

# A 'feminist tsunami' - 'If we stop, the world stops': Behind the millions-strong women's strike that shook the Spanish state

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**On an International Women's Day (IWD) in which demonstrations took place in an unprecedented 177 countries, the Spanish state stood out as the place where the mobilisation for women's equality was biggest — at least five million, the greatest mobilisation for women's rights in history. Why?**

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There are many causes. To begin with, the #MeToo campaign of women film stars, media personalities and political figures coming out against sexual harassment by creeps in positions of power had a big impact in Spain, where *machismo* is all-pervasive. Yet that campaign wouldn't by itself have produced the explosion of protest from women of all generations and all walks of life that took place in 120 cities and towns across the peninsula on March 8.

This was the biggest Spanish mobilisation of women ever, and on an oceanic scale that recalled the May 15, 2011 protests and square occupations that launched the *indignado* movement and made it such a potent factor in politics.

One critical element, maybe the most important, was that Spain was the only country where IWD was called as a feminist general strike and seriously organised as such. It was to be a 24-hour "downing of tools" against women's double burden of wage labour (unequal with men) and domestic labour (entirely unpaid). It was also projected as a consumption strike and a day when women stopped work as carers. Its approach and demands were spelled out in the 8M Manifesto. Its all-embracing slogan was: "If we stop, the world stops."

## Wellsprings of a 'feminist tsunami' — decades of struggle

It might have been expected — the Spanish government of People's Party (PP) prime minister Mariano Rajoy certainly did — that such an initiative would be a fizzer, a fringe performance by the often anti-capitalist collectives that have kept IWD alive over the years but with no power of attraction for the mass of working women. How wrong that turned out to be.

March 8, 2018 had deep roots. Mobilisations such as this are built not only on previous gains and by the layers of activists that won them but also through the networks of associations and collectives created over the course of years of struggle — an activist infrastructure dating back to the underground fight against the Francoist dictatorship.

Feminist activists worked to overthrow the fascist dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. Under General Francisco Franco, women were completely subordinate to men: married women could not work and all women required permission from their father or husband to open a bank account, get a drivers licence or sign a contract. By 1978, as a result of years of difficult struggle against this oppression, the State Federation of Feminist Organisations (FEOF) was created during the transition from the Francoist dictatorship. The FEOF, now more commonly known as the Feminist Coordinating Committee, represents women's groups from across the Spanish state and is organised democratically in order to share experiences and debates as well as to organise activities.

The feminist movement was particularly strong in the 1980s, after the transition to democracy led to the election in 1982 of a social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government. The movement won the right to divorce and access to birth control and abortion, as well as campaigning against domestic violence and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer rights. Despite institutionalisation under the PSOE of parts of the movement into government bureaucracies in the 1980s and 1990s, 3000 women attended the Federation's thirtieth anniversary conference in Granada in 2009.

In March 2017, it was the FEOF that launched the 8M Commission in its call for a 24-hour strike and the effort to produce a common manifesto through a series of national assemblies. Local coordinating groups were launched across the Spanish state to contribute local and regional demands to the manifesto and build the strike. All of these groups were built by an existing network of women's groups, some politically aligned, but others not. The local organising committees, like the national assemblies, were based on open participation by organisations and individuals, with decisions made by majority vote of those present.

While this approach was well received, the role of the PSOE varied from place to place depending on the feminist politics of its elected representatives and grassroots activists. For example in Mérida (Extremadura), where the PSOE forms a minority administration on the local council, the Councillor for Women is a feminist activist who has participated in the organising assemblies with one vote like all others present. The council also provided funds without this in any way implying control. By contrast, even though the demonstrations were not driven from within governing institutions and were strictly politically unaligned, in some cities male PSOE councillors were widely criticised for marching with their party banner at the head of marches.

### **Austerity and *machismo***

Initially, the collectives' proposal for a 24-hour feminist general strike was campaigned for by the country's minority trade union confederations — such as the anarcho-syndicalist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and National Confederation of Labour (CNT) and the Rank-and-File Committees (Co.Bas) — but the idea quickly caught on in those workplaces where women workers predominate.

In the health and education sectors, the unions with greatest coverage — usually the relevant professional (that is, not explicitly ideological) associations — soon came out in support of the stoppage. An important example was the majority teachers union in Catalonia, USTEC-STEs (Education Workers Union of Catalonia). The reason was that women workers whose sacrifices have

been keeping public health and education going during years of austerity-driven funding cuts saw the strike as an invaluable occasion to express their anger.

They were joined by journalists, researchers, academics, authors, students and lawyers — the women in the professions that have been downgraded, underfunded and casualised during the years of the economic crisis. Women workers in the private sector — especially those in the worst-paid and most casualised sector — also grabbed the opportunity. A notable example was hotel cleaning where mainly migrant women have begun to organise themselves in the association The Kellys.

Women retired from working life — pensioners who receive €760 a month on average compared to €1200 for their male counterparts — or yet to enter it — women students who see their older sisters unable to find work in their field of study — were soon expressing support through student unions and pensioner associations.

Adding further energy to the growing protest wave was Spain's black history of murders of women by partners or ex-partners — 924 since records began in 2003. The town halls and squares of its cities have become the site of regular and impotent official ceremonies of rejection of lethal domestic violence: at the same time women have become increasingly afraid to go out at night because of increasing levels of harassment.

All these factors came together to produce Spain's "feminist tsunami" of IWD 2018 — an extraordinary mobilisation organised not by established unions or parties but by the women's movement itself.

## **Approaching March 8**

By late February, the surge in support for a strike that was being pushed by the minority union confederations was so evident that Spain's two main trade union confederations — the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Labour (UGT) — had no choice but to react.

They did so by announcing their own version of the strike: a morning and an afternoon two-hour stoppage. Because of the weight of CCOO and UGT within trade unionism in the Spanish state — and also because of the backing that their position received from the nationalist unions in the Basque Country — this was the form in which the feminist strike became known to the bulk of women workers. It was to the disgust of the forces who had originated the idea, especially many organising collectives.

Nonetheless, the CCOO and UGT mini-strike call was better than the effort of the main public servants' union, the Independent Trade Union and Public Servants Union Centre (CSIF): despite covering many women workers, the chief union of Spain's public servants didn't even call partial stoppages.

Despite these conflicts, which reflected both CCOO and UGT fears about being outflanked by their minority rivals but also genuine debate over how best to mobilise working women on the day, the strikes were always going to succeed as a demonstration of support for women's rights. That was already clear in the week before March 8 when media and social network commentary — not to mention conversations at home and in the nearby bar — centred on who would or should be joining the strike.

The announcement by Barcelona mayor Ada Colau that she and other women councillors of her Barcelona Together administration would not be working on March 8 and the support given by

Madrid mayor Manuela Carmena was followed by support from women media personalities, even including star interviewers from reactionary TV channels.

In the party political arena, Podemos led the way in building support, while Citizens and the PP said they supported action for women's rights but not an "ideologically based", "anti-capitalist" feminist strike. Women ministers like health minister Dolors Montserrat were sent onto talk-back radio and PP-friendly TV channels to decode this position.

In the end, the strike was supported by practically every important social organisation, becoming so popular — with over 80% support in polling — that even Rajoy emerged on March 8 with a purple ribbon on his lapel, to the amazement, amusement and disgust of the millions of women who have been suffering from his government's austerity policies.

## Participation

Despite its "redimensioning" by the CCOO and UGT — backed up by attempts by some PSOE lead regional governments to use the two-hour stoppage to undermine the call for a 24 hour strike — and despite an unresolved debate as to how men could best contribute — by also striking or by providing "minimum services" while women were on strike — Spain's feminist general strike was an enormous success, with people in the end taking part in whatever way they felt comfortable. According to CCOO and UGT figures, 5.9 million workers, overwhelmingly women and representing one in three workers in the Spanish state, stopped work on the day: 80% of workplaces were affected.

The biggest impacts were in:

- **Education.** In Catalonia, participation in the two-hour stoppages (between 1130 and 1330 and between 1600 and 1800) was "practically total" in high schools and universities (CCOO figure), while 20% of secondary teachers struck for the full 24 hours (USTEC-STEs figure). For the Valencian Country, all education unions put participation at 50%. In Andalusia, 90% of university students walked out.

Women student support for the strike was 90% in Madrid's high schools and 65% in its universities (CCOO figure).

- **Health.** According to the CCOO's health federation, participation reached 80% in the two-hour strikes in Catalonia and the Valencian Country and between 55% and 70% in Andalusia.

- **Transport.** For all of Spain, long-distance and regional rail services were slightly affected, interurban and suburban services more so (25% reduction in peak hour and 50 % in the rest of the day), and metro, tram and bus services — where women drivers are most common — most of all. In Barcelona, where the CGT is a major union presence, these services were cut by 50% in peak hour and 75% for the rest of the day.

- **Media.** This was the sector where the strike was particularly visible, with women TV and radio presenters absent from many stations and programming adjusted to fit. Women media professionals were also present in building the strike, with their manifesto in support signed by over 7000 fellow workers.

Adherence to the strike in other sectors such as heavy industry and commerce was by small minorities, but not without important exceptions in services where women predominate. For example, according to CCOO Catalonia, women cleaners walked off the job in major sites like

Barcelona airport and the SEAT and Nissan car factories. According to the CGT, its flying information pickets led to the precautionary closure of shopping centres while women in call centres responded to management threats of sackings with go-slows.

The strike was also accompanied by other protest techniques usual in the Spanish state, such as roadblocks and street and square occupations. In Catalonia, major highways were cut while the centre of Madrid was brought to a standstill from early morning by rallies and sit-downs.

Many women interviewed on the day said they fully supported the goals of the strike but simply could not risk participation for fear of losing their job. They reflected passive support so widespread that even the Spanish equivalent of Australia's shock-jocks were nearly reduced to silence by a turnout for an action that had begun as a "subversive plot".

Despite the presence of long-standing feminists within the ranks of the majority trade union leaderships, the decision not to support the 24-hour strike was based partly on the idea that it would not be successful. The success of the strike demonstrated that huge numbers of mostly women workers are prepared to take action, leading some to recognise that only calling for a two-hour stoppage was a mistake. Meanwhile reports of an up-tick in affiliations to the minority anarcho-syndicalist trade unions and other more radical unions have demonstrated their increasing support as a result of the strike.

## Assessments

How did the various protagonists of March 8 assess it? Patricia Araguren, member of the Madrid organising collective made this judgment on the impact of the differential union support in the March 10 edition of the web-based *El Confidencial*:

*We were able to do the 24-hour general strike thanks to the legal cover that unions like the CGT, CNT and Co.Bas gave us. [1] UGT and CCOO called two-hour strikes per shift, which was not what we were calling for ourselves, but we still consider it positive compared to last year, when they called for nothing.*

Elena Blasco, the CCOO's women and equality officer defended her union's work, claiming that an important job of consciousness-raising was done through the 3000 workplace meetings it organised and through statements issued by workplace committees. She also left the door open to CCOO supporting a 24-hour strike on IWD 2019.

For its part, the UGT showed its nervousness by claiming on its official Twitter account in the middle of the day that the two-hour strikes were the only ones having real impact, only to later delete the comment. UGT general secretary Pepe Álvarez stated on his blog that the strike "has served to show both the [Rajoy] government and all the political parties that we are going to struggle to achieve the elimination from our lives of the wage and pension gap, harassment and abuse."

The CNT in the Basque Country commented: "We consider the calling of the first 24-hour feminist general strike as an achievement, despite the work of disinformation carried out by some media close to the government, the boycott of CCOO, UGT, ELA and LAB [the Basque nationalist unions], in addition to the obstacles put in the way of maintaining minimum services by the [Basque] government."

The CGT was even harsher, denouncing "the shameful and miserable stance maintained by the trade unions of the regime (UGT and CCOO), directed at boycotting the actions that had been planned for

the March 8 day of struggle and serving — once again — as support to those who are to blame for many of our society's inequalities."

Social movement analyst Nuria Alabao, cited in the El Confidencial account, stressed that the Spanish women's movement had been maintaining since the 1970s that so-called general strikes were not general at all, because they did not take into account the unpaid, usually domestic, labour of women. This analysis got no sympathy from the trade unions of the day, but the brutal casualisation of the workforce carried out under the economic crisis had brought home that if the system was really to be affected all forms of labour had to stop.

According to Rafa Mayoral, in charge of Podemos's relations with social movements, the strike had also been a protest against the regime of permanent uncertainty in people's lives produced by labour market "reform", felt most of all, but not only, by women. The proposal of the feminist general strike had hit such a powerful nerve — and drawn many men out onto the streets — because it had been developed on the understanding that "all parts of life are interdependent".

### **Huge turnouts, radical demands**

The strike was accompanied by demonstrations that were unprecedentedly large, even according to the often-conservative official figures. In Barcelona, 200,000 marched (for the organisers, 600,000) while in Madrid the figure was 170,000 (for the organisers, half a million). By contrast, the biggest IWD demonstration of recent years was Madrid's 2017 march, put at 40,000 by the authorities: the 2015 Barcelona IWD march drew only 4000.

Other cities matched these figures, producing demonstrations comparable to the biggest seen on any issue. Some official examples: Andalusian capital Sevilla 120,000; Valencia (capital, Valencian Country); 100,000; Bilbao (Basque Country) 60,000; Zaragoza (capital of Aragon) 37,000.

In centres with less of a history of mass demonstrations, the exceptional character of March 8 was even clearer. For example, 13,000 marched in the Galician city of Pontferrada, a turnout as large as previous protests against mine closures or for a decent public health system. In Santander, capital of Cantabria, 22,000 turned out for a march that local police admitted was bigger than anyone could remember.

The scene was repeated in a string of Spain's 50 provincial capitals, sign that March 8 was on a scale similar to the indignado revolt. In Andalusia alone the turnout in the seven provincial capitals (apart from Sevilla) was: Málaga, 70,000; Granada, 50,000; Córdoba, 15,000; Almería, 10,000; Huelva, 10,000; Jaén, 5000 and Cadiz, 5000.

Writing on the internet commentary site Magnet on March 9, Esther Miguel Trula tried to calculate the likely total number mobilised, based on the numbers marching in the 14 largest cities and adjusting for official understatement and organiser overstatement. She arrived at a conservative figure of five million, over 10% of the population of the Spanish state.

The demands of the marches were radical, reflecting not only the politics of many of the IWD organising collectives but also the angry mood among the tide of younger woman facing the uncertainty of an economic future in a casualised labour market but the ongoing certainty of machismo. Examples of lead banners were: "There Is No Revolution Without Feminism" (Valencia), "United in Diversity Against The Patriarchy And Capital" (Palma), "We Are Striking To Change The World" (Madrid) and "Patriarchy and Capital, Criminal Alliance" (Girona). A favourite placard on the marches was "We Are The Granddaughters Of The Witches You Couldn't Burn!"



In Catalonia, the involvement of the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDR) guaranteed a March 8 where chants of “the [independent Catalan] Republic will be feminist or it won’t be at all” rung out in the demonstrations in Barcelona, Girona, Tarragona and Lleida.

Leire, member of the Biscay feminist collective that organised the immense march that occupied central Bilbao explained to El Diario what she thought was happening: “The place has come to a halt because the people have come out to shout that they don’t want this system that crushes and kills us.”

## Conclusion

The best gauge of the success of any popular mobilisation is how its enemies and false friends react to it. By that measure, March 8 was an overwhelming victory as, in the words of one newspaper headline, the politicians “went to bed blokey and woke up feminist”.

The PP’s and Citizens’ line had to change abruptly, symbolised by Rajoy’s miraculous transformation into a sensitive purple ribbon wearer. Only six weeks earlier, when asked about women being paid less than men in the same job, he had responded: “We won’t get involved in that”. From this indifference and patronising talk about the strike as “posh” and “trendy” the PP line shifted rapidly to acceptance that “it was something very positive that I hope turns out to be useful” (Community of Madrid PP premier Cristina Cifuentes) and that “feminism is part of the basic values of our democracy” (Andrea Levy, PP deputy secretary of research and program).

For the official opposition, in the words PSOE federal secretary Pedro Sánchez: “we are facing an historic moment for Spanish society, one led by the women of this country. From today onwards, nothing will be the same in the struggle for equality.” On March 9, Carmen Calvo, the PSOE’s shadow minister for equality, called on the Rajoy government to immediately negotiate the adoption of bills on gender equality and the elimination of the gender wage gap that have been tabled by the PSOE and Unidos Podemos.

The PSOE’s inclusion of Unidos Podemos as a partner in this particular struggle is an indication that Spain’s social democracy is aware that its rival for left hegemony has greater credibility within the feminist movement and that a premature PSOE attempt to posture as Spanish feminism’s exclusive voice in parliament would backfire. The PSOE’s tactic for the moment is to present the movement as above party politics. In the March 9 words of its Spanish Congress spokesperson Margarita Robles: “Yesterday’s demands by women were transverse and no party has the right to capitalise on the spontaneous movement of women.”

For Unidos Podemos, March 8 represents a big boost given both the support it gave to building the day and the capacity of its women MPs to champion the demands of the struggle. As Unidos Podemos Congress spokesperson Irene Montoro told TV interviewer Ana Rosa Quintana on March 9 (after thanking the feminist movement for having brought off the mobilisations “against wind and tide”):

*Citizens said that this strike was a strike of communists. The PP said it had been called by [Podemos leader] Pablo Iglesias. They worked for weeks to smear the feminist movement and the calling of the strike [while] the PSOE didn’t respect the 24-hour strike that had been called ... The 24-hour strike was needed so as to shout out to the whole world that we women are treading strong and that we are here to defend our rights and that it’s now impossible not to talk about feminism in Spain ... Feminism is Spain’s banner for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and there are economic and social foundations that have to change.*

What a shift from May 15, 2011, the beginning of the indignado movement, when some women on that day put up a banner in Madrid's occupied Puerta del Sol saying "The Revolution Will Be Feminist Or Not At All" and they were booed by some and the banner torn down.

In a March 13 comment, the Castilian Left [2] said:

*Not seven years have passed since that shameful episode. Let it serve as proof of the unstoppable advance of our conquest of rights and freedoms as women, as well as of the accelerated apprenticeship in the meaning of feminism of the popular movement and of society in general.*

The 8M Commission had a shorter summary of the meaning of that amazing day: it represented "the end of patience". The Commission has decided to continue to organise through regular assemblies as well as to throw its weight behind other mobilisations that can only have gained inspiration from March 8 - including the ongoing mobilisations being called by the National Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Public Pensions.

Its most recent day of action for decent pensions on March 17 mobilised hundreds of thousands despite torrential downpours, providing further evidence that IWD 2018 was not a one-off, but the beginning of a new wave of resistance against the multiple injustices of life in the Spanish state.

**Julian Coppins and Dick Nichols**

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**P.S.**

\* March 20, 2018 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*:  
<http://links.org.au/women-strike-spain>

\* Julian Coppins is a Podemos and Anticapitalistas activist, based in Mérida. Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly's European correspondent, based in Barcelona. A shorter version of this article has appeared on its web site.

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## Footnotes

[1] The right to strike legally, providing a series of exacting procedures is followed, is guaranteed under article 28.2 of the Spanish Constitution. Trade unions with recognised workplace representation are therefore able to call a legal strike if they can show that they have followed these procedures.

[2] The Castilian Left (Izquierda Castellana) is a left-nationalist party opposed to the Castilian establishment's domination of the Spanish state and in solidarity with the struggle for self-determination of the oppressed nationalities within the state, such as the Catalans, Basques and Galicians.