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Report on the Assembly Movement

Miguel Amorós

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The workers assembly movement that shook Spain from 1976 to 1978 was neither more nor less than the independent manifestation of the proletariat, and as a consequence, the confirmation of the existence of the class struggle in a country where both the dictatorship as well as the politicians of the transition had fought against it for forty years by concealing it.

It was the spontaneous response of the Spanish proletariat to the political exhaustion of Francoism, superimposed on the general economic crisis then affecting the capitalist world, at the very moment when the dictatorship was attempting a controlled adaptation of its institutions to democratic forms, and the capitalist world was attempting to carry out a process of modernization of the spectacular market economy that would painlessly dissolve the second proletarian assault against class society. But this did not imply the mere rejection of a backward political regime, that is, Francoism, and even less any kind of support for an anti-Francoist replacement option. The assembly movement was an uprising against all forms of exploitation that escaped the narrow framework of bourgeois

politics intended for the containment of the workers, and which exposed the anti-Francoist opposition when the latter was getting ready to negotiate for more European forms of social slavery, that is, more standardized forms, in return for a share in their management.

The return of the class organization of the proletariat, of class-consciousness, is a constant demand of direct democracy in the struggle, which is in no small measure reminiscent of the anarchist tradition of the Spanish proletariat of the past, as are the rejection of the idea of leadership vanguards, politics, trade union reformism, and of all representation separate from the class, and the practice of solidarity, self-defense, direct dialogue and the general strike as specific methods of struggle. And while it is true that the libertarian movement of the past possessed an emancipatory project and organic experience which the assembly movement lacked, the latter had the advantage of being less rhetorical, more numerous, encompassing non-industrial sectors, less anti-intellectual and more demanding of its representatives. With a more favorable starting point, it could have gone further. The assembly movement was the continuation of the workers movement under late Francoism and was contemporaneous with the movement of the Portuguese proletariat, but demonstrating a greater revolutionary content: unlike Portugal, where the proletariat advanced unopposed, here the workers assemblies from the very beginning had to face all of their enemies, who formed a compact counterrevolution, and they had to move against everyone and everything, including their own weaknesses, the effects of which were so cruelly felt when their movement lost its force and momentum. The movement was only gradually defeated, and was still dangerous even after it had disappeared; not only because the assembly idea was never totally extirpated, but also because the Spanish democracy was constructed in opposition to the workers assembly movement, and once the latter was extinguished, all the existing political forces that attained influence precisely by virtue

came necessary for it to understand its deeds and the consequences thereof. In order to advance after having gone into battle, it had to protect itself from recuperation, perfecting its organization and defining its tasks. When the opportunity to move to a higher stage of struggle against Capital and the State presented itself, class instinct was not enough: class-consciousness is the decisive factor: knowledge of the conditions of the struggle as a whole, the clear understanding of reality, precise judgment of the capitalist social order. The proletariat's fight against class society obliges it to take on the problem of understanding itself. Parallel with the economic struggle, a struggle over consciousness also develops, a struggle for the understanding of society. Historical social knowledge, the acquisition of social consciousness, also signifies the possibility of rule over society, or social emancipation, if the proletariat emerges victorious from this struggle. Both struggles are intertwined, and each is real only if the other accompanies it. The sole precondition for this to be fulfilled is the autonomous action of the proletariat. If the proletariat does not succeed in making itself independent of representations external to it, its process of emancipation falters and comes to an end. This is the principal lesson of the assembly movement.

ment had persisted in the Basque Country, where it enjoyed the support of the nationalists. Between July and September, the shoe factory workers in the province of Alicante provided the best example of assembly organization ever witnessed. After the Moncloa Agreement the paradoxical situation arose whereby despite having defeated the assembly movement, the trade unions and parties were not rewarded with all the advantages they sought and, when they tried to rectify this situation, they lost what they had already gained. All the important strikes that took place after this conjuncture were, in one way or another, strikes against the Agreement. In October 1977, in Cadiz, the *Coordinadora de Trabajadores* (Workers Coordination) swept the city, as in Vitoria, and in November huge demonstrations were held in protest against the Agreement in the big cities, the movement culminating one month later with the general strikes in Vizcaya and Tenerife. Many employers had to bypass the trade unionists and accept the delegates elected by the assemblies. This fourth stage of the assembly movement, however, did not conclude with a rejuvenation of direct democracy in the factories and the streets, but with its near-disappearance, as was made obvious after January 16, 1978, when the first trade union elections were held. Afterwards dialogue among the rank and file and direct representation came to an end. One could henceforth no longer speak of assemblyism except as an increasingly minoritarian tendency among the workers, as the ensemble of practices that were increasingly marginalized and criminalized by their enemies. From then on, the working class was to play a very minor role in the succeeding events.

The workers assemblies made their enemies retreat on several occasions, but did not occupy the terrain that the latter surrendered. The movement, lacking cohesion, was worn down, without general goals, without being able to deliver decisive blows. The absence of a definite revolutionary current among the assemblyists was a factor that contributed even more to the confusion that came to prevail. The assembly movement had gone so far that it be-

of their struggle against that movement—first of all the Stalinists, systematic boycotters of independent mass organization, and then the conglomerate of reformed, dissident and Jesuit Francoists, led by Suárez, as the leading party of the “transition”—were discredited and entered into a process of fatal decomposition threatening the whole transition, which was resolved in a coup. Thus arose the paradox whereby, for the PCE, the UCD and the trade unions, the workers assemblies were more dangerous dead than alive. For the workers assembly movement was the cause of their importance and their necessity, and, once the cause disappeared, so did their reason for existence. The destruction of the workers assemblies signified neither more nor less than the peaceful handing over of the country to the ruling classes and the political projects they found most suitable.

In Spain, as in Poland, the proletarians succeeded in establishing their means of communication and organization without being immediately isolated and destroyed, but while in Poland the struggle was capable of providing itself with general and unifying goals, and being translated into radical everyday initiatives, in Spain, the radical formulations of the assemblies were few and far between, the movement generally being restricted to solidarity and workplace issues. Nor could the Spanish movement count on the sympathies or the neutrality of those secondary middle classes that capitalism was creating, by means of which it was transforming social labor, those with graduate degrees, for example, the primary grounds for the recruitment of managerial personnel, or intellectuals, or the trade union bureaucracy, even considering only the leftist version of the latter, or the employees of the communications media.

In Spain, a country where capitalism is weak and incapable of great initiatives, and even less capable of keeping in its service a swarm of cadres who are not directly profitable, such as journalists, bureaucrats and intellectuals, the State engages to take care of those tasks that are of general interest for the ruling class. The only means of existence and advancement for all these subaltern

personnel is the administrative, political and cultural apparatus of the State; the purposes of the State are therefore their purposes as well. And just when the State was ready to reform itself and employ some of them, an anti-political and anti-hierarchical assembly movement arose, visibly an enemy of the State. So the proletariat, hardly having entered the fray, not only had to confront money and power, but also the politicians and ideologists of every stripe, all the careerists, the trade unions, the press, culture and even folklore. In Poland there was no such symbiotic relationship of all the non-proletarian layers with the State; the movement was favored by the generalized complicity of all social layers. In Spain the movement was hindered at every step by a generalized complicity of all other social layers against it.

The assemblies were produced by the circumstances of the time. The dictatorship, having become a lame duck government, its leadership team divided, lacking the unconditional support of the powerful sectors that were its historical justification, had lost control over Spanish society, without anyone else having taken its place. Most Francoists were aware of the fact that as soon as Franco died, his regime ceased to exist, rendering the State an empty shell, isolated and rudderless, and they realized as well that it would have to be propped up with a democratic reform. But the old Francoism, while trying to modernize, knew that it was incapable of imposing its own reforms, and even of leading the country towards them. In 1976, “democratic” Francoism made no sense. Its reform, which was not negotiated with either the opposition or with the recalcitrant Francoist families, had the virtue of disgusting the entire world and leading to increased polarization. The reformist Francoists, obliged to exercise tolerance in order to maintain credibility, made their debut with a wage freeze at the very moment when numerous labor contracts were being negotiated and prices were skyrocketing. The sudden deterioration of the economic conditions of the “greatest productive force” was the last straw for the social crisis that had been incubating for the previous few years, and the

heirs of the historical role once played by the petit bourgeoisie; it had obtained the support of the most politically backward sectors of the workers, and had ideologically disarmed the most radical sectors, thereby becoming the vanguard of the party of order in 1977. As the boss of this party, its secretary Carrillo was introduced to the Twenty First Century Club and to its national capitalist elites by Fraga. The presence of the PCE and the trade unions, favored by those in power, was further reinforced by the ongoing divergence between the workers’ everyday interests and their real class interests, leading to a situation where the proletariat did not unanimously confront the ruling class and, as a result of the impact of the economic crisis that had been steered so as to primarily affect the workers, their solidarity flagged and their class consciousness became obscured. It was then enough for the remains of Francoism to counterattack by fomenting anti-reformist reactions in the military and by resort to the strategy of tension, like the Italian fascists, so that the opposition threw itself into the arms of the renovated Francoist government, disorienting and demoralizing the proletariat. This sacred union was perfected after the January 15 elections with a calamitous social pact.

The Moncloa Agreement of September 1977 was a united front of all the government parties against a possible proletarian offensive they feared would be triggered by the exacerbation of the economic situation. For the first time, the trade unions were publicly recognized as strikebreakers and scabs, as being responsible for the domestication of the working class and for subjecting it to the “natural” laws of production that guaranteed the rule of capital over labor. Until then, their victories over the assemblies had been ephemeral, because these victories were not accompanied by the material benefits that would confer prestige upon them; quite the contrary was more often true: each trade union intervention was a disaster for the workers’ standard of living, and thus all their stalling tactics were always a hair’s breadth away from causing an undesired reactivation of the assembly movement. The move-

treat the politico-trade unionist bureaucracy without respect, as enemies of the same kind as Francoism. The workers constituted a power that aroused the hostility of all, and faced with the perspectives such a situation provided, either asserted their autonomy or surrendered to the usurpation: “either assemblies or trade unions”. This is how the most radical elements perceived the question. The problem of the Spanish revolution—and of all modern revolutions—resides at the very root of this controversy: to recognize or not to recognize the independent role of the proletariat, and to act accordingly. Which is what the workers never had to do after the events of November 12, when, in exchange for satiating their bellicose enthusiasm with a massive anti-Francoist demonstration, they surrendered the leadership of the movement, and the mobilization became a test of trade union discipline that was crowned with success. All the strikes that took place afterwards had the police in front of them and the trade unions at their back.

The strikes of the third stage of the assembly movement, which lasted until the legalization of the trade unions on April 28, 1977, were isolated in an environment created by a secret agreement entered into by the employers and the trade unions, between the opposition and the government, the workers having lost the initiative. They were long strikes, totally independent of the trade unions, all of which ended in defeat. They were nonetheless exemplary strikes, all capable of reversing the correlation of forces for a certain period of time and any one of which could have served to reanimate the movement if it had become generalized. But this was now very difficult, and the few initiatives that were undertaken for this purpose, such as the commemoration of the anniversary of the events that took place at Vitoria and the celebration of May Day, failed. The post-Franco regime opened the doors of administration and politics to the parties and the middle classes, people who were conscious of their specific class interests for the first time, positions that could by no means be acquired through the workers revolt. During this time the PCE represented the interests of such classes,

tolerance that the regime of “soft dictatorship” was forced to exercise was the gap through which the movement poured.

The strikes began in January in Madrid and slowly spread throughout the whole country, surprising everyone by virtue of their combativeness and magnitude, and above all due to the generalization of the workers assemblies, resolute and alert, organs for collective discussion and decision-making, which demonstrated the will of the workers to manage their own affairs, and not to leave them to be managed by others. The assemblies elected delegates and spread the strikes everywhere, often through simple class solidarity, and took to the streets, flouting not just the existing laws but also the official trade union structure that the Stalinists expected to capture and all the plans of the government, the bankers and the opposition, in which the proletariat played a passive role in their transactions. Their entrance onto the scene brought about a qualitative change in the situation, bringing the existing class antagonism into the foreground. The assemblies, institutions for the defense of everyday interests, created for the purpose of discussing labor problems and selecting those given the responsibility of negotiating with the employer, became a true power, independent, with an enormous force, full of possibilities that were beginning to be apparent to many workers. In Vitoria, in February and March of 1976, the assembly movement reached its high point. If the Madrid strikes had exposed the insignificant extent of the government’s opening and had convinced the employers of the need for a powerful trade union central that could control the workers, the general strike in Vitoria definitely torpedoed any gradualist reform and any project of rehabilitation, even with regard to the CCCO and the National Trade Union Central, unmasking the pact concluded by the Francoist rearguard with the opposition. The Vitoria strike was not only a key weapon of the assembly—“arms are nothing but the nature of the combatants”—but it also imposed the *representative committees* of delegates, elected and revocable, simultaneously forcing the resignation of

official and informal trade unionism. The workers occupied the streets and assemblies were formed in all the different domains of public life. The movement shed its spontaneous character in order to coordinate its activities and for organizing self-defense. All the enemies of the proletariat took cognizance of these tremendously contagious revolutionary features, which could multiply and lead to a real revolution if the situation were to continue to develop in their favor. But tolerance came to an end and the workers of Vitoria were mowed down with machine guns. The government and the opposition managed to contain the revolt provoked by the police shootings to the Basque Country, and the solidarity of the workers of the rest of Spain was scattered and harshly repressed.

In Vitoria the first stage of the assembly movement ended with important results: the failure of the Francoist reform and the acceptance on the part of those in power of the inevitability of parties and trade unions, which would have to be legalized, since they were the only creditable buffers available at the time; the unification of the Stalinist and socialist opposition in a joint platform, the Democratic Coordination, which would have to negotiate the political reform and the social pact—the “agreed break”—with a government that would hold elections. Those in power were afraid that the workers would reflect upon the end of tolerance and coordinate their activities by providing themselves with a strong autonomous organization that would overcome the difficulties of their beginnings and successfully confront their enemies-allies. They had to find the way to unite all their problems in one, which would demand an immediate solution, or, in other words, they had to unify their demands in a coherent revolutionary project. Some of the necessary tasks were vividly felt, such as that of autonomous organization, and in many factories the workers organized outside the trade unions, but their degree of coordination never extended beyond their immediate surroundings, except for brief periods. Only a few industries formed links at a provincial level, but were unable to prevent many assemblies that were manipulated by leftists from

voting for the formation of unitary trade unions and many delegate committees were transformed into embryonic trade unions. Only in Vizcaya was it possible to create a *Unitary Coordination of Factory Assemblies*, which organized huge mobilizations. The strikes continued but they no longer spread so easily as before because they had to confront the C.O.S., an ad-hoc association of the leading central committees, launched in September 1976 for the purpose of establishing a climate of social peace that would provide a favorable environment for the meetings underway between the opposition and the government of Suárez. Instead, strikes took place that had a more assemblyist and anti-trade union character, for obvious reasons, and which were more violent, because they had to face the forces of repression. Sure of the opposition, the employers tried to recover the ground lost in the previous strikes, with the help of the government, which authorized the wage freeze and layoffs. The repression led to more fatalities and called forth an immediate reaction from the workers, precipitating a hot autumn. This second stage of the assembly movement ended with the week of November 12, after which the balance between the assemblyist proletarians and the trade union bureaucrats tipped in favor of the latter, and the movement entered a phase of isolation and dispersion.

The alliance between liberal sectors of the bourgeoisie, socialists and Stalinists had no other purpose than the need for a peaceful political evolution of the Francoist regime, and sought nothing more than dialogue with the latter. Its strategy was based on strengthening this evolution, and to achieve agreements of the kind that were actually implemented. Any factor that disturbed this process, such as, for example, the class struggle, upset the plans of the opposition, because it frightened the Francoists and alienated the bourgeois representatives. The proletariat was supposed to limit itself to a supporting role, echo the slogans of the Stalino-bourgeois conclave and docilely line up behind its self-proclaimed leaders. The working class therefore had to draw the necessary conclusions and