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Spain

Barcelona: against the Europe of capital

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Over half a million people mobilized in Barcelona against the meeting of European Union Heads of State and Government on March 15-16, 2002. It marks a watershed in the development of the movement against capitalist globalisation in the Spanish state, and could lead to the opening of a new cycle of mobilizations in the Spanish state and Catalonia.

The context of the mobilizations

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/barc1.jpg>]

At the international level, the mobilizations in Barcelona were marked by the dynamics of the development of the movement after September 11. If Brussels constituted the first test, passed with flying colours, the Second World Social Forum at Porto Alegre revealed the continued good state of health of the movement, in spite of the reactionary turn in world politics imposed by Bush after September 11.

The mobilizations in Barcelona, the first of any significance in Europe after the second WSF, showed once again that resistance to neo-liberal globalisation is continuing.

Within the Spanish State, the Barcelona mobilizations must be placed in a context of a renaissance of social mobilizations, albeit in partial and unequal form, and an increase in social discontent with the policies of the PP government as well as those of the CiU in Catalonia.

Several fronts have been opened in recent months. We would emphasize the following:

– First, the student mobilizations against proposed changes in the universities, whose defining moment was the student strike of November 14 (November 13 in Catalonia), that brought 300,000 students onto the street. The strike was launched, in most of the universities, by the *asambleario* student movement, with a combativity that initially bypassed the traditional student organizations tied to the PSOE and IU and the strategies of these parties and the big unions. At the end of the mobilizations, nevertheless, these sectors retook the initiative, with the demonstration in Madrid on December 1, 2001 that attracted 200,000 people, called by the PSOE, IU, CCOO and the UGT.

– Secondly, the massive mobilizations against the National Hydrological Plan (PHN) for the diversion of the waters of the Ebro, whose impact in the most affected zones (Aragón, the regions around the Ebro in Catalonia and so on) has been of enormous social breadth. On the Sunday before the European summit, March 10, the platform against the PHN mobilized some 200,000 people in Barcelona.

– Thirdly, the mobilizations of the undocumented immigrants, whose catalyst was the coming into effect of the new nationality law in early 2001.

– Fourthly, we should emphasize the outbreak of a number of trade union struggles, some with great social impact (like that of Sintel), and others of a much more local character and with less importance (Miniwatt, Lear and so on). In spite of this, it is nonetheless clear that there has not been a situation of generalized labour conflict in recent months and that, in addition, the general situation has suffered from the demobilisatory leadership of the majority unions, the CCOO and the UGT.

– In the fifth place, we should note the increasing role of the anti-globalisation movement itself, which, from the mobilizations against the World Bank in Barcelona (June 24-25, 2001) has been taking root and gaining social force throughout the Spanish state.

The dynamic of all these struggles has been different in each case, although some common elements exist. In general, they have been based around broad and unitary campaigns or platforms with combative and mobilisatory approaches. In almost all cases there has been an element of conflict between the most combative and mobilized sectors and the parliamentary political organizations (PSOE, most of IU, ICV and so on) and the big unions, the CCOO and UGT, which have often set up their own platforms in competition with the unitary campaigns, as is the case in the mobilizations against the university laws or the immigrant struggles.

All these struggles have served to considerably erode the hegemony of the PP government, whose authoritarian and arrogant approach has been repeatedly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the main socially contested governmental projects have been pursued, although with an evident lack of legitimacy, as is the case with the universities law, and the Aznar government has not yet entered into crisis. Nonetheless we can say that the period of social demobilization which characterized the first PP government is over and that we are beginning a new cycle of struggles, albeit of a contradictory and still limited form.

The anti-globalisation movement in Catalonia and the Spanish state

In the period since Seattle, several events have marked the development of the anti-globalisation movement in the Spanish state and Catalonia. Three of the most significant have been:

– First, the social consultation for the abolition of the foreign debt, organized by the Citizens' Network for the Abolition of the Foreign Debt (RCADE) on March 12, 2000. Taking place on the same day as the general election, the consultation obtained more than 1,250,000 votes (half of them in Catalonia). The process of preparation served to create an important network with local implantation, the most militant sector of which subsequently participated actively in the various activities of the 'anti-globalisation movement'.

– Secondly, there was the creation of the Movement of Global Resistance (MRG) in Catalonia and the preparation of the mobilization for Prague in September 2000. The MRG was set up in Catalonia before the summer of 2000. It involved people from sectors of the independent movement, groups in solidarity with the Zapatistas, the RCADE, and several local rank and file collectives.

The MRG was formed as a diffuse network of coordination of groups and people oriented to grass roots work in the fight against capitalist globalisation. From the beginning an orientation more focused in participating in the campaigns and international mobilizations and another centred more on work at the local level and with less connection with the international processes coexisted in the MRG. The first campaign carried out was the preparation of the mobilization against the IMF and the World Bank meeting in Prague (S26).

In the framework of this campaign, several MRGs were set up in the main cities of the Spanish State, like Madrid, Valencia or Zaragoza, but without any real connection with the MRG in Catalonia and with a very different profile and composition in each case.

The mobilization for Prague became a veritable founding struggle of the movement against capitalist globalisation in

the Spanish state. After Prague the 'anti-globalisation' movement in the Spanish state emerged initially as a movement centred on a new militant generation and the MRG became its reference point. The importance of the MRG has not been so much at the organizational level, but in the fact that it has been one of the best expressions of the present processes of radicalisation of an important layer of youth in Catalonia and the Spanish state, and the emergence of a new militant generation.

This latter is characterized by a generic anti-capitalist ideology, by the will to revive grass roots political activity, organizing in horizontal networks and with little organizational formalization and by the search for 'non-conventional' forms of mobilization, centred on various forms of non-violent direct action.

During the second half of the 1990s there has been a framework favourable to the eruption of a powerful youth movement, disconnected from the movements of previous militant generations and the political left, because of two factors.

On the one hand, the weakening of the structures and militant networks of the various movements arising in the 1970s and 1980s and the drift to the right of the big unions. On the other, the crisis of the political left, due to the blockage and stagnation of projects like the IU or the rightward drift of others like the ICV in Catalonia, as well as the implosion of the main organizations of the revolutionary left during the early 1990s.

The present wave of radicalisation of youth opposed to capitalist globalisation was preceded by a first wave around the okupa movement from the end of 1996 to 1999, in a context of demobilization. The present radicalisation, nevertheless, is based partly on the previous height of the autonomous movement, but its framework covers a much broader and diverse spectrum of young people, and it takes place in a context of revival of struggles and the confluence of several social sectors and generations in unitary campaigns, like the mobilizations in Barcelona against the EU Summit.

– Thirdly, there was the campaign against the World Bank Conference on Development in Barcelona (June 25-27, 2001). Barcelona 2001 saw the launch on a wide scale of the anti-globalisation movement in the Spanish State, and above all in Catalonia, although its impact was very unequal at a territorial level. The campaign against the World Bank was formed by a broad assembly of networks and organizations across a very broad ideological and social spectrum. The big unions and the parliamentary left of Catalonia were dragged into supporting the campaign, although their participation was symbolic. Barcelona 2001 saw the transformation of the profile of the movement and an extension and pluralisation of its social base, creating a process of convergence between a great variety of social organizations, so that it was no longer a movement exclusively formed by the new militant generation.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/barc2.jpg>]

The balance sheet of the mobilizations was highly positive, with more than 30,000 people participating in the demonstration of June 24, and 5,000 in the counter-conference; there was also the symbolic victory of the WB being forced to cancel the conference.

The European presidency and the Campaign Against the Europe of Capital

The dynamics of the campaign

The preparations for the Spanish European presidency began in autumn 2001, after the local success in June against the World Bank and the international success in Genoa, and amidst the confusion reigning after September 11. The six months of the European presidency were crammed with official appointments, due to the very decentralized approach that the Aznar government has adopted to the presidency (two European Councils, 41 ministerial meetings and 151 lower level meetings). The structure adopted for these six months of mobilizations has been one of a flexible coordination on the state scale of the different local campaigns organized in the cities that will host some of the multiple official meetings.

The anti-globalisation movement initially appeared to have a very unequal implantation in the different parts of the Spanish state, little consolidated in some areas, deeply implanted and organizationally mature in others.

The beginning of the Campaign against the Europe of Capital and War in Catalonia was slow and complicated. Although the mobilizations against the World Bank in June had consolidated the movement in Catalonia, a certain sensation of fatigue was evident in the militant layers. Barcelona faced the quite unusual situation of being the scene of two great anti-globalisation mobilizations in a few months (June 2001 and March 2002), and the Summit of Heads of State was prepared with the sensation of 'second time around', of a repetition of what was already done in June.

At the same time, the movement was paralysed for a couple of months by strategic discrepancies on the organizational form to adopt. Finally, it was decided to establish a unitary campaign, inspired by that formed against the World Bank.

The campaign, which did not really start until the beginning of 2002, was formed by more than 100 organizations of a different nature (informal networks, local platforms, parties, unions, NGOs and so on), as well as many individuals.

Among the main groups we can emphasize the MRG and its periphery, the RCADE, the Zapatista Rebellion support group, ATTAC, the Assembly of Workers Against Globalisation (comprising the CGT, the Inter-trade union Alternative of Catalonia and critical members of the CCOO), the world-wide women's march network and the Rojos current of the IU in Catalonia. In the campaign, or at least in some of its activities, there was a good participation by a section of the independence movement, a part of which had broken off during the campaign against the World Bank to set up a small platform called Barcelona Tremola ('Barcelona Shakes'). However, the big union confederations, the CCOO and the UGT, the Catalan parliamentary parties the ICV, (ex-Communists, reconverted into greens), the ERC (the nationalistic left), most of the IU, and the Socialist Party did not participate. These organizations, with the support of some NGOs, organized around their own platform, the Barcelona Social Forum.

In spite of this, the Social Forum was finally forced to support the demonstration of March 16 called by the campaign, as it was obvious that this was going to be an unavoidable event.

As had already happened in the campaign against the World Bank, the Campaign against the Europe of Capital did not adopt a structure of a platform of organizations, but rather that of a campaign formed by assemblies and open working commissions, in which each person acted on an individual basis and not as representatives of an organization.

This is the organizational form that better fits with the reality of the movement in Catalonia, with a very great weight of informal networks and non-organized individuals. The balance sheet of the internal dynamics of the campaign is positive, and the coexistence between its different components has been correct, in spite of some problems and tensions deriving from the existence of different political cultures, in particular between the new militant generation and the movements based on preceding generations, and of some distrust between some sectors.

The balance sheet of the mobilisations

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/barc3.jpg>]

The philosophy of the campaign was to conjugate several types of activity, with different objectives (alternative forum, mass demonstrations, day of direct action and so on), not with the intention of any counter-position but reciprocally to reinforce a perspective of strategic convergence between very different networks and organizations.

Starting from the incontestable fact that the priorities of many of the components of the campaign were different it was considered important to obtain a certain fusion of experiences so that everybody participated in the different moments and facets of the campaign. As the components of the Italian Social Forum would say, the objective was to make the campaign a reciprocal space of 'contamination'.

The activities finally organized were the following: a video-forum space from Monday 11 to Friday 14, with an attendance of more than 1,000 people in some sessions; a day of decentralized direct action on March 15, opening day of the official Summit; a 'forum of alternatives' on the morning of Saturday March 16, in which 6,000 people participated; the demonstration on the evening of March 16, whose numbers were impressive (250,000 according to the police, 500,000 according to the campaign, 300,000 according to the mass media); and a final concert with Manu Chao headlining, with 50,000 people.

To all these activities we should add the trade union demonstration organized by the ECTU on March 13, with about 100,000 people, as well as two other important activities the previous weekend: Reclaim the Streets on Saturday March 9, with 3,000 people, and the massive demonstration called by the Platform against the Plan Hidrológico Nacional on Sunday March 10, with 200,000 people.

It's worth commenting on two of the main activities of the weekend: the demonstration and the day of decentralized direct action. The demonstration, undoubtedly, was a success of historical proportions, absolutely unexpected everywhere.

It is important to emphasize that the immense majority of the demonstrators were Catalan, because most of the foreign demonstrators were blocked at the French border, and the attendance of demonstrators from the rest of the Spanish State was not very high. The reason was that in many Spanish cities there were official meetings and mobilizations (in Zaragoza, Valencia, Madrid, Seville and so on) which demotivated many demonstrators from coming to Barcelona.

The demonstration was the result of three different appeals: that of the Campaign against the Europe of Capital and War, that of the Barcelona Social Forum, and that of the Catalan Platform against the Europe of Capital, grouping the pro-independence organizations. The correlation of forces between the three blocs leaves no room for doubts: the bloc of the Social Forum was of modest dimensions, the Catalan Platform organized a contingent of 5,000 people, and most of the demonstrators marched in the contingent of the Campaign.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/barc4.jpg>]

Two big reasons help explain the success of the demonstration. First, the strength of the 'anti-globalisation' movement in Catalonia, whose dynamism was already made clear last June in the demonstration against the World Bank and subsequently in other international mobilizations.

Second, the success of the demonstration can be seen as a symptom of accumulated social rejection of the policies of the PP and, in particular, the attitude maintained by the Aznar government towards the mobilizations anticipated in Barcelona over the previous months.

On the one hand, the organized police presence, with more than 8,500 officers, was perceived as a disproportionate and arrogant militarisation of Barcelona. On the other, Aznar's systematic attempt at criminalisation of the movement had a boomerang effect and stimulated many citizens to join the demonstration.

The demonstration was developed in a climate of tension and confrontation much lower than that of Genoa, although the police presence was spectacular and the demonstration was cut by half by a brutal police charge. This relative absence of tension favoured the social legitimization of the movement, facilitating also the attempts at cooption and neutralization of the demonstration on the part of the institutional left.

The mayor of Barcelona, Joan Clos, of the Socialist Party, turned the massive anti-globalisation protest into another example of the traditional civismo of the Barcelonans, and an example of the capacity of the city to organize great social events in a satisfactory manner, as already shown in the Olympic Games of 1992!

The day of decentralized direct action on March 15 also deserves some commentary, because of its innovatory character in relation to previous counter-summits. The need to organize a day of civil disobedience and 'non-conventional' protest was evident for the organizers of the Campaign.

At the same time, the possibility of laying siege to the official summit, following the 'classic' style of Seattle, seemed impossible considering the unprecedented police presence. Faced with this, it was decided to call a day of actions decentralized actions at points all over the city throughout the day.

The decentralized day of action served to readapt the strategy of non-violent direct action in the new current scenario, of increased repression and police presence during summits. Altogether there were more than 30 actions, within which we could point to: mobile street lobbies, in which 1,000 people participated (taking a route by the offices of several lobbies and multinationals in the city centre); the attempt at occupation of one of the offices of Telefónica by some of its workers; different marches with bicycles in the city; a route by different Latin American consulates; a demonstration against genetically modified foods and, finally an 'alternative' circus with about 5,000 spectators.

The perspective after the success

Finally, we can indicate some of the perspectives and the immediate challenges of the anti-globalisation movement in the Spanish state after the success of Barcelona and with the Spanish EU presidency as background.

In the first place, the European presidency is going to be, indeed is already, a good occasion to consolidate the anti-globalisation movement throughout the Spanish State. The mobilizations, on a different scale and levels, are going to take place in many cities and territories, and constitute a good opportunity to launch the movement in those places where it is still in an incipient phase.

It is too soon to know what will be the impact of Barcelona for the next big meetings of the European presidency, but it is evident that the success of Barcelona is going to contribute to building the future mobilizations, in particular that in Seville in June.

At the same time, even in the places where the movement is more consolidated, like in Catalonia, efforts must be made to reinforce its organizational capacity, because the current lack of synch between its capacity of mobilization and the weakness of its structures and organizational resources is obvious. Devising forms of organizational expression for the movement after the end of the Spanish presidency is another one of the debates that is now upon

the table.

Secondly, the impulse of Barcelona and the entire European presidency should serve to give a definitive boost to the cycle of social struggles that has been taking place in the Spanish state in recent months.

However, it is too soon to know what is going to be the concrete practical translation of the impressive success at Barcelona for all the social movements in the country, although it is obvious that we have entered a more favourable situation for social mobilization, and that the different struggles that can explode can rest, at least on the symbolic level, on the pressure of the anti-globalisation movement. And, in particular, it is difficult to know if the new climate opened after Barcelona is going to push the union leaderships towards a clear policy of opposition to the policies of the PP, as has already happened in Italy.

In any case, around the Campaign against the Europe of Capital and War processes of strategic coordination of sectoral struggles have been established, and links between organizations and movements have been strengthened.

It is worth emphasizing, for example, the processes of articulation of the trade union left, around the Assembly of Workers against Globalisation, or, at another level, the success of the mobile street lobbies, which can be the embryo of important campaigns against the multinationals.

It is still too soon to measure the mid-term impact of Barcelona. But one thing is clear: the pessimism and the resignation of three or four years ago have vanished completely in activist circles. And this is already a promising beginning.