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Women

Change Everything: Foundations and Challenges of the Feminist Strike in Spain

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Tuesday 14 May 2019

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"We are not here to parade one day a year, to be one more quota in the spaces of power or to be applauded while we march, while the system that reproduces our oppression remains intact. This is why we resort to the strike: because it is the most powerful tool we have to stop and change everything." - Manifesto read on March 8, 2019 at the Zaragoza demonstration

It is hard to believe that only a year and a half has passed since 2017. Over this remarkably short period of time, the feminist movement has managed to disrupt the entire political landscape - by political landscape, we should understand something that goes beyond the partisan-electoral game, and rather includes the terrain of social dynamics, macro-level power relations, dominant common sense, and, in general, the frames through which these processes are interpreted. In March of 2019, it is difficult to deny that feminism constitutes a major political actor.

We are facing a complex scenario, marked by global instability and by the attempts of the ruling classes to maintain their privileges in a world that is falling apart. In the countries of the European periphery, since 2008 this has meant the implementation of policies that strip rights and liberties on a large scale, combining repressive practices with the subordination of all aspects of life to the payment of external debt, and the socialization of the losses of banks and large companies. It is in this context that the feminist movement has exploded: after years of "economic crisis," with precarity normalized by an entire generation, the social agreements of the years of the real estate boom broken forever, and an important ebb in social movements. After two years of constant mobilization, it is necessary to think through the conditions that have made this phenomenon possible, as well as their possible implications. Such an analysis is a precondition not only to prevent our accumulated strength from dissolving, but to use that strength for the development of broader horizons of transformation, those that might finally give form to the call to "put life at the center".

1. The Beginnings: Social Unionism and the Feminization of Protest

"In all defenses of our rights, any union will have us at their side; if they fail us, they will have us at the front." - Myriam Barros, president of la Asociación Las Kellys

"The separation of work and life has been a weak spot for social movements." - Beatriz Garc a, Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages

At the beginning of 2014, the social centers and left-wing bars of Madrid filled with posters and stickers touting this slogan: "If Madrid does not produce, Madrid does not consume". Coca-Cola had launched an ERE that would later be declared illegal, leaving 350 workers on the street and threatening to close the plant in Fuenlabrada. The boycott campaign, initially modest, quickly became viral thanks to a key element: 180 women, comrades, daughters and relatives of the workers had camped outside the front of the factory. They became known as the Spartans, in reference to the Thermopylae.

Some time later, in October of 2016, las Kellys went public: hotel cleaners, with salaries below three euros per room and constant work-related pain and chronic illness, had organized themselves. The profile of las Kellys, who are largely migrant women and almost always with their own families to care for, is similar to that of the domestic and care workers who are organizing in associations such as Domestic Territory(Madrid) or the Collective of Domestic

and Care Workers (Zaragoza), and who have recently established a national network. Their demands (the recognition of rights and social protections, equal right to general Social Security) reveal a conflict that transcends their immediate working conditions. They are what Judith Carreras calls "union struggles for social reproduction": labor struggles led and organized by women who, in addition to defending labor rights and demanding the dignity for feminized sectors, are serving to make visible the sexual division of labor, the social crisis of care, and the capital-life contradiction. [1]

In a way, these types of conflict are closely related to what has become known as "social unionism" after the movement of the Indignados: struggles that blur the boundaries between work and life, articulate broader conceptions of work, with a focus on processes of dispossession that, in moments of generalized crisis (economic, political and ecological), expand far beyond the labor market and subordinate all aspects of life to capitalist accumulation. The Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages, the housing assemblies, and the most recent Tenants Unions are the clearest example of social unionism and share with the Spartans, las Kellys and the care workers another commonality: in the lead, are the women. This feminization of protest has clear causes: because of their particular social role, women are the most affected by attacks on life and those who have mobilized against the increasing difficulties in reproducing it. The concrete forms that the feminist movement has taken in Spain would not be comprehensible without this previous sedimentation, which nourishes our practices and influences our political imagination. I do not propose here a direct cause-effect relationship between the one and the other. Rather, I believe it is possible to affirm that the Feminist Strike is, in a sense, the fullest expression of social unionism achieved thus far.

2. What's This About the Feminist Strike?

The strike as momentum, the strike as process, the strike as structure. There is, from the first moment, this ambivalence when it comes to naming the strike (and to naming ourselves). Not in vain, the website of the movement is called "towards the feminist strike," in reference also to the ongoing collective construction of a new type of conflict that goes beyond the concept of the classical general strike and the concrete date of March 8, experimenting with flexible forms of internal coördination that may enable us to address the tension between unity and diversity.

The 8M Commission works as a state-wide network that articulates feminist assemblies throughout the territory, respecting the autonomy of local processes and trying to endow this whole constellation of groups with a common horizon and orientation. The main advantage of this type of organization is its fractal dimension, which translates into an infinity of local and territorial processes of self-organization, politicization and network building from the base. The result is an increasingly dense network of self-organized formations, which incorporates assemblies and pre-existing groups, but which also facilitates and enhances the emergence of new ones in towns, neighborhoods and cities where up until now feminists were dispersed, pushing towards the construction of unitary movement spaces in those areas that were once largely fragmented.

As a structure the Feminist Strike is, above all, an immense machine of collective intelligence. The state-wide Meetings, which have been celebrated since the 8M Commission was launched at the end of 2017, and which each bring together between 500 and 600 women, are a good example of this. Being the main body for collective debate and decision making in the movement, each meeting is prepared months in advance by a state-wide working group where one or two people from each territory can participate as they wish. Some of the tasks that the working group performs towards the meeting are the elaboration of preliminary readings, the collection of proposals and programmatic contributions from the territories, the elaboration of a synthesis of the main concerns and positions emerging from the assemblies, the elaboration of methodologies, and the compilation of minutes.

The evolution of the state-wide Meetings is a reflection of the evolution of the Feminist Strike itself. This involves not

only the obvious improvements in organizational capacity, but an important advance in debates: in a year and a half we have advanced to the gates of a serious programmatic and strategic discussion, incorporating feminized sectors in struggle while also building alliances with other movements, such as social environmentalism and political anti-racism.

There are, of course, still unresolved tensions and contradictions. The Commission's way of working does not allow for quick responses, and the absence of joint initiatives or campaigns that move beyond March 8 leaves the movement's visibility and political influence in the hands of the territories with the greatest capacity to assume it, such as Madrid, strengthening a two levels development that could be further exacerbated. Furthermore, critiques of the 8M Commission raised last year by several collectives of migrant and racialized people highlight the movement's shortcomings in involving certain sectors of women from the working class. However, the creation of a state-wide working group of migrant women, as well the inclusion of the closure of immigrant detention centers and of the repeal of the immigration law among the central demands of this year's strike, indicate that we are moving in a positive direction.

3. Against Institutional Feminism and thus Liberal Feminism

The success of this March 8, which exceeded already immense expectations and far surpassed the historic day of 2018, is much more than numerical: it confirms that the re-politicization of International Women's Day is now unstoppable.

Last year, the novelty of the call compelled the mainstream media to continuously monitor its preparations and led a diverse social majority to identify themselves with feminism. The spokespeople of the movement appeared almost daily on television programs and in the main newspapers; El Partido Popular and Ciudadanos argued over who best defended "the equality of women"; and some of the most well-known female faces of televised news and political salons opted to join the strike by participating in a media blackout.

None of that has happened this year. The strategic clarification of the movement and the advance in programmatic content have brought about a relative media vacuum up until the last days before March 8. El Partido Popular recently defined the manifesto of 8M as "anti-capitalist" and a project of the "radical left," noting that they would not participate in any of the calls for demonstrations. And yet, the figures speak for themselves: 350,000 demonstrators in Madrid, 260,000 in Barcelona, 200,000 in Zaragoza. UGT estimates the total following of the strike at 6 million. It seems that, despite the radicalization of the movement (or perhaps because of it), participation and support for it has magnified.

Unlike France or the United States, our movement in Spain has not had to confront a hegemonic liberal feminism. The specific socio-historical characteristics of the country have prevented the formation of any significant sector of women in real cultural or economic power: Spain, of course, only emerged from a fascist dictatorship at the end of the 1970s, and until 1981 women were required to ask their husbands for permission to work, to collect their salary, to open a bank account or get their driver's license. The processes of social struggle that characterized the period known as the Spanish Transición, amongst which feminism stood out as a radical and mass mobilizing actor, ended up blocking the consolidation of a liberal feminist sector.

The Socialist Party (PSOE), whose electoral victory in 1982 represents the closure of the period of the Transición and the opening of a new era, was the one to capitalize on this situation. PSOE managed to dismantle the transformative potential of the movement by adopting rapid measures that gave response to real needs and that had a strong media impact (such as the partial decriminalization of abortion in 1985) and incorporating women from the

feminist movement into important administrative positions. The implementation of gender studies in universities did the rest. The result is what we know as "institutional feminism," a brand of feminism close to Spanish social democracy, based on a combination of legal reforms with symbolic politics and on the assumption that any possible change must move through institutional channels. The current administration, the first government in our history with more women than men, is a good example of this.

Institutional feminism has functioned as hegemonic feminism for forty years in the Spanish State. There were those who thought that the feminist explosion could be well suited to the Socialist Party, which happened to be in government and is now facing a complex electoral situation. The Sanchez government, which in 2017 approved a "State Charter against Gender Violence" that has never been implemented, sought to legitimize itself socially and appear linked to a movement whose transformative power, nevertheless, needed to be defused.

After March 8, 2018, some sectors of the movement tried to convince the 8M Commission to initiate a dialogue with the Government. The attempt failed: refusing to reduce the strength of their demands to a few measures formally acceptable to the current system, the feminist movement preferred to preserve its autonomy and radicalism and maintain its presence in the streets. Nuria Alabao and Marisa Pérez Colina have recently explained the shift in the strategy of PSOE: as they were unable to co-opt the movement, they attempted to divide it by instrumentalizing some of its debates. The emphasis on the debate about sex work, one of the points that historically have generated disputes within the movement, is the best example of this. The emergence of organized groups of women at the state-wide Meeting in Valencia and in the 8M Commission of Madrid, which tried to force a stance on this in parallel to the statements of the Government equating feminism and abolitionism and denying the diversity of perspectives, generated a situation of permanent tension in the assemblies that lasted a month and a half. The work methodology employed by the feminist movement, however, based on the search for consensus and on building friendly democratic spaces, managed to isolate these groups and prevent them from influencing the preparation of the strike.

Ciudadanos, on the other hand, has developed a strategy all its own. With an aesthetic and a discourse reminiscent of Macron, the party of Albert Rivera has tried to appropriate the idea of liberal feminism and spearhead its construction in the Spanish State. It is true that the attempt is often quite ridiculous, as with the instrumentalization of the figure of Clara Campoamor, the main figure behind women's suffrage. This March 8 the party held an event at its headquarters in Madrid: since then one can read the quote "I am a liberal" - Clara Campoamor's slogan - emblazoned on one of its walls. However, beyond finding them comical, we must remain alert to these moves insofar as they demonstrate an awareness of how transformative feminism is being restrained in other countries.

Therefore, the Feminist Strike constitutes itself in opposition to both institutional feminism and liberal feminism. Its double denunciation of patriarchal and racist capitalism, fierce criticism of the central institutions of the State (the judiciary, borders) and protective zeal for its autonomy all cast it as an independent political actor, difficult to manipulate and alien to partisan logic and interests. With the proximity of the elections, some parties wanted to use March 8 as the launching-pad for their own campaign. The feminist outburst has routed these efforts: it now seems clear that the feminist struggle will either be autonomous, or it will cease to be.

4. Change Everything

The act of occupying the public space and transforming it into a collective space in itself has an emancipatory and expansive character. There is something liberating about meeting together, seeing each other and recognizing each other and ourselves in the women surrounding us while the cry "¡Ajáquã- estamos las feministas!" floods everything. In a debrief after the strike last year, I called this feeling "the achievement of the right to be": it is the end of isolation, the rediscovery of the collective, the birth of a new way of being in the world.

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The networks created during this year and a half have already begun to spread everywhere. Since its inception the Feminist Strike has been an intergenerational movement, driven by strata of very young women but also managing to incorporate older women, who in many cases had no prior political experience. This mixture seen in assemblies and work commissions has now crystallized in personal bonds, where our comradeship precedes any existing differences. The principle of active solidarity is enabling women from diverse backgrounds to become quickly aware of the problems and conflicts that affect other women. This has nothing to do with essentialism; on the contrary, it is about linking the question - "to what extent has being a woman affected our life?" - to the concrete analysis of material conditions and actual realities. There is a generative dialectic between the micro and the macro levels, between the local dimension of the neighborhood and the global scale of the contemporary operations of capitalism. The international dimension, which has been present from the very beginning of the movement, is strictly necessary if we want to have a chance of winning in addressing the tasks that the movement itself has given us.

Advancing the programmatic debate and developing collective strategies are two of the main challenges we face. Taking leave of the national scale in order to weave transnational networks and alliances is the only possible way to put an end to structures of domination that are not just local, but are reproduced and reinforced through global economic powers and neocolonial relations. Because the great strength of the international feminist tide lies in this: its capacity to confront everything.

May 13 2019

Translated by Kelly Gawel

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[1] Judith Carreras, "¿Puede el feminismo ser un revulsivo sindical?," *Viento Sur* 161 (December 2018): 71-82.