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Spanish State

Spanish state: Housing – old problem, new solutions

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Rent levels have been on everyone's lips in recent months, and not for nothing. Not only because it's a problem that affects hundreds of thousands of people, but also because the housing rights movement has succeeded in getting tens of thousands of people onto the streets of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Gijón, Burgos, Zaragoza, Salamanca and other cities.

Like many people - including the organisers - we were surprised by the sudden outburst of tenants, but also from other social sectors, taking to the streets en masse. The fact is that these mobilisations, the largest in recent history, took place at a time of political ebb and flow, with a general retreat of the forces of the left and the rise of the right and the far right. Against this backdrop, the tenants' unions (*Sindicatos de Inquilinas*) succeeded in carving out a place for themselves in the media and in defining the political agenda with a radical discourse of confrontation with the rentier system and with the political parties of the so-called progressive bloc, incapable of providing real answers to the housing problem.

Building tenants' unions as tools of struggle

Despite the surprise generated by these mobilisations, they did not come out of nowhere. They are the fruit of a housing movement built up over many years. And, above all, they are the result of the building of tenants' unions, which have succeeded in affiliating thousands of people (more than 3,000 in Madrid and more than 5,000 in Catalonia), rowing against the tide during years of political regression. Both unions were founded in May 2017, when the 15M cycle was clearly running out of steam, Podemos was beginning its process of subordination and adaptation to the PSOE, and the large-scale mobilisations that had characterised the previous cycle were beginning to run out of steam.

The tenants' unions were able to perceive and try to overcome some of the limitations characteristic of recent social movements, thanks to hybrid forms between the latter and workers' trades unionism. They have opted for the creation of stable structures, with membership and permanent staff, like any trade union. It is these elements that have enabled these tenants' unions to endure, develop and consolidate, and even resist the ravages caused by the restrictions on activism imposed in the context of the pandemic. These restrictions were the coup de grâce for the majority of social movements, which were unable to resist the cessation of their activities.

Concrete battles

However, the organisational challenge was not the only key to the unions' success. Their ability to articulate the conflict between tenants and landlords in a collective manner was another, as was their ability to create trade union tools that enabled them to win victories. The ability to give concrete, useful answers to the people who came to the meetings to present their problems, and to resolve them, was the key to growth. There's no better way to win members than to demonstrate the usefulness of tenants' unions. There's nothing like the collective struggle to make people understand the need to fight beyond individual cases. There's nothing like victories against landlords to gain social legitimacy and improve the balance of power in favour of tenants and the working classes.

Different strategies have been developed to deal with most of the problems faced by tenants, such as the

non-reimbursement of deposits, the illegal charging of fees, the lack of repairs and maintenance to flats and buildings, harassment aimed at pushing tenants out of their homes and so on. But above all, a strategy of resistance has been put in place in the face of the main problem: rising prices and the non-renewal of rental contracts, which are the main mechanisms by which housing is treated as a commodity, allowing landlords to increase their profits at the expense of a basic necessity and impoverishing more and more tenants.

A concentration of capital

Faced with this situation of abuse, tenants' unions have developed the *Nos quedamos/Ens quedem* (We stay) union strategy, which consists of disobeying both price increases and lease non-renewals. The idea is simple: tenants stay in their homes after the end of the contract, paying the same price, and enter into a process of collective negotiation with the landlord to obtain a renewal of the contract without a price increase.

Although we are sold the idea of a housing stock in the hands of small owners who depend on this income to survive, the reality is much more complex. One of the dynamics of the property market that emerged in the wake of the 2008 crisis, and the shift in the property market from buy-to-let to leasing, was the rush by companies and investment funds. As a result, in recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of large landlords and a trend towards the concentration of ownership in a small number of hands. While these large landlords do not yet account for the majority of the rental property market, they do play a dominant role, spear-heading property speculation.

It is in this context that the organisation of vertical property blocks takes on its full meaning, sometimes comprising dozens of flats for rent, in which a large number of tenants affected by the same problems can be found and who can fight together against a common enemy. [1] Tenants' unions have decided to break with the passive dynamic of waiting for the people concerned to come to their meetings, and adopt a proactive role that seeks conflict. In short, to go on the offensive. Seek out the different parts of the same property, talk to the neighbours, identify the main problems in each community and organise a joint fight by dozens or hundreds of tenants to guarantee the rights that are being trampled underfoot. And above all, act before the majority of tenants find themselves in a critical situation, thereby saving time in organising and fighting.

Articulating the conflict

Another of the fundamental pillars has been to combine the struggle through conflict with the struggle in the institutional arena, understanding the need to obtain legislative changes that recognise the rights and improve the general situation of tenants. In this sense, the legislative improvements achieved through the reform of the LAU [Ley de Arrendamientos Urbanos, Urban Tenancies Act] and the Housing Act (5/7 year contract duration, fees to be paid by the property, regulation of rents in force in some Catalan municipalities, limitation of deposits and so on) should be seen as victories achieved through struggle, but without falling into triumphalism. Acknowledging these advances does not mean ignoring the fact that their effects have been very limited and totally inadequate. We must not forget that current legislation continues to protect the interests of landlords to the detriment of the right to housing.

The key to linking the trade union struggle with the institutional struggle and legislative improvements is to understand the latter not as an end in themselves, not as a possible real solution to the housing problem, but as another tool for action, as an improvement in the balance of power in favour of tenants, a tool that serves as a basis for promoting subsequent conflicts against landlords and preparing the next round of struggles. Legislative improvements, the fight for a programme that raises awareness, trade union action and institutional pressure are all part of the political struggle that is being waged at all levels and against all parts of the state.

The rent strike

A large part of the success of the mobilisations of October and November 2024 lay precisely in their ability to put forward demands and a programme felt to be legitimate by large sections of the working class, in particular the need for an urgent and radical reduction in rent prices (minimum 50%), a measure totally unacceptable to the government. At the same time, the mobilisations denounced the fact that this supposedly progressive government regards housing as a commodity and always legislates to guarantee the continued existence of private property and its profits. Finally, they highlighted a new trade union strategy for achieving this autonomous price reduction: the rent strike.

But lower rents are not the only urgent measure. The following measures, among others, are necessary:

- Stable, long-term leases with automatic renewal, providing long-term guarantees so that people can plan and develop their lives in good conditions.
- The expropriation of all empty, tourist and vulture-funded housing that is not fulfilling its social function, in order to create a public housing stock under social control.
- Genuine regulation of rents, taking into account the social and economic situation of families, and adjusting rents to a maximum of 10% of income.

All these measures are essential if we are to begin to alleviate the housing emergency from which we have been suffering for years. But let's make no mistake, the only way to guarantee the right to housing for all is to take housing off the market and end renting as a method of extracting rents on the backs of the working class. And this will not be done within the framework of the capitalist system.

Rebuilding class consciousness and fighting the far right

Over and above the need to organise tenants to improve their material conditions, organisations and structures like tenants' unions can play a key role in rebuilding class consciousness, by articulating important sectors of working women in their complexity, with a feminist and anti-racist perspective, and by serving as a bastion against the far right.

It is important to emphasise, as has been stressed on other occasions, that there is no such thing as a tenant class. Tenants are a sector of the working class, whose class position is conditioned not only by the exploitation of labour, but also by the lack of control over their housing, just as is the case for people with mortgages or who live in squats. Contrary to those who speak of a generational issue, we see it as a confrontation between the working class and the interests of the rentiers, who constitute a central fraction of the bourgeoisie in the Spanish state.

The potential of the housing rights movement offers us the chance to build a union capable of countering the dynamic imposed by the market, by bringing together the most impoverished sectors and those who, although not subject to the greatest precariousness, suffer the exploitation of rentiers on a daily basis. Tenants' unions now have an obligation to work - by articulating conflict and organisation through the experience of struggle - to build a mass movement capable of integrating the majority of people who rent their homes.

The rising cost of living, the eviction of neighbours from our neighbourhoods, the proliferation of tourist flats, the systematic degradation and commodification of public services, are also a consequence of the process of commodification of our neighbourhoods, directly linked to the rentier offensive. But this situation also offers

opportunities to the housing movement and to all those on the revolutionary left who feel it necessary to form a political and social bloc that breaks with the policy of social dialogue. In the case of housing, it's a question of widening our field of action to include the whole of the working class, in particular those who own and live in a house, and whose interests are closer to those of people who don't have control over their housing, than to those of the 6% of the population who make a living from renting.

Facing the reactionaries

Moreover, the class conflict over housing is one of the spearheads of the far right through the squadrism of the desokupación companies [private companies which offer quick and effective solutions to evict illegal occupants], generating security responses to invented panics - you can go downstairs to buy your bread and find your home squatted - and as a tool for the reproduction of the immiserated middle classes, in the struggle of the second last against the last. While the far right seeks to fragment the working class on the basis of issues such as nationality or race, tenant unionism - in general - makes it possible to unite the working class as a whole in the struggle.

The best way to confront the reactionary positions of certain sectors of the middle classes is to unite the working classes with a political programme that proposes universal solutions to the housing problem, recognising the diversity of the working class and emphasising the need to put forward anti-racist and feminist principles.

A feminist struggle

In the field of housing, this is very visible because migrant sectors - which are often on the margins of political circuits - are organising alongside non-migrant sectors, sometimes in less precarious situations. By generating communities and collective struggle processes, the native white population ceases to consider migrants as an 'other' and sees them as part of the same subject. All this with a large number of women as the main protagonists.

This is no coincidence: the home is still the space that patriarchy and capitalism re-serve for women, who continue to perform most of the tasks necessary for social reproduction. For many of them, the home remains a place of responsibility and work, but also of personal fulfilment. Moreover, when they are evicted from their homes, they are not only evicted from the home, but also from a community. This is also why, when it comes to defending the home and all that it contains, it is women who are on the front line.

While men often occupy more space at tenants' union meetings, every week more and more women are taking charge of their own dispute, leading and managing their own cases, adding this extra workload to caring tasks and working for a living. In a neo-liberal culture and economy that wants us to be alone and powerless, where everyone has to save themselves, it's our neighbours who support and back each other up to go where the state won't, while the system continues its attacks.

Resistance against evictions and the fight for decent housing for all place life at the centre and focus attention on social reproduction. We are challenging the rules of the market and property speculation, which put economic profit before human needs and the preservation of life; we are forging links with feminist struggles against the gentrification and destruction of working-class neighbourhoods; we are resisting the commodification of public space. The fight for housing must embody this feminist and militant trade unionism that confronts the neoliberal attack on the reproduction of life, by building alliances with domestic workers, sex workers, sexual and gender dissidents, migrant and racialised women, and all those who bear the full brunt of the crisis of social reproduction.

New challenges for tenant unionism

In conclusion, we think it is important to highlight the main challenges that tenants' unions, and the movement as a whole, must face in the coming years if we are to be able to provide a comprehensive response to the housing problem. Firstly, we need to develop and refine the tool of the rent strike so that it is genuinely useful and enables us to achieve further victories and large-scale price reductions, while also being able to take advantage of moments of political irruption. In addition, we need to go beyond the existing tenant unions, betting on the development of new tenant organisations at territorial and national level and taking a further step to overcome the fragmentation between tenants and owner-occupiers on loan, and create a housing unionism capable of providing a global response.

First of all, it has to be said that the rent strike is already underway. Hundreds of Nestar tenants, organised with the *Sindicato de Inquilinas de Madrid*, have already stopped paying part of their rent to combat the abuses of this vulture fund; similarly, the tenants of La Caixa are leading a total rent strike, with the *Sindicat de Llogateres de Catalunya*, to recover the IBI [*Impuesto sobre Bienes Inmuebles*, the local property tax that affects every property], fraudulently levied. The organisation of blocs in struggle has made possible active strikes in Madrid and Catalonia, taking advantage of the collective component of these strikes and directly attacking the big vulture funds. This is a direct attack on real estate capital, and it has also led to victories such as the elimination of unfair terms, demonstrating the effectiveness of collective struggle.

The Madrid tenants' union put forward the idea of a rent strike in the run-up to the demon-stration on 13 October, and this possibility made its way into the media, arousing the horror and indignation of the rentiers, but also the curiosity and enthusiasm of many tenants. The strike is useful as an element of agitation and as a horizon towards which to march, on the understanding that it must be the consequence of a process of bottom-up struggles, which creates the possibilities from concrete experiences of strikes, partial or total, in vertical building blocks, to gain conflict and legitimacy while extending the organisation and the slogan to each neighbourhood and improving our balance of power. The rent strike cannot be a symbolic proclamation: if it is declared, it is to be won.

But in addition to developing the rent strike, tenants' unions must be able to take advantage of the present moment. As we have already mentioned, unions have been able to build stable, long-term organisations, thanks to structured plans, long-term bets and a clear methodology. However, at a time when the issue of housing is bursting onto the political and media scene, it is essential to have the audacity to take the initiative, because the current political situation demands rapid responses in order to take advantage of a moment of political momentum and mobilise the masses by going beyond day-to-day action.

Confronting capitalism

On the one hand, this makes it possible to challenge the state with programmatic slogans, such as the expropriation of empty, tourist and temporary housing, while at the same time raising the general level of awareness and appealing to the need to organise. Challenging the state is essential if we are to understand that rent is one of the structural elements in the construction of capitalism in the Spanish state, which, although it may manifest itself in different forms - seasonal rentals, touristification, empty dwellings and so on - responds to the same speculative dynamic of generalised price rises.

The fact that rent is a widespread problem raises the question of political power and the state, which ultimately has the political capacity to intervene and guide society as a whole. This is why it is important that, in addition to the formation and development of tenants' unions in all territories, they should be able to articulate and coordinate amongst themselves, forming a confederal organisation, which improves our balance of power when confronting

each of the institutions of the state, maintaining a totalising orientation towards governments as the main parties responsible for the housing situation.

But the aim should not just be to make an organisational leap at the territorial level, but to make the leap towards an integral housing unionism, which deals with all the problems - renting, squatting, substandard housing, mortgages - and which would be able to unite and give effective responses to the whole of the working class which does not have control over its housing.

At the moment, renting is a starting point for organising the conflict around the lack of control over housing. On the one hand, it is a numerically very important sector of the working class and, on the other, it is the one that suffers most from the problems of the commodification of housing. What's more, the instability of the contracts, which allow abusive increases or evictions of families on a regular basis, with only a few years between them, leads to a dynamic and effective fight against the rentier system.

However, we need to appeal to the entire working class who do not have control over their housing, understanding that ultimately the central problem lies in its commodification. It is essential to develop a programme that addresses all these sectors in a universal way so as to avoid confrontation between indebted landlords, tenants and squatters, whose common interest is to ensure that housing is a universal good and not a commodity. It is therefore also a political step forward, uniting, through a concrete programme, the demands and needs of those whom the market and the state seek to divide. To make progress in building a political bloc of the working class which, through the experience of the housing conflict, breaks with the strategy of social dialogue and conceives of politics as an awareness of our own capacity to build a social, cultural and political alternative to capitalism.

In our view, this unity is only possible through a common struggle and a common experience that highlights the imperative need and urgency of articulating a political alternative that, on the common basis of an anti-capitalist response to the whole system of capitalist domination and exploitation, articulates in the field of housing an ecosocialist programmatic response as a springboard for direct confrontation against all the parties of the regime and the state, in their own institutions. There are already many examples where, in the absence of a political tool of our own from which to confront without concessions the parties of rent and property speculation, we are presented with the main alternative of delegation to those who, at best, assume a critical management of the capitalist crisis. But we are aware that one of the historic slogans of the housing movement, *vivienda universal y de calidad*, 'universal and quality housing', has no chance of becoming a reality under the boot of capitalism. This imposes on us all the task of advancing towards this goal by combining daily conquests with the construction of a social and political bloc that embraces this idea and is prepared to fight for it in all areas of the class struggle.

PS:

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[1] Vertical property blocks refer to buildings where all the flats belong to a single owner or entity (such as an investment fund, a bank or a large landlord), unlike horizontal property, where each flat has a different owner.