubt. We know that more, however, will come on 22-M: more social cuts, less democracy.

We have always maintained that the “class struggle” is a long-winded battle. There are no shortcuts or magic bullets. Even when we know how to change the world. Neither 15-M nor what is happening now is a final lesson. But it has been a small tear in the normality of this democracy that gives a truncheon and anti-social orders under the spurious designs of what they call “market”.

Use this crack, shape spaces of resistance on the ground that don’t abandon the big problems, consolidate the spaces for the practice of resistance and of democracy that are the tasks that allowed us the cry of 15-M.

In mobilizing against the crisis and the fight against this world of looting, a small door has opened in this corner of the planet. Daniel Bensaid said that revolutions “arrive too late or too early, but always when they are not expected.” He also said that revolutions are a miracle, but we even have to prepare miracles. What has erupted in 15-M (if not before, in 7-A) is not a revolution, naturally. But it is a real opportunity to build a strong movement against the effects of the crisis. With intelligence and a good dose of virtue and fortune, you can start changing things.

And as we have seen and experienced in recent years such opportunities are not abundant.

We shouldn’t let it pass us by.

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**P.S.**

\* Original from written for the Viento Sur website:

<http://www.vientosur.info/articulosweb/noticia/?x=3922>

\* English translation from Left Flank blog:

<http://left-flank.blogspot.com/2011/05/revolutions-arrive-too-late-or-too.html>

\* Apologies in advance for errors in this rough translation, by Dr Tad, of which there are bound to be a few.

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## Footnotes

[1] This article, among other weaknesses, it is thought and written in a time when events occur at great speed. Changeability of the situation could alter the content and meaning of what is expressed here.

[2] Such as expressed by Daniel Bensaid, this was a “generation” of young installed in the “getting better” while today we are facing the “getting worse”.

[3] “No home, no gigs, no pension, no fear.”

[4] Just read the horrific statements of political leaders of the “size” by Jose Blanco and Ángel Pérez regard.