

At around 6pm on Sunday May 15th, 2011, approximately 1,000 activists marched the short distance from Plaza de Cibeles to Puerta de Sol, the historic centre of Madrid. As instructed by the principle organisers Democracia Real Ya (Real Democracy Now: DRY), they did not carry flags or banners to identifying any party or trade union.

They eventually arrived under a DRY banner declaring they were not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers. Like at the end of many anti-capitalist demonstrations they held a rally denouncing the problems that were afflicting the country. Fatefully, around 200 of them decided to camp there, ostensibly until Spain's municipal elections a week later.

This small encampment was an obvious inconvenience to the authorities. The regional government had only just finished refurbishing Sol at a cost of many millions of euros, and it was back to working as the main hub for visitors to the city.

The small number of occupiers managed to "take the square" from Monday morning, until the early hours of the next day. At 5am on the Tuesday, agents from the national and municipal police forces evicted them, arresting one young man, and refusing the other activists re-entry to the square. At this point, with the exception of the left-wing newspaper *Publico*, events in Madrid and in the other dozens of cities where small numbers had answered DRY's call were still off the media's radar.

As news of the eviction circulated, through word of mouth and through social networks, activists fixed 8pm as the time to take back the square. No one really expected what came next.

The police eviction inspired rebellion. By Tuesday night, activists had re-established the camp, and that night, as every night between the eviction and the municipal elections the following Sunday there were massive demonstration that packed the square and prevented further evictions. The camp became a massive democratic free-for-all, with advertising hoardings and the new underground station being used to hang thousands of homemade messages outraged at the craven behaviour of the Spanish ruling class. "15M" and the "Indignados" were on the lips of every media outlet, and every politician.

What seemed so remarkable to the Establishment was how a small group of activists had managed to get so many people out in support of their cause, without any of the usual means for mobilising people. No trade unions and no political party had had any role.

Explanations for such an unprecedented event ranged from the hard right - that the protesters were the usual suspects, crusties, trained by ETA, "anti-system" anarchists - to the fairly obvious, that a country with 40% youth unemployment and fairly shameful levels of political corruption should expect such protests.

To begin with, even Esperanza Aguirre, the Governor of the Madrid region and hate figure for the Left, agreed with the demonstrators, stating that the movement seemed like a "a heterogeneous movement, which is fairly logically unhappy." She would later change her tune as it dawned on the main political parties that they

INDIGNADOS

Analysis: The Spanish protests open a door for real change



couldn't co-opt the movement on the street, moving to insinuating that 15M were simply communists and anarchists.

As the occupation dragged on and the media began to draw conclusions as to what they were doing there the narrative shifted from sympathy to defence of the old two-party state. If you weren't for the PSOE or the PP, then you must, logically, be for nothing at all.

Well, we knew clearly what they were against, because they said so, they were against a political system that strengthened the dominant political parties, they were against privatisations and the attacks on workers' rights that were stripping away job security, decent wages and pension rights, against the utter impunity with which politicians were stealing public money, and an end to a government which tailored every single policy toward calming the markets.

In mass assemblies the occupants of Sol put forward simple proposals, reforms that would combat political corruption, that would improve job security, reduce

unemployment, open the political system up, combat housing shortages, prevent people being evicted from their homes. Other proposals came forward for defending public services, controlling the financial sector and its influence over the country. Inevitably these proposals died without any serious public discussion as they were dismissed as impractical or more often as the same tired old leftism.

As the Partido Popular romped home in the elections that Sunday, demonstrators and activists had to start thinking what they should do next as the prospect of a party modelled on Cameron's Tories taking power within a year loomed (PP will, barring a miracle, do so on November 22nd). After mobilising unprecedented numbers of people the movement had to go somewhere practical, or waste all its energies on gestures of defiance.

In the days following the first demonstrations, the movement in Madrid expanded out into two dozen neighbourhood assemblies. These assemblies, run on

OUTRAGED



radical democratic principles, incorporated many of the methods of their anti-globalisation predecessors such as the often ridiculed hand signals, consensus decision making, turn rules etc. Attracting several hundred participants in various locations across the city, they set about establishing schedules for regular meetings to turn them into authentic community groups fit to struggle for the population of their areas.

Shortly afterwards, 15M spawned the “STOP DESAHUCIOS” movement, aimed at preventing evictions. Spain’s mortgage laws enable banks not only to repossess people’s houses but also maintain the debt afterwards. As a result of 15M’s capacity to mobilise activists, dozens of evictions have been prevented across the country. Such a deviation is appropriate, as the initial mobilisation had strong links with a housing rights campaign some five years ago called “V for Vivienda” for which some activists are still facing prison sentences.

Despite the movement’s origins in

Madrid, 15M has also had a big impact in the Catalan capital of Barcelona. The May 22nd Municipal elections were also a big win for the conservative Catalan nationalists Convergence i Unio (CIU). New Catalan President Artur Mas immediately set about enacting his programme of massive cuts to social and health services. Massive protests erupted, with Catalan health workers blocking roads, activists occupying Plaza Catalunya, and much to the outrage of the press and politicians, blockading the Catalan parliament, resulting in the abandonment of the session and the indignity of politicians having to be helicoptered in to avoid facing the public’s rage.

More recently, the same networks have also been used to mobilise people in support of MareaVerde, a strike campaign by Madrid teachers aimed at preventing Esperanza Aguirre raising teachers’ hours by 10% – a move that may result in thousands of redundancies.

Tens of thousands have been out to support the teachers, with activists

harassing municipal politicians all over the city to drive their message home. An issue that the PP felt that it had political backing for suddenly blew up in their face as citizens showed support for overworked and averagely paid teachers.

Although it might be tempting to ascribe the development of the movement to Spain’s traditional attraction to anarchist ideas, those groups that self-identify as anarchist seem, whether or not by design, to have limited formal presence, although CNT statements have expressed broad support and militants have been involved. Certainly the protests have involved people far beyond the radical milieu that anarchist groups have previously been able to influence.

In doing so, 15M perhaps shares some of the problems of perhaps the most comparative event in this country, UK Uncut. Since the bulk of the people organised have come into the movement via online social networks, for many people this medium is their principle link to the rebellion.

This primarily has the effect of creating an organisation with the capacity to put people on the streets, but without a very firm social basis. There are no workplace 15M groups and unless the neighbourhood assemblies can make progress, no community groups either. As a result, although activists can use the network to support other people’s struggles, they can’t initiate them very easily.

Another side effect of this mode of organising is that 15M is an alliance of people of incredibly diverse, even contradictory views. The group’s proposals read like a classic list of transitional demands, a list of reforms that are designed more to expose the utter absurdity of two governing parties both run from Brussels on the whims of the financial class than something that can ever be enacted. In attempting to appeal to broad disillusionment with the political class, and operating through direct democratic assemblies, 15M has struggled to define exactly what it’s for.

I suspect that the legacy of 15M is not directly going to be a substantial change to the Spanish state or capitalism. The ties between the core activists and the bulk of participants are too weak to persist over time without specific goals to reach for. Like UK Uncut it will most likely run out of steam, as they run out of messages to get across. That might not be a terrible thing, there’s not a high enough level of organisation or structure to make it very effective for direct class struggle, and its obsession with non-violence and legality could also be a potential problem long-term.

Whatever its limitations however 15M as a campaign against has been an incredible, unprecedented success. It is a long time since a mass movement has managed to place the conduct of the entire ruling class under public scrutiny.

The Sol camp managed to turn the routine of municipal elections into a general questioning of what the political class was for and whether or not it could really claim to represent us. It is to be hoped that their protest has, at the very least, set down a marker in that sense and left a door open for others to walk through.

By Jack
Ray

