

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4401>



Catalonia

# **“Municipalism of change” and metro workers**

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV494 - March 2016 -

Publication date: Monday 21 March 2016

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**Barcelona en Comú has faced probably its most difficult week in its nine months at the helm of government. Although there have been other moments of tension between the Municipality and sectors of social activism (such as the operations of Guardia Urbana against hawkers), the Metro strike of February 22-24, 2016 was surely the most open and crude confrontation between the town hall and a mobilization from below. It is necessary to reflect on the experiences of “municipalism of change” in a manner which allows us to better understand what has happened and what the implications for the movement are. It is not a question of handing out lessons from positions of comfort to the people who are in the first line institutionally, but providing ideas to derive collective lessons.**

Media and public attention was drawn at this time by the coincidence of the strikes with the Mobile World Congress, but this is a conflict that has dragged on for months, within a struggle in TMB which has been going on for years. It concerns the negotiation of the agreement in Ferrocarrils Metropolitans de Barcelona, the public company that manages the Metro (while Transports de Barcelona manages buses), mainly concerning the ending of the four year wage freeze and the conversion of 600 temporary work posts in the company into permanent jobs.

As a symptom of how negotiations have become bogged down, workers reported that management was not present at a number of meetings and had not made any written proposal. In this context, in January, the General Meeting of employees convened a partial strike on February 2 and 24 hour strikes for two days during the MWC. The municipality, following the advice of “people with political experience”, as Ada Colau put it, had not been involved in the conflict. However, the company works council and the metro unions had appealed publicly on several occasions to the government team to intervene.

## Intervention of the municipality

Colau intervened in the public debate on the conflict in an unfortunate manner, as she herself recognized and subsequently rectified, asking the workers to withdraw the strike plan so as to negotiate. Since then both Colau and TMB president Mercedes Vidal have defended the right to strike in their public statements, but stressing that this in particular case it was “disproportionate”. However, the proposal made by management with the mediation of the municipality in the week before the MWC was unanimously rejected by assemblies of workers who decided to maintain the strike.

There are, at least from my point of view, three criticisms of how the governing team has addressed the conflict:

First: to transmit a conception of the strike which is extremely restricted. “I understand that the strike is an extreme measure to be used before loss of rights and when the other party does not offer dialog, when there is no other way”, Colau stated on her Facebook page. However, it is not too novel to say that the strike is one of the few effective means of pressure which workers have and that of course is not limited to defensive struggles. The model of trade unionism based on social pacts and dialogue that avoids conflict is precisely the one that has demonstrated its ineffectiveness to defend the living conditions of the working class.

Second: The use of demobilizing tactics reminiscent of the “old politics”. For example, appeals to the responsibility of all parties; the constant criticism of the strike in the media by Mercedes Vidal, an activist in Comunistes de Catalunya

and EUiA; the publication of the wages of workers, who claim that the data was not correct, pointing to them as “privileged” in relation to more impoverished sectors; or the meeting with the Catalan heads of the CCOO and UGT, which the CGT refused to attend, arguing that only the strike committee was entitled to negotiate.

Third: a logic of confrontation between the interests of the workers and the public or even the city in the abstract. The main example of this: saying that granting the workers’ demands would mean raising the price of tickets or taxes, instead of putting the focus on the restrictions of the Court of Auditors or the inadequate funding of public transport by the Generalitat and the state or the need to streamline and democratize the structure of TMB. It also appeared that the main motivation to try to resolve the conflict was “so that the MWC is a success”, strengthening the consensus on the importance of protecting the Barcelona brand and the quasi-miraculous effects of mega-events on the metropolitan economy for any inhabitant of the city regardless of their social class.

In short, a logic of demobilization that breaks with the discourse of BenCom<sup>0</sup> so far, which has always placed emphasis on the need for self-organization and popular pressure to make significant changes possible. It is not that the city had to accept the strike demands, but it has appeared aligned with the TMB management and economic powers and media against the strikers. The focus has been put on the wages of the workers and on their responsibility for the conflict, instead of drawing attention to the need to restructure the oversized TMB management, ending opacity and the use of the company as an elephants’ graveyard for the Catalan elites, and legitimizing both the demands of the workers and their strike, even if they are incompatible with the budget.

It should be borne in mind that the public statements of the main faces of the municipality and especially of Ada Colau have a huge audience and considerable capacity to influence. On this occasion they have strengthened the brand of *La Vanguardia* or Grupo Prisa in which strikes, especially in transport, are a nuisance to be avoided in order to maintain the credibility of the city. She has positioned herself as a mediator between two parties and guarantor of the interests of the city but we have already said that anyone who tries to be “the mayor of all” and to reach a consensus between conflicting interests is more likely to end up being the mayor of “all the same.”

## Why?

As in Greece after the signing of the third memorandum, moralistic criticisms (“they have sold out”) proliferate, focused on Ada Colau. Colau countered these criticisms stating that the councillors of BenCom<sup>0</sup> work every day with honesty and with humility. However, the theories of betrayal do not explain anything and what we must try to understand are the correlation of forces and the strategic scenarios.

An idea that has been repeated in countless occasions but that is key to understanding the situation is that being in government is not the same as holding power. The municipalities of change have been subject since last May to a constant tension from the oligarchy towards cooptation or towards collapse. That is to say, the mainstream mass media continue to set the agenda on what is important or what you can or cannot do, employers try to avoid any measure that encroaches on their privileges while the regime blocks the action of the municipal candidates.

In addition, municipalities have few powers to resolve the majority of situations. In this case, restructuring the TMB management is in the hands of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona where the PSC holds the majority. The question is to be able to communicate the blackmail and the limits of institutional action instead of justifying political decisions which are little understood.

As if it was not enough to have such limited power, we must not forget that BenCom<sup>0</sup> is a minority government and needs support to approve budgets and prevent an extension of those previously approved by the right. How do you

publicly confront a TMB management packed with former and current leaders of the PSC if you need its support to push through budgets?

So BenCom<sup>0</sup> has a poor correlation of forces to face this kind of conflict at the institutional level but how can it be improved? Precisely by stimulating struggles and promoting the autonomy of the movement with regard to the institutions and to perspectives of action. If there is a constant pressure from the powerful to neutralize the transformations, it is imperative to have an impulse from the have-nots to make them effective.

Sometimes this represents a huge balancing act because, as Ada Colau said in the interview on TV3, “everyone has to play their role”. Ultimately this means elucidating how that the role of municipal government is understood: as a good left manager of the existing situation or as a precipitator of a constituent process.

## Relationship with trade unions

Another factor to take into account is the lack of centrality of trade union struggles in the recent cycle of mobilization. This means, on the one hand, that few of those with responsibilities in the municipalities come from the trade union world and have experience in dealing with situations such as that of the metro strike and, on the other hand, that trade unionism has been less affected by the transformations caused by the 15M and is quite disconnected from the political processes underway.

“Resolving these situations will be key to not generating mistrust among the most active and politicized sectors or a sense of failure and disappointment in the sectors immersed in their first political experience” as I already noted in May. [1] The risk of confrontations like this one is a decoupling between the social activism capable of radicalizing the processes underway and the municipal candidacies.

It is obvious that there are some sectors of the radical left with a central position in the articulation of social movements in the city that have a hostile position toward BenCom<sup>0</sup>, such as the CUP of Barcelona in its war of continuous attrition, or libertarians delighted to confirm that “power corrupts”.

However, the management of the municipality has also caused discomfort among left trades unionists such as the Co.Bas (a trade union of rank and file commissions), or some among the CCOO or CGT, who have in recent months seen the new municipality as an ally and who can progressively become disenchanted if these situations are repeated. More distance between these sectors and the “municipalism of change” means more risk of falling into a managerialist dynamic.

## The role of struggles in the public sector

A question that arises is: what can struggles like the metro strike contribute to pushing the situation towards rupture? A document distributed on demonstrations entitled “Letter to the citizens from a metro worker” stated that “on the contrary, unfortunately, for other groups, we have the power to try to solve the problem, and who in their right mind would not do something to change their situation if they could?” This phrase notes at the same time one of the main potentialities and one of the main limits of trade union struggles like the metro strike.

The potential is that we are talking about a sector with a tradition of association and of struggle, where casualization

and neoliberal atomization have not much penetrated and with a strategic position (the possibility of paralysing the city) to exert pressure. It is a great success that the metro unions of the metro want to fight temporary jobs of new incorporation in the company, because it has been customary to give the green light to this type of measure so staff with more experience maintain good conditions, generating a rupture, sometimes insurmountable, inside the workforce. However, the risk is to fall into corporate struggles. In the long run this is an impasse because if the other sectors are precarious and fragmented an offensive to criminalize these workers and isolate them for destroying decent conditions of work is much more possible.

To avoid this risk, the trade unions in sectors such as the Metro also can raise demands focused not only on wage increases but also concerning the division of labour and wealth and the democratization of public services, both in terms of access and management. It is also important that there is a policy of broad alliances and resources are placed at the service of the most precarious and difficult to organize sectors. For example, developing a platform of companies outsourced and subcontracted by the municipality to pursue re-municipalisation and decent working conditions for all workers that depend on this.

In short, this is an open conflict in which the positions of the municipality and the trade unions have become polarized, but that still can be corrected. Just like water management or the problems with the Guardia Urbana, TMB is an endemic source of conflict and a trench for the clientelist networks of the PSC and CiU that has to be faced sooner or later in order to transform Barcelona and socialize political power. In addition, this struggle is also a warning that the “bloc of change” must dispute “political economy” and not reduce its actions to symbolic radicalism. Tensions between sectors of the workers and governments are something almost inevitable while we continue disputing the hegemony and institutions of the dominant class.

The challenge is to take advantage of these tensions creatively, pushing the “municipalities of change” beyond the constrictions which they are anchored. For this purpose there is a need to stimulate new alliances and agreements that are capable of generating counterbalancing forces that push and overflow the limits of the existing frameworks. Each impulse of this type should be linked to pedagogy and a double task: on the one hand, convincing the social majority that each specific struggle is part of a collective process, of a whole class that represents the interests of society as a whole, and on the other, generating a social force capable of countering the firepower of the elites. That is to say, making visible an alternative project of city and society at the service of the popular classes and advancing in the constitution of the material force that makes this possible.

*Barcelona*

*1 mars 2016*

Source *Viento Sur* [Municipalismo del cambio, huelgas y conflicto](#).

---

[1] Laia Facet and Oscar Blanco [“Transformar votos en movimiento popular”](#).