

## **The uneven development of (mass) strikes in France and Spain**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses the strikes in recent years against the dominant government strategies of crisis management in France and Spain. It argues that there is a marked difference in the dynamics of the strikes in these two countries: whereas the stoppages in Spain came close to a mass strike in a Luxemburgian sense with new forms of working class consciousness and organisation emerging, the same cannot be said of France.

### **KEYWORDS**

Strikes in France and Spain, Government strategies of crisis management, New forms of working-class consciousness and organisation

## I Introduction

Each economic crisis can lead people to question capitalism and has, therefore, the potential to demonstrate that capitalism could end. One of the possible historical roles of mass strikes is to lead to this end. In the current finance-driven over-accumulation crisis, however, this is not what is happening. So far, the mass strikes and protest movements have only been demanding the withdrawal of austerity measures, and this has been ignored, on the whole, by governments and decisions-makers at the European level. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that class struggles cannot be measured solely by establishing whether demands were fulfilled. It is important to take into account their contribution to the development of class consciousness, which also occurs in situations of partial defeat. Rosa Luxemburg stated that mass strikes are “the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution”<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, defeats can turn out to be steps in the direction of a revolutionary struggle.

In order to assess the crisis protests in Spain and France, we will proceed as follows: firstly, we will explain general features of general strikes and mass strikes and will lay out the framework of our analysis. Secondly, we will present the union landscape in the two countries. Moreover, we will recapitulate the development of the most important class struggles in France and Spain between 2010 and 2014, as well as the attempt of an EU-wide strike in 2012. Thirdly, we will assess which of the characteristics of mass strikes are visible in the class struggles in France and Spain. Finally, we will compare the development of the working class struggles in both countries.

### 1. Mass and general strikes

Luxemburg saw three attributes of mass strikes that are relevant for the crisis in the EU. Firstly, she stated that political and economic demands come together. Secondly, she underlined that defeats are also significant for the working class becoming aware of its interests. Finally, she highlighted the need to go beyond national borders, pointing out that workers should consider

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<sup>1</sup> LUXEMBURG, Rosa. *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union*. Detroit: Marxist Educational Society of Detroit, 1925, p. 18. [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/>]

revolutions in other countries as “a part of their own social and political history”.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, Luxemburg meant more than a general strike when she spoke of a mass “strike”. In her view, a mass strike occurs if labour unrest is accompanied by a wave of small and big economic and political strikes.<sup>3</sup> However, general strikes are undeniably part of the mass strike because they carry, most of the time, a revolutionary imaginary. Even if she did not see the mass strike as the “big evening” before the revolution – as the French syndicalists did, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the general strike – she conceived of it as a time when the working class organises itself to prepare for the revolution. This suggests that both the mass strike and the general strike have a role to play in processes resulting in a break with capitalism. Nevertheless, there are different types of general strikes and – although they all carry a revolutionary imaginary – they are not meant, in Western Europe in this period of crisis, to bring down bourgeois democracy. Rather, they aimed at demanding that certain decisions in fiscal politics be withdrawn.

In this text, we use the term general strike as it is used in the countries we are looking at. In France, for many foreign observers, a general strike broke out in 2010. But for the French working class, no such thing happened. The general understanding is that a general strike involves all economic sectors, and that a substantial share of workers participate. The same understanding of general strike applies in Spain, and we use the term as it is employed by the unions when they call for strike mobilisation.

In order to define the mass strike we use Luxemburg’s defining features of a mass strike as selected by Jörg Nowak and Alexander Gallas:

First of all, they disrupt political life, affect public discourse and provoke massive responses from governments or other state bodies. A second central aspect is the mobilizing character of mass strikes for the working class: Workers experience the power that goes along with collective action, gain experience in political struggles and see the need for organization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-23.

<sup>4</sup> NOWAK, Jörg; GALLAS, Alexander. “Mass Strikes Against Austerity in Western Europe – A Strategic Assessment”. *Global Labour Journal*. vol. 5, n. 3, 2014, pp. 306-320.

The second defining feature is what is best translated as class consciousness and can develop in the course of mass struggles.<sup>5</sup> It is one of the most difficult features to observe, and we aim to assess it through the development of struggles in Spain and France from 2010 onwards.

Furthermore, we add a feature also emphasised by Luxemburg, which we consider central: The fact that a mass strike cannot be declared from above by a union or a party. In other words, it cannot be switched on and off as desired and cannot be steered into a preferred direction.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Case studies: France/Spain (2010-4)

Labour unions are, of course, important actors in strikes. In our two countries, they share similar features: French and Spanish unions are characterised by a low level of institutionalisation and, in particular, by a divide according to political and religious orientation.<sup>7</sup> The low level of institutionalisation is expressed, for example, in a lack of opportunities for collective bargaining and the non-existence of strike funds. Additionally, unions in both countries are supported financially by the state.<sup>8</sup> A difference, however, can also be noted: whereas union density is notoriously low in France (7.7 per cent), it roughly reaches the OECD average in Spain (17.5 per cent).<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the biggest unions in both countries have been dominated by the Communist Party: in Spain, *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) and in France, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT). Their main competitors are unions linked to the Socialist Party: in France, *Force Ouvrière* (FO) and the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT), and in Spain, the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT). In the 1990s, a left-wing union was founded in France that criticised both the CGT and the social democratic unions: *SUD Solidaires*. Specific to Spain's union landscape are several syndicalist unions and two syndicalist federations of notable size: the CNT

<sup>5</sup> LUXEMBURG. *Mass Strike*. Op. Cit., pp. 27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-23; MOODY, Kim. "General strike, Mass Strike". 2012. [<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3679>]

<sup>7</sup> VANDAELE, Kurt. "Sustaining or abandoning 'Social Peace'. Strike Developments and Trends in Europe since the 1990s". 2011. [[http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=kurt\\_vandaele](http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=kurt_vandaele)]

<sup>8</sup> CEBOLLA, Hector; ORTIZ, Luis. "Political Mobilisation and Models of Trade Unionism: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective". DemoSoc Working Paper. Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2011, p. 10; ANDOLFATTO, Dominique; LABBÉ, Dominique. "Retraites: les faux-semblants d'un mouvement social". *Le Débat*. Paris: Gallimard, 2011, pp. 72-80.

<sup>9</sup> OECD 2012.

(*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*) and the CGT (*Confederación General del Trabajo*).

In France and Spain, strikes compensate for the low level of institutionalised collective bargaining. They are often used as “a weapon of protest and demonstration” and usually are based on mass mobilisations aimed at demonstrating the power of the unions.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we can expect mass strikes to occur quite easily in the two countries. Finally, traditional unions, as in the rest of Western Europe, are on the defensive and have lost structural power in recent decades due to the relocation and shrinking of industries.<sup>11</sup>

A last point needed to comprehend the current situation is that Spain, in 2010, along with Portugal, Italy, Ireland and Greece was one of the most indebted countries of the EU and could have been bankrupted. In this respect, France is better off. Nevertheless, there have been discussions to add France to the list. Moreover, the EU Commission has been imposing austerity measures on several EU countries simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> Some countries are more affected by the crisis and more prone to the emergence of resistance movements, but Spain and France are also even in their uneven development: they have to implement so-called cuts and privatise state-owned companies in order to attract capital.

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<sup>10</sup> VANDAELE, Kurt. “Sustaining or abandoning ‘Social Peace’...”. Op. Cit., p.16.

<sup>11</sup> GUMBRELL-MCCORMICK, Rebecca; HYMAN, Richard. “Trade Unions in Western Europe: Hard Times”. *Hard Choices*, 2013. [<http://column.global-labour-university.org/2013/09/trade-unions-in-western-europe-hard.html>]

<sup>12</sup> GILMORE, Oisin. “Europe Forged in Crisis: The Emergence and Development of the EU”. 2014 [<https://viewpointmag.com/2014/10/26/europe-forged-in-crisis-the-emergence-and-development-of-the-eu/>]

## 2.1 The Protests in France

In 2009, the first “day of action” (a one-day national strike accompanied by demonstrations) related to the crisis took place in France.<sup>13</sup> Well-known forms of resistance, namely “bossnapping” and sabotage, also reappeared that year. These methods are mostly used against mass dismissals and are effective because there is no need to mobilise a large number of workers or to wait for the union’s approval. Moreover, “bossnapping” grabs the attention of the media and helps workers to pull their weight at the negotiation table (there are dismissals, but people obtain big compensations).<sup>14</sup> According to the Institut Supérieur du Travail,<sup>15</sup> the new forms of resistance have replaced mass action. At the same time, the opposite tendency, that is, to see the inability to cope with pressures caused by exploitation as an individual failure, is also strongly developed in France, as the recent increase in work-related suicides demonstrates.<sup>16</sup>

In June 2010, nationwide protests started after the decision of the government to increase both the retirement age and the minimum age for a full pension. This decision was part of the measures taken to reduce public debt and thus related to the management of the crisis. Almost immediately, all the major unions started protesting against the new pensions law. The protest gained in intensity in September after the summer holiday break and declined rapidly after the positive vote of the Parliament on 27 October 2010. However, the mobilisation of different sectors and generations, as well as the fact that economic blockades took place, gave the impression that France was entering an unprecedented period of mass strike. So what happened?

First of all, two new elements dominated the protest wave. One of them was the concerted action of the *intersyndicale*: a committee where the unions decided the course of action together. The intersyndicale gained legitimacy during the 2009 days of action.<sup>17</sup> The other element was that people expected

<sup>13</sup> CROZAT, Dominique; GAUTHIER, Elisabeth; DUMAS, Maryse. “Crise et mouvement social en France“. Entretien avec Maryse Dumas, dirigeante nationale de la CGT, 2009 [<http://www.transform-network.net/fr/yearbook/revue-042009/news/detail/Journal/the-crisis-and-the-social-movement-in-france.html>]

<sup>14</sup> DE LA VEGA. “Travail, salaires, retraites : la Lutte continue” 2011. [[http://www.scienceshumaines.com/travail-salaires-retraites-la-lutte-continue\\_fr\\_27210.html](http://www.scienceshumaines.com/travail-salaires-retraites-la-lutte-continue_fr_27210.html)]

<sup>15</sup> INSTITUT SUPÉRIEUR DU TRAVAIL 2009

<sup>16</sup> ANDOLFATTO, Dominique; LABBÉ, Dominique. “Retraites: les faux-semblants d’un mouvement social”. Op. Cit., p.6.

<sup>17</sup> DURAND, Cédric. “Anatomie d’un grand mouvement social. Entretien avec Sophie Bérout et Karel Yon conduit par Cédric Durand”. *À L’Encontre*. Lausanne, 2010 [<http://alencontre.org/europe/automne-2010-anatomie-dun-grand-mouvement-social.html>]

“strong sectors” like the refineries to strike for them. Workers in the refineries were aware of their role: “We block for those who can’t strike”.<sup>18</sup> The idea of a strike “by delegation” was coined during the 1995 strikes against the pensions and social security reforms and gained new momentum in 2010, with “external” blockades of sites with key economic importance. We can assume that in an era of unemployment and precariousness, strikes at the workplace are not the main strategy anymore; in contrast to those strikes, blockades allow members of the non-employed working class to get involved.<sup>19</sup>

The mobilisation was widespread and showed some characteristics of a mass strike. Before the strikes in the refineries and the ports around Marseille, demonstrations were the most important mode of action. They attracted an average of one million and – according to the CGT and the CFDT – peaked at up to three million participants.<sup>20</sup> Several strike types took place alongside the days of action in different sectors. For instance, on the eve of 11 October – one of the days of action – the media reported that 244 demonstrations had been registered. Furthermore, there were strikes in public transport, the ports, the postal service, telecommunications, job centres, power plants, refineries, education, car factories, etc. Nevertheless, even if some of these strikes were – in the French terminology – “extendable”, none of them were unlimited. While strike attendance was very high in the refineries, in other plants the strikers were in the minority.<sup>21</sup> In the course of the protests more people became active, and the demands were widened: they now addressed the duration of working life and working hours, hardship caused by wages and working conditions, inequalities in all its dimensions, precariousness and the lack of perspectives for young people.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, striking school canteen workers, street cleaners and truck drivers raised specific issues such as wages and working conditions.

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in CHESNAIS, François. “Analyse du mouvement de l’automne 2010: 2 Réflexions sur le mouvement des retraites” 2010. [<http://www.gauchemip.org/spip.php?article14494>] Durand 2010); DURAND, Cédric. “Anatomie d’un grand mouvement social”. Op. Cit.

<sup>19</sup> DURAND, Cédric. “Anatomie d’un grand mouvement social”. Op. Cit.

<sup>20</sup> CHESNAIS, François. “Analyse du mouvement de l’automne 2010: 2 Réflexions sur le mouvement des retraites”. Op. Cit.

<sup>21</sup> MOUVEMENT COMMUNISTE. “Movement Against Pensions Reform: To draw a Lucid Balance”. 2011. [<http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Letters/LTMC1134EN.pdf>]

<sup>22</sup> CHESNAIS, François. “Analyse du mouvement de l’automne 2010: 2 Réflexions sur le mouvement des retraites”. Op. Cit.

In economic terms, the key element was the strike in the energy sector: in early September, there were stoppages at six French refineries (out of twelve overall), as well as at the port of Fos and at some petrol depots. Many participants saw disrupting the entire economy as an aim of the protest and supported the strikes by blockading the entrances to the sites. Oil depots were soon requisitioned by the Government; police special forces “de-blockaded” them on 15 October.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the sites stayed on strike and oil tankers were therefore “stuck” at sea. Meanwhile, all refineries in France were on strike, and the lack of petrol was beginning to become an issue. It was even the case that the struggle started to internationalise. At the Grandpuits refinery, workers got in touch with Belgian unionists, who in turn blockaded a Belgian petrol depot in order to stop petrol from being transported France.<sup>24</sup> However, the main French unions were not ready to leave the negotiation table and, at the last meeting of the *intersyndicale*, most unions declined to support the blockades.<sup>25</sup>

On 22 October, President Sarkozy requisitioned the Grandpuits refinery.<sup>26</sup> Once the state sent police Special Forces to end the blockade, other workers and neighbours tried to secure the site. In this situation, the CGT collaborated with the police and employers, helping workers prepared to break the blockade to access the site. At the same time, the union took symbolic action, which aimed at deploring the end of democracy.<sup>27</sup> In other refineries such as Le Havre, workers were mobilised after these attacks and were ready to defend themselves.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in the end, the new pensions law was passed. Some demonstrations persisted, but eventually faded away.

As we have shown, there were rank-and-file initiatives such as the solidarity blockades. At some point, the protests could have been expanded into a mass strike. However, there are two major reasons why there was no lasting movement: firstly, the protest was coordinated by the unions, which tend to mediate between workers, the state and capital. Accordingly, strikes took place by delegation, which meant that only a small portion of the working

<sup>23</sup> LE MONDE. “Toutes les raffineries de France en grève”. 15/10/2010. [[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2010/10/15/le-depot-petrolier-de-fos-sur-mer-a-ete-debloque-par-les-forces-de-l-ordre\\_1426438\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2010/10/15/le-depot-petrolier-de-fos-sur-mer-a-ete-debloque-par-les-forces-de-l-ordre_1426438_3224.html)]

<sup>24</sup> See the testimony of a worker in the film, *Grandpuits petites Victoires*.

<sup>25</sup> CHESNAIS, François. “Analyse du mouvement de l’automne 2010: 2 Réflexions sur le mouvement des retraites”. Op. Cit.

<sup>26</sup> LE MONDE, 22/10/2010.

<sup>27</sup> KUMARAN, Ira; LEROUGETEL, Antoine. “France: Comment les syndicats ont aidé la police à briser la grève à la raffinerie de Grandpuits”. 2010. [<http://www.wsws.org/francais/News/2010/dec2010/gran-d11.shtml>]

<sup>28</sup> FRANCE24, 22/10/2010.



class gained experiences of a collective struggle to build on. Secondly, the movement was weakened by the fact that there were going to be presidential elections in 2012, and that the victory of a socialist candidate was within reach. Indeed, the socialists would win the election in the end; in expectation of their victory, the unions did not want to exert too much pressure.<sup>29</sup>

Even if, after a probation period, the unions and parties to the left of the Socialist Party decided to show their opposition with anti-austerity protests, the movement remained weak and nearly invisible. What became visible, however, was the reactionary movement against gay marriage and gender-sensitive school education. Admittedly, nationwide protests erupted in 2014 in reaction to the murder of the environmental activist Rémi Fraisse by the police. But this was erased from the collective memory with the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher supermarket. The huge demonstrations in response to the attacks reinforced the national spirit and may therefore have weakened expressions of class antagonism.

Despite these highly visible, predominantly citizen-oriented protests, we should not forget that workers have indeed been organising around specific issues, often as a reaction to public expenditure cuts, layoffs and plants closures. Just to mention a few conflicts: from 2009 onwards, workers at Continental organised wildcat strikes and a strike with their German colleagues against the relocation of their workplace. In 2014, the so-called precarious culture workers (technicians, artists etc.) organised themselves against cuts to their unemployment benefits system and went on strike. After years of occupying a relocated tea factory called Fralib, workers won a high severance pay and a fund of 20 million Euros from Unilever, which allowed them to start a workers' cooperative in the abandoned factory. Nevertheless, these disparate strikes did not generalise into a larger movement. Additionally, in a situation where conservative forces are able to act as a mass opposition movement, it is difficult for some sections of the working class to organise protests. Indeed, in this period of crisis and protests, France, similarly to

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<sup>29</sup> LAFONT, Christine. "Wir hatten den Eindruck, dass es unter Sarkozy überhaupt nichts bringt, an den alten Aktionsformen festzuhalten". In: GALLAS, Alexander; NOWAK, Jörg; WILDE, Florian (eds.), *Politische Streiks im Europa der Krise*. Hamburg: VSA, 2012, pp. 145-149.

Germany, is seen by an observer as “becalmed in the eye of the European storm”.<sup>30</sup>

The defeat of the working class after the protests against the pension reform did not lead to a reorganisation of struggles. Against this backdrop, we are unable to identify a process of consciousness development. On the contrary, many of the people involved in protests ended up relying on electoral politics. Furthermore, there are at least two movements that moved in a different direction: on one hand, the ultra-nationalist and sexist protests; on the other hand, the wildcat strikes, the bossnapping practices, the self-organisation of precarious marginalised workers (for example in the culture sector and by the ‘Sans Papiers’). All of the latter are defensive actions that do not express the intent to move beyond capitalism.

## 2.2. Spain: Mobilisations beyond the unions

In 2008, Spain was hit hard by the financial crisis. As the crisis first affected the building sector, many workers in that sector faced wage reductions and layoffs. Unemployment benefit payments constituted the biggest part of social expenditure; nevertheless, the socialist government denied the existence of the crisis until the end of 2008.<sup>31</sup> After cuts to public expenditure in education and welfare, the socialist government passed a first labour law reform in May 2010.

Under the new law, employers could lay off workers not just when they suffered losses, but even when they simply predicted them. Furthermore, the government found a way to allow employers to pay smaller dismissal compensations. Similarly, the labour law reform undermined collective bargaining. Around the same time, the government also adopted fiscal adjustment measures such as freezing pensions and reducing salaries of public employees.

As a response, the main trade unions called for a general strike, which was planned for September 2010. Although the labour law reform and the fiscal adjustment measures had already been approved, the unions believed that the general strike would be more successful after the summer because of the “lack of mobilization of civil servants in previous strikes” and the possibility of the

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<sup>30</sup> GREEMAN, Richard. “Europe at a Dark Crossroads: Letter from France”. *New Politics*. Vol. XIV, n. 2, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> COLAU, Ada; ALEMANY, Adrià. *Vidas hipotecadas: De la burbuja inmobiliaria al derecho a la vivienda*. Barcelona: Cuadrilátero de libros, 2012.

strike taking place alongside demonstrations in other European countries.<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Zapatero announced that the 24-hour general strike deferred to September would not influence his politics. The deferral, however, undermined the potential of union mobilisations.

In total, the unions called three 24-hour general strikes between 2010 and 2014. Whereas the socialist government only faced one general strike (29 September 2010), two strikes against tax reform took place during the first year in office of conservative prime minister Mariano Rajoy (29 March 2012 and the EU-wide strike day on 14 November 2012). According to UGT and CCOO, the number of participants increased with each general strike. The last mobilised about 1 million workers.<sup>33</sup> However, UGT and CCOO did not keep up the fight against the labour law reforms and stopped calling for strikes and actions.

The economic crisis in Spain gave an impulse to peripheral nationalist movements. In the Basque Country, the unions called three additional general strikes (27 January 2011, 26 September 2012 and 30 May 2013). Moreover, the Basque unions also supported two of the Spanish general strikes, but refused to join in the Spanish call for the European Strike.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, large demonstrations for independence took place in Catalonia: in 2013, 20 per cent of the population took part in a human chain.

The crisis did not just lead to 24-general strikes, but to new ways of protesting. On 15 May 2011, just before the local elections in Spain, a demonstration demanding “real democracy” took place. The demonstrators occupied a central square in Madrid for almost a month – despite attempts by the police to evict them – and called for the formation of local assemblies to spread the so-called 15M movement.<sup>35</sup> This was the starting point of a wave of revolts especially against cuts in education and healthcare. In the process, different

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<sup>32</sup> EL PAÍS. “Los sindicatos convocan la primera huelga general contra Zapatero para septiembre”. 14/06/2010.

[[http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2010/06/14/actualidad/1276-500776\\_850215.html](http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2010/06/14/actualidad/1276-500776_850215.html)]

<sup>33</sup> EL MUNDO. “Huelga general: los sindicatos dicen que el ‘éxito es un acicate para más movilizaciones”. 15/11/2012. [<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/11/14/espana/1352861849.html>]

<sup>34</sup> GARA. “Milaka pertsona atera dira kalera Hego Euskal Herrian greba orokorraren deialdiari erantzunez”.

15/11/2012. [<http://www.naiz.eus/eu/actualidad/noticia/20121114/milaka-pertsona-atera-dira-kalera-hego-euskal-herrian-greba-orokorraren-deialdiari-erantzunez#>]

<sup>35</sup> COLAU, Ada; ALEMANY, Adrià. *Vidas hipotecadas...* Op. Cit.

movements converged, for example, the fight against evictions (*Plataforma por la Hipoteca* [PAH]). An important result of the 15M movement was the increase in political consciousness of people who had not been involved politically before.<sup>36</sup> Police repression against the 15M movement seemed disproportionate and encouraged people to reoccupy public spaces after they had been dispersed.<sup>37</sup>

The roots of the 15M movement have been analysed in the light of “citizenism” – an approach to politics suggesting that democracy is able to oppose capitalism and to correct its excesses. In other words, it replaces class struggle with citizens’ political participation.<sup>38</sup> ‘Citizenist’ activism generates “bubbles of lucidity” by occupying the public space: “Each mobilizing opportunity establishes an intensely lived truth, where the nightmare of production relations, family units and structural servility of our daily lives has vanished for a few moments or even days.”<sup>39</sup>

Against this backdrop, continued mobilisation becomes essential in order to keep an open space to facilitate shifts in consciousness.<sup>40</sup> The plea for deeper democracy is not only the point of convergence where political and economic issues meet, but the also the starting point of further struggles. ‘Citizenists’ defend the democratic political system of bourgeois liberalism, but importantly, also defend that the working class needs democracy, “because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task”.<sup>41</sup>

On 19 June 2011, *Democracia Real Ya* called for a demonstration against the Euro Plus Pact, which aimed at enhancing the “competitiveness” of southern European workers. More people joined this new demonstration than those

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<sup>36</sup> DURGAN, Andy; SANS, Joel. “No one represents us”: the 15 May Movement in the Spanish State. *Sozial.Geschichte Online. Duisburg: Universität Duisburg Essen*, vol. 7, 2012, pp. 93-113.

<sup>37</sup> EL PAÍS. “La carga policial desata la indignación en Barcelona”. 27/05/2011. [[http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/05/27/actualidad/130648-9864\\_137130.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/05/27/actualidad/130648-9864_137130.html)]

<sup>38</sup> ALAIN, C. *L'impasse citoyenniste: Contribution à une critique du citoyennisme*. Nancy: Hobolo, 2001.

<sup>39</sup> DELGADO, Manuel. *El espacio público como ideología*. Madrid: La Catarata, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> RUPTURA. “Los anarquistas y el 15M”. [<https://gruporuptura.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/los-anarquistas-y-el-15m/Ruptura/>].

<sup>41</sup> LUXEMBURG, Rosa. *Reform or Revolution*. 1900, p. 60. [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/>]

who took part in the 15M movement.<sup>42</sup> After this event, the 15M movement was only visible in the struggles against cuts in healthcare and education.<sup>43</sup>

Other strikes also became relevant once others sectors were hit by cuts. Power generation from coal faced investment cuts of 65 per cent; in 2012, the closure of several mines was announced. Workers protested violently in May 2012 and later led a march from Asturias in the north of Spain to Madrid. When the miners arrived at their destination, many joined them in a demonstration that eventually mobilised over 15,000 participants as they saw these protests as protests against austerity. The police once again attacked the demonstrators, but the action succeeded in defending the jobs in the mining sector and became an important point of reference for the Spanish workers' movement.

After M15 lost momentum, a new movement arose. The Marches for Dignity were organised by three social movements: the SAT (*Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores*),<sup>44</sup> *Frente Cívico – Somos Mayoría*<sup>45</sup> and the assemblies of unemployed.<sup>46</sup> A total of 150 collectives supported the call for the Marches such as local M15 assemblies, assemblies of factory workers, associations of migrant workers, anti-eviction activists, local political parties (*Equo*, *Izquierda Anticapitalista*), unions (CNT, CGT) and grassroots Christian movements. The Marches for Dignity showed a more developed class consciousness than 15M itself: participants considered themselves workers, not citizens, and voiced their opposition to exploitation. Unlike the people involved in M15, they did not commit themselves to peaceful protest only. This can be interpreted as a recognition of the fact that bourgeois democracy is limited and violent.

In March 2014, eight “columns” of workers marched all over the Spanish state to converge in Madrid in a demonstration, demanding “bread, work, and

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<sup>42</sup> GALLAS, Alexander; NOWAK, Jörg. “Agieren aus der Defensive: Ein Überblick zu politischen Streiks in Europa mit Fallstudien zu Frankreich und Großbritannien. In: GALLAS, Alexander; NOWAK, Jörg; WILDE, Florian (eds.). *Politische Streiks im Europa der Krise*. Hamburg: VSA, 2012, pp. 24-106.

<sup>43</sup> EL DIARIO. “La marea verde toma las calles de Madrid contra la LOMCE al grito de ‘Wert dimisión’”. 24/10/2013. [[http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/marea\\_verde/lomce-marea\\_verde-huelga-educacion-24O-wert\\_0\\_189331976.html](http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/marea_verde/lomce-marea_verde-huelga-educacion-24O-wert_0_189331976.html)]

<sup>44</sup> SAT is an Andalusian union, founded in 2007. It is famous for organising land occupations.

<sup>45</sup> The “Civic Front” was created after Julio Anguita’s (a former communist politician) call to set up a civilian front against the government.

<sup>46</sup> The assemblies of unemployed organise employed and unemployed workers in order to break their competition over jobs and alleviate the downward pressure on working conditions.

shelter for all". During the marches, the columns showed solidarity with workers' struggles, such those taking place at Coca Cola<sup>47</sup> and Panrico.<sup>48</sup> In correspondence with the coverage of the 15M movement, the media ignored the marches until a demonstration was held that had two million participants according to the organisers.<sup>49</sup> The Marches for Dignity issued a call for another demonstration to be held on the 29 November 2014. Surprisingly, the traditional unions UGT and CCOO appealed to their members to demonstrate on the same day, but they did not openly support the Marches. The UGT and the CCOO are still not involved in the Marches, but numerous collectives called for a general labour, social and consumption strike to be held on 22 October 2015. The Marches are prepared to go beyond the previous demonstrations in so far as they are now calling for general strikes without the support of the main unions. In fact, they have led to more workers gathering than at the demonstrations during the general strikes organised by the UGT and the CCOO. Presently, these grassroots movements seem to be more successful in terms of mobilising the working class. Since they are not dependent on state funding, they are less likely to accommodate to government interventions or state institutions. In sum, a new social actor has emerged. This is not surprising if the general political situation is considered: the traditional unions stopped taking actions based on broad mobilisation after the attempted EU-wide strike (see below); the M15 movement has lost the urban squares, and the management of the crisis by the government and the EU continues to harm people's lives. Crucially, the Marches respond to this situation by integrating both the economic and the political side of the struggle.

### 2.3. The First Attempt of a European Strike

The crisis is international; therefore, an international or at least a European strategy of resistance is required. In the context of the struggles against austerity measures, two Portuguese unions (CGTP, STE) had called a 24-hour general strike for the 14 November 2012. In response, the Spanish unions

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<sup>47</sup> The Coca Cola workers in Fuenlabrada had been fighting since 2013 for the reinstatement of 800 dismissed workers.

<sup>48</sup> EL DIARIO. "La dignidad camina hacia". 18/03/2014. The workers at Panrico in Barcelona started a strike in 2013, after the enterprise voiced its intention to dismiss half of the workforce of 4,000 employees and cut the wages of the other half by 40 per cent.

<sup>49</sup> DIAGONAL. "Ecos de la carga que puso fin a la protesta del 22 de marzo". 23/03/2014. [<https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/libertades/22320-indignante-actuacion-policia.html>]

UGT and CCOO proposed turn this stoppage into an “Iberian strike”.<sup>50</sup> This opened up an opportunity for a European general strike. In this situation, other unions from southern Europe declared their support for the strike, including the Spanish unions CNT and CGT, and the Italian union CGIL. The Greek unions GSEE and ADEDY supported the European strike too – despite the fact that they already had called for a 48-hour strike on 6 and 7 November. Finally, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) published a formal statement calling for a day of action and for solidarity on 14 November. In the countries that were not hit so hard by the crisis, solidarity actions took place. The French unions, for example, called for mobilisations, but did not go on strike because they were waiting to see what the government agenda of the recently elected socialist President François Hollande was going to be.<sup>51</sup>

The European strike seemed to be a step forward, as it was the first EU-wide strike coordination in history. However, it did not fully succeed in transcending the national borders, because it was called by national unions in every country. In fact, nationalist feelings overlapped class consciousness when, for instance, the unions in the Basque Country decided not to support an “Iberian” strike. Since then, there has not been a call for any other European general strike.

### 3. Elements of Mass strikes in Spain and France?

We focused in this article on the defining elements of the mass strike according to Luxemburg in order to assess the strikes in France and Spain. The first one is the fact that a mass strike is a “movement of the people” that cannot be triggered at the flick of the switch by a union, a party, or any other organisation. Both in France and Spain, the numerous general strikes and days of action were all controlled by unions. Their duration was determined in advance (one day strikes), and they were thus small demonstrations of power. The same can be said of the EU-wide strike and even of the Marches in Spain,

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<sup>50</sup> The term “Iberian” caused the Basque Unions to withhold their support for the strike because they saw it as having colonialist connotations. GARA. “LAB no secundará la huelga general convocada por UGT y CCOO en el Estado español”. 31/10/2012. [<http://www.naiz.eus/eu/actualidad/noticia/20121031/lab-no-secundara-la-huelga-general-convocada-por-ugt-y-ccoo-en-el-estado-espanol>]

<sup>51</sup> EL MUNDO. “La huelga en otros países europeos”. 14/11/2012. [<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/11/14/economia/1352885878.html>]

which were also coordinated by several organisations. In the French case, there were some protest forms that were not controlled by organisations, for example the blockades, the bossnappings and some of the economic strikes, but they were separate from each other, and did not converge into a mass strike movement. In the Spanish case, the M15 movement was not led by an organisation. Post-M15, the decision-making structures of political parties and trade unions were much criticised. This and the formation of the Marches could be a hint that workers want radical democratic organisations and are willing to continue the struggle even without the unions.

It is quite clear that the second element of the mass strikes – “they disrupt political life, affect public discourse and provoke massive responses from governments or other state bodies” – applies to the pension protests in France. For nearly two months, the media reported nonstop, and the state and the government had to react to the protests and did so by requisitioning workers and sending armed police forces to the strike sites. In this situation, workers defended themselves and learned to struggle.

The 15M movement in Spain erupted just before local elections took place, showing that people did not expect much from formal democracy. Through the eyes of the mainstream media, political life seemed to be disrupted. They focused on the 15M movement, partly because of the presence of previously “non-political” people, partly because of the colourful images it provided. The Marches for Dignity, however, were omitted in the news until the last big demonstration in Madrid in March 2014. Against this backdrop, it can be said that 15M was able to influence the public discourse. Two important consequences of 15M were the development of a political consciousness of previously non-engaged individuals and the emergence of opportunities for new cooperation networks. As a result, the “remnants” of 15M became active in the Marches for Dignity. Nevertheless – and in inverse proportion to the media attention – the “Marches” triggered the most violent response from the authorities.

The third element, the mobilisation of the working class and the development of its consciousness through struggles as well as the formation of workers’ organisations, throws up questions to which we cannot provide definite answers in the French case. There were large demonstrations with a wide geographical dispersion, but only a small section of the working class actively blockaded economic processes and thus gained experiences of the struggle – a kind of vanguard. It is very likely that this minority and some of the other people involved discussed the question of organisation because they had to



develop forms of resistances (blockades) that were suitable for a strike by delegation in the context of an international economic crisis. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there is no proof of a continuation or a rebirth of an organisational consciousness in the French case. The Spanish case shows that it is through concrete struggles and the assessment of defeats that the working class develops consciousness and creates new forms of organisations.

In both cases, in the course of the struggles, workers saw the need to organise across national borders: international solidarity was a practical reality for French and Belgian workers – and Spanish workers participated strongly in the EU strike. Despite all the limitations of these attempts, the struggles had a momentum where the working class could see that struggles in other countries are part of their own history.

### Conclusion

First of all, what we can see from the comparison of the two case studies is that they tell us different stories. Whereas in Spain two protest movements existed in parallel – the union-led general strikes and the social movements (in which some of the syndicalist unions participated), in France there is no significant anti-austerity social movement even if radical labour conflicts are occurring without union control. In Spain, it is when the unions do not organise general strikes any more that the movements “innovate” with the workers’ marches. Notably, the Marches call for “work, social and consumption” strikes. This form of action is adapted to a situation of high unemployment and shows that they try to overcome the separation of the spheres of production and consumption. This separation was not overcome by M15, which concentrated on the political side of the crisis. A mass strike has only come fully into existence when the working class is capable of overcoming these separations in their struggles.<sup>52</sup>

It is true in both countries that unions with limited bargaining power are more vocal on the street, but are nevertheless interested in being social partners of the governments. It is in this respect that an important similarity between both countries comes to the fore: unions were more cautious to go on the street when socialist parties were in power.

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<sup>52</sup> LUXEMBURG, ROSA. *The Mass Strike...* Op. Cit., p. 33ff.

In France, the far-right conservative forces took advantage of a situation in which the non-parliamentarian left as well as a left government could not solve the economic situation. In Spain, even if nationalism is reinforced by the crisis, there is more social movement-driven political innovation. It is a less hierarchical organisation, the Marches for Dignity, that gained considerable support within the working class. How struggles will develop in the next years remains unknown, but we have to stay cautious, since reactionary forces are on the rise.

All in all, we are in a situation where a peripheral southern European country (Spain) comes close to a mass strike situation and a centre-southern European country (France) is far away from anything close to a mass strike. Nevertheless, whereas centralism and nationalism in Spain could prevent the development of a full mass strike situation in the future, a more international strategy would strengthen class consciousness.

Everywhere, we should discuss the strategic challenges connected to emerging mass strike movements: how to include the jobless and workers from all sectors in a strike? Are mass strikes about broadening democracy as the M15 movement believed? Do they serve to protect at least parts of the welfare state? The last two questions indicate that the gains to be made in many cases may not be as big as the mobilisation efforts put into a mass strike movement. If mass strikes were about building a new Europe or breaking with the roots of the crisis, then they would fulfil their historical role. But in order to get there, we have to develop innovative forms and contents of struggles. Up to now, a new kind of movement likely to bring about a full mass strike has not yet been born.

