

# The long May 68 in the Spanish state

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**In the decade from 1964 to 1974, just before the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, time accelerated in the Spanish state. It was the final years of the Franco regime. A time when changes around in the world were multiplying. A time when new experiences were proliferating, led by the political and social left.**

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In the 1960s Spain experienced significant economic development and the appearance of political currents related to Opus Dei or around people like Manuel Fraga Iribarne (the leader years later under democracy of the Popular Party) within the regime which, through very limited cosmetic changes, sought to gain a new legitimacy for dictatorship with the Western powers as an acceptable authoritarian regime.

Many years passed before the workers' movement recovered from the defeat of 1939. It is very important to keep in mind that one of the successes of the dictatorship had been to break the transmission of ideas, traditions and experiences of organizations from the left to the next generations. There was not a living memory of its history. The hegemonic (and almost unique) story was that of the victors, that of the Franco regime. Similarly, the autarkic Franco regime had made it very difficult to access literary production, economic debate and socialist and anti-fascist political views, but in truth it has never succeeded in imposing intellectual isolation and self-sufficiency. There were several channels that allowed the osmosis of ideas and currents.

Thanks to the election of workers' commissions in workplaces, new structures were created during the prolonged rise of social struggles from 1965 to 1970. This movement broke the mould of the national trade union federation - the fascist vertical union of which membership was compulsory - and overwhelmed the control of the Falangist hierarchy on the main labour nuclei. Tens of thousands of young workers experienced an important process of politicization in professional schools, workshops, factories and workers' neighbourhoods.

During these years, a student movement had appeared capable of toppling the Spanish University Union (UES), a fascist obligatory membership organization, and built the Democratic Union of University Students (SDEU) in faculties and technical schools. A unique experience under the dictatorship because a democratic and inclusive trades unionism was built in an open and public way, in an open challenge to academic, police and political authorities. For a few years the student movement conquered "spaces of freedom" in the study centres in a kind of student "dual power".

The revolts of the sixties were the expression of the profound discontent that was aroused by the model of exploitation and consumption among layers of youth in the Spanish state and increasingly

in the industrial proletariat. They also expressed the discomfort and distance of important sectors of the social left concerning the proposals for integration into a “reformed” Francoism, the phantom socialist opposition and even, in some areas, mistrust of Eurocommunist positions, which represented a majority in the opposition movement to Francoism.

All this made possible the spectacular growth of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), but also of a new left, the embryo of the revolutionary left of the 1970s, with an important influence among working class youth – especially in the student sector. Maoists, anarchists and Trotskyites formed various organizations. The Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) – Fourth International, ancestor of the current Anticapitalistas, was created in 1970. It originated from the Popular Liberation Front (FLP) which until its dissolution in 1969 had a large role in the leadership of the student movement.

### **May 68 in Spain began in October 67**

In the Spanish universities in 1967-1968, the mythical month of May 1968 passed without any particularly salient events to mention. Indeed, as noted by André Lwoff (Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine, 1965) and Jacques-Lucien Monod, when both refused their appointment as Doctor honoris causa by the University of Madrid, the whole year was exceptional. Lwoff said: “In other words, in Spain, the university does not exist”. Indeed, the open gap between the student body and the Franco regime had rendered the university institution bankrupt. In most universities, in particular that of Madrid, the norm was classrooms closed by ministerial order and occupied by the police, and permanent mobilizations of students, with their leaders sanctioned and judged by the Court of Public Order (TOP) or actively sought for arrest. We can say that the Spanish universities experienced a small, but long, May in 1968.

The Spanish 68 originated in previous, very agitated, years. In 1965 the 1<sup>st</sup> Free Assembly of the Students of Barcelona was held and the Spanish University Union (SEU – the official union) collapsed. The attempt by the regime to create Professional Student Associations (EPAs), to substitute for the SEU, has also failed. In Barcelona, the Democratic Union of University Students of Barcelona (SDEUB) was born in the monastery of the Capuchin monks of Sarriá, after free elections and a debate attended by thousands of students. Several student leaders were expelled from the university. From there, the organizations that were created in the rest of the state were called SDEU, adding the acronym of the city. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, student representatives from the universities of Barcelona, Bilbao, Seville, Valencia, Oviedo, Valladolid, Zaragoza and Madrid met in Barcelona to sign a solidarity pact and declare: “in the face of any repressive measures taken against any district, all others will feel affected.”

In 1966, free and massive assemblies and union mobilizations continued. In Madrid, Professors Tierno Galván (later Mayor of Madrid), Aranguren and three other lecturers were expelled from the university; as were Manuel Sacristán and 68 other lecturers in Barcelona. The TOP multiplied the trials of representatives of the Universities of Catalonia and Madrid. The long and exemplary strike of workers of Laminación de Bandas in Frío de Echevarri [a small town near Bilbao] had a great echo among students across the Spanish state, who developed new forms of solidarity. The regime attempted to seal its “constitutional” continuity through the Organic State Law, the first attempt to institutionalize the Franco regime without Franco, which was accompanied the following year by the Fundamental Law of the Kingdom.

On January 7, 1967, there was a strong student presence in the demonstrations organized by the CCOO [Workers’ Commissions] in Madrid, Barcelona and other cities. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, in Madrid, the SDEUM (Madrid Student Democratic Union) was created. On October 27<sup>th</sup>, students again

participated massively in the demonstrations organized by the CCOO in many cities. In October, all over the country free elections were held called by the SDEU to elect delegates and impose them against the will of the academic authorities. At the first preparatory coordination meeting of the National Students' Congress (RCP) in Valencia, there was an attempt to coordinate all the universities. The repression against it provoked the first general strike of students under the Franco regime. The assassination of the Valencian student Rafael Guijarro was the work of the Social Police Brigade (BPS). On March 26<sup>th</sup>, the government ordered the closure of the science students' headquarters in Madrid, which provoked a wave of strikes and demonstrations in protest. In December, the government attempted, in vain, to "suppress" the leadership of the student movement through a severe sanction: the expulsion from the university from all the elected officials of the Faculty of Political and Economic Sciences of Madrid.

In January of 1968, this Faculty was closed with all students punished by the loss of their registration. There were 39 expulsions in the faculties of Science and Philosophy - which were also closed - in Madrid and 137 expulsions in Barcelona, mostly in technical schools. Assemblies, demonstrations and clashes with the police extended to Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Oviedo, Malaga, Valencia, Valladolid. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, the sixth and last RCP took place in Seville. The representatives from Madrid did not come because of a disagreement with the moderate orientation that the PCE was trying to impose. Several student representatives were detained. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, the universities of Madrid and Valencia were closed. The clashes between students and the fascists of *Defensa Universitaria de Madrid* were violent and continued in the following days. The Council of Ministers sets up a university police force to occupy the campuses and appointed a special judge for "student crimes". On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the University of Seville was closed, and major demonstrations take place in Zaragoza, Bilbao, Granada, Pamplona, Santiago and Barcelona. On the same day, in Madrid, the expulsion of five faculties led to the continuation of trade union activity, despite academic closures, and cultural activities, including self-organized "parallel classes", sit-ins and demonstrations inside and in front of the university buildings.

On March 26<sup>th</sup> the students won a first victory: the resignation of Education Minister Lora Tamayo; she was replaced on April 14<sup>th</sup> by Villar Palasí (Opus Dei), to promote a university reform that made possible the profitability of teaching and the pacification of campuses. His plan was based on two measures that quickly foundered: the issuance of university debt (a public financial instrument) and the decree-law that set up student associations. On that same day, the authorities were forced to close the University of Santiago.

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968, students from different cities joined the CCOO Mayday demonstrations. Throughout the month, the students showed their solidarity with the workers at Standard (metallurgy) and Pegaso (truck manufacturing) in Madrid and SEAT (cars) in Barcelona. Similarly, they boycotted the lecture at the Madrid Law Faculty by Servan-Schreiber (a French neo-capitalist liberal politician) with cries of "down with the Europe of the monopolies" and "long live socialist Europe".

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, the universities of Valencia and Madrid were reopened. On the same day a district assembly was held which ended with a massive protest demanding cancellation of the sanctions on the student representatives. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, at the Faculty of Economics in Madrid, a recital in Catalan by the singer-songwriter and poet Raimon was held. The subsequent mobilization went beyond the control of the police escorting Princess (now Queen) Sofia. The students went to the centre of the city, after 3 hours of barricades on the university campus and on national road VI, with slogans like "Amnesty and Freedom", "students with workers, police with bankers", "Commissions to Power", "Madrid with Paris", "Paris with Madrid" and the usual "one solution: revolution".

In October and after the changes of perspective, activists who had learned from the French May rejected a form of organization that had been very useful in the past, but which facilitated the repression of the regime in the new stage, and the SDEU elections failed. They did not have the same echo as in the previous period. In addition, hundreds of students and oppositionists were in prison or in hiding, even forced into exile. Under these conditions, the SDEUM was really emptied of its substance and it imploded.

Most progressive students, stimulated by repression, tried new forms of organization based on the French example. They initiated "critical trials" of teachers and implemented a policy based on "exemplary action" with an anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian orientation. A broad sector of students influenced by the FLP developed clearly anti-capitalist action committees. For its part, the PCE was trying to renew the formula of student councils and the platform of trade unions with a more academic policy subordinate to the reformist project "Alliance of forces of labour and culture". On December 1<sup>st</sup>, massive clashes with the police took place in Barcelona and Madrid. In January 1969, the rectorate of Barcelona was invaded by the students. The "national" flag was burned, and the bust of Franco destroyed. The rejection of the red and gold monarchical flag with the imperial eagle spread to other universities such as Valencia.

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, Enrique Ruano, a law student in Madrid, a member of a bourgeois family and an activist in the Popular Liberation Front (FLP), arrested a few hours previously, was killed by members of the political police. Beyond student demonstrations, other sectors of society were mobilizing, and a general strike took place at all universities.

The reaction of the regime was not slow. It put an end to the period of (timid) policies of "openness" and "liberalization". On January 24<sup>th</sup>, a state of emergency was declared throughout the territory of the Spanish state. This extended the measures in force in Guipúzcoa since August 1968 following the execution by ETA of the provincial head of the BPS, Melitón Manzanas, in response to the killing of the ETA leader Txabi Echebarrieta. Manuel Fraga Iribarne, a minister under Franco, said after the murder of Ruano by the police and the declaration of the state of emergency, fearing that Spain would reproduce situations like that of France: "Prevention is better than cure. We are not going to wait for a day in May for the later return to order will be more difficult and costlier."

In February, there were deportations of leftist professors and opposition members. More than 500 arrests of students and workers. 230 activists from the CCOO and student activists were prosecuted. The regime brought its technocratic liberalization phase to a halt. The second package of measures to strengthen the regime was underway: the renewal of the military agreement with the United States (use of bases on Spanish territory) and the appointment of Juan Carlos Borbón as the future successor of Franco as head of state.

### **Specific characteristics**

The student movement in Spain developed in very different conditions and ways from the May movement in France. First, the conditions imposed by the dictatorship made the politicisation and the consciousness of the students and their organization difficult, but they were a catalyst for rebellion. The Spanish student movement was led by youth who felt uncomfortable within the narrow and impoverished cultural boundaries imposed by dictatorship and with the repressive and asphyxiating customs and morals of national Catholicism in power.

Secondly, the numerical weight of Spanish students was lower than that of students in the rest of the industrialized countries. According to the National Statistical Institute (INE), the number of students enrolled in higher education was 160,008 in 1967-1968, including 115,590 in faculties, 38,695 in

higher technical schools, 4,005 in Arts and 1,718 in military education. Therefore, the “civil” university students in the Spanish state were 158,000 against 550,000 in France or 413,000 in Italy.

Most students came from bourgeois or middle-class families, and university students from working class families represented only 4%. Therefore, the students, mainly male, were the children of the winners of the civil war and, in any case, belonged to the bourgeoisie and the professional middle classes that were the social base of the regime.

University education in Francoist Spain was a secondary objective. According to UNESCO, for the academic year 1964-65 the state spent US \$2.7 per capita for university education; Ghana 4.2; Portugal 4.3; Italy 12.8; the USA 92; the USSR 113 and Japan 137.6. This meant that in the academic year 1964-65, university students who received some assistance in acquiring books were only 14% and those who had a scholarship to cover their expenses were only 1.4% of the student body. In 1967, the state budget devoted 1.13% to universities and 22.5% to the army, the Civil Guard and the police.

### **Common elements with revolts in other countries**

The dictatorship had brought the issue of freedoms to the forefront and encouraged democratic aspirations, but logically the damage of capitalism generated an anti-capitalist social consciousness and struggle. The student movement expressed the rejection of a generation towards one of the fundamental functions of the university in society: the class formation and the reproduction of the dominant elites. A rejection that in turn the movement itself nourished.

The democratic dimension of the student movement led it to criticize the territorial organization associated with the Franco regime in an elementary way. University students from all over the Spanish state were receptive and in solidarity with the democratic aspirations of historical nationalities. The questioning of Francoism also became the questioning of the Spanish unitarian and centralist state. By sheer democratic coherence, the movement quickly challenged the model and function assigned to the university by the capitalist system. Hence the slogans for the “popular university” or the “democratic university”. Criticism of the role of the institution soon became criticism of the capitalist system itself in whose service it was conceived.

The interest aroused by the student movement in France in May 1968 in a large sector multiplied exponentially in the student sector of the Popular Liberation Front, an organization in which many student leaders of the time were active. The Raimon festival of May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1968 at the Faculty of Economics and the subsequent mobilization of more than 6,000 students who confronted the police for hours in the streets of Madrid, were recalled by the singer recalled in “18 de maig a la villa” in the verses “Per one quantes hores/ens vàrem feel lliures,/I qui ha sentit la llibertat/te més forces per viure” (for a few hours/we felt free/and who has felt freedom/has more strength to live).

The goals of the French students and working-class youth were objectives, forms of organization and struggle that many activists in the Spanish state thought they had to emulate. The FLP, whose Federation for Foreign Affairs was involved in the Parisian workers’ mobilizations and the student barricades, was the organization most open to new approaches, particularly in the student sector. The texts of Daniel Bensaïd and the JCR were added to the writings, already circulating, by Ernest Mandel. From a living experience, we integrated into our ranks the discourse of the current which, in our opinion, had best interpreted the event and proposed the most appealing strategic approach.

A left to the left of the very powerful PCE emerged. A new left that gave democratic political content to its fight against Francoism but overcame the narrowness of the reformist outlook limited to the

“recovery of liberties” through an inter-class pact and orientation to the reformist sectors of Francoism. This left posed the necessity of the struggle for socialism and the socialist revolution.

Very quickly, the anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical vectors present in Berlin, Rome and Paris, permeated the movement. And with them also the need to consider together the model of life and the model of society. Similarly, in the Spanish state the student movement of late Francoism was the embryo of the recent developments of the so-called new social movements: feminism, ecology, pacifism.

Hannah Arendt’s comments on the attitude of young people in Berkeley, Rome or Paris in the Sixties are also applicable to the new generation of activists in the Spanish State: They showed “determination to act, their joy in action and their confidence in the ability to change things with their own efforts.”

### **Political consequences**

The student movement under the Franco regime was an element of youth politicization and a catalyst for broader social processes, as had previously occurred in the Second Republic, which Trotsky masterfully described with the metaphor of the play whose first act is opened by the students, but whose second act demands the presence of the working classes.

The dictatorship lost its legitimacy among the children of the sectors which constituted its social base, which made it very difficult to renew the political frameworks of the regime and contributed to the erosion of its support in the middle classes. The student movement under Franco’s regime was a particularly important political player in the process of questioning the fascist military dictatorship. It helped to disrupt the cosmetic operations of the regime favoured by the so-called “opening” sectors and dynamited the various manoeuvres to maintain institutions of supervision and control of university students.

We can say that Francoism lost the university and began to lose the factories, which hindered its legitimation, but also the recruitment of new elites. 1968 marked the end of a period of opening of the regime and the beginning of another: the senility of late Francoism.

**Manuel Garí**

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