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Spanish state

# The Left at the Crossroads: Notes For Building Anew

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**Two leading members of Anticapitalistas reflect on the challenges facing the left today.**

## 1. Where Have We Come From?

Almost eight years have passed since Pedro Sánchez's PSOE government came to power, first alone and, from 2020 onwards, in coalition with Unidas Podemos (Podemos, IU, Comunes) until 2023 and with Sumar (IU, Comunes, Movimiento Sumar) from then on. This period, practically two full legislative terms, is more than enough to make an accurate assessment of what the progressive government has meant in social and political terms. And, firstly, we can agree that from the beginning there has been a disconnect between the rhetoric and the measures this government has actually implemented. Sanchez's first solo executive promises included measures such as the repeal of the so-called Gag Law, passed by Mariano Rajoy's previous right-wing government to severely repress protests against him, or the Labour Reform, which cost Rajoy a general strike. None of the most damaging aspects of these two flagship laws of right-wing policies have been corrected after eight years of progressive governments.

Housing policies are another prime example of the progressive government's inaction on issues critical to the working class. During the legislature where the PSOE and Unidas Podemos governed, a Housing Law was passed that has been virtually ineffective, as it left rent control in the hands of the Autonomous Communities, mostly governed by the PP. Even in regions governed by the PSOE, these controls have been minimal. During these eight years of progressive coalition governments, there has been no real redistribution of wealth, and banks and large corporations have reaped the greatest profits in their history.

However, it's important to remember that the progressive government has enjoyed the support of the educated middle class and the majority of working-class voters throughout these years, who have largely backed both the PSOE and UP, initially, and later Sumar, in various elections. Only the corruption scandals within the PSOE and the internal divisions within the Sumar-Podemos political space have significantly eroded the government's support among this social sector. Even the defence of economic and political liberalism, with the EU as a pillar of support for a middle-class-friendly capitalism, is one of the strengths of the current coalition government and is part of the dominant common sense of progressivism. Nor is it surprising that, given the global context in which we find ourselves, with a widespread rise of far-right forces and a Trump unrestrained in his expansionist ambitions, there is a closing of ranks among the progressive middle classes to defend governments that sustain a way of life without upheavals for them and with relative well-being in relation to the migrant proletariat of the capitalist core countries or the immense pockets of poverty in the countries of the south. But political disaffection is growing significantly among young people, and not only because the left offers them no other life horizon than perpetual precarity and the absence of dignified life prospects; necessarily, if those at the top get rich, those at the bottom suffer.

The rise of the far-right Vox party has also served as a constant excuse to portray the social-liberal government as the lesser evil compared to the possibility of the extreme right entering the Spanish government. But this reactionary wave has not been solely due to objective causes. It is also a consequence of the disappointment and weariness stemming from the failed experiences of center-left governments, which came to power amid great expectations only to be swept aside by far-right parties.

We have examples of this in Latin America, with Argentina and Chile as prime examples, but it has also occurred, for various reasons impossible to address in this article, in Bolivia and Ecuador. The disappointment with the lack of transformative policies from these governments (something that we can also apply to the European case) causes,

first, resignation among the popular sectors that brought these parties to power and, later, weariness and social and political abstention. Contrary to what some impressionistic analyses suggest, at the moment there is no significant shift from the working classes to supporting far-right options, but rather internal shifts within the right-wing field (from the most traditional to the most extreme) along with a certain uncritical acceptance among youth sectors, who find that progressive governments do not improve their depressing job prospects and access to housing. The propaganda and rhetorical inflation of center-left governments is inversely proportional to the real changes their policies bring about, policies that submit with little resistance to the constraints of neoliberalism prevalent in both the North and the South.

Faced with this bleak outlook, the working classes lack clear role models and union or community affiliations as they once did. The loss of class identity is one of the foundations upon which the expansion of neoliberal ideology and the general decline of the left rest—not understood as an electoral brand, but as a way of organising the lives of the working class. Mass consumption and the "make it work" mentality have replaced meetings, events, and popular cultural centers, just as the assimilation of simple messages on social media has replaced books and study. The reconstruction of a subjectivity based on the materiality of class, with all its oppressions, should be one of the primary objectives of any political option that continues to aspire to an ecosocialist revolution.

## 2. The Social and Political Crisis of the Left

The self-proclaimed civil society often speaks of a crisis of the left to refer to the lack of electoral unity of the various progressive groups (Sumar, Podemos, Izquierda Unida and the specific organisations of each territory) and to the joint loss of votes. In the most superficial discourse, the idea of crisis is limited to the electoral field, as if the mediation between political parties and society was solely and primarily the ballot box, and this floated over a social void composed of dispersed individualities. In a more developed version of this idea, the crisis would be created or at least fuelled by the disappearance of the internal life of parties, their democratic shortcomings and a struggle of egos that would prevent the establishment of agreements. The crisis thus becomes self-explanatory: a phenomenon that arises from the bowels of the parties and that has an electoral consequence, where society/voters and political organisations/representatives maintain a relationship of otherness and mutual incomprehension.

Where does this leave an analysis of the changes and difficulties within the historical bloc as a whole? Have we suddenly accepted that institutional politics and its diplomatic pathos are the only real dimension of what we call politics?

There is no doubt that the past political cycle introduced new forms in the traditional political action of left-wing political parties. But, after a few years and after verifying that the weight of the new expressions of change was essentially placed on the leadership and its plenipotentiary control of the organisations they championed, these new winds have not served to instill forces that allow resistance in the medium term, but rather to have permanent vacuous effects in each new political operation, be it Podemos, Ahora Madrid, Comunes, Más Madrid or Sumar.

Today's political left is a mix of ageing organisations and younger, salaried professionals who have found in institutions a lifeline in the face of an uncertain job market. The institutional left no longer offers projects that would allow sectors of social activism, unions, or youth to join a vision of radical social transformation. The only horizon since 2017 (when Podemos' leadership shifted towards regional governments with its entry into the Castilla-La Mancha executive) has been to govern at any administrative level as the junior partner of the PSOE. Unlike the 1990s, when Julio Anguita's more combative profile drew more left-leaning currents and young people towards what IU then represented, young people are now shunning these kinds of organisations, and no one considers them useful tools for a type of activism that aspires to overcome capitalism. They are merely ballot papers to complete the majority for the lesser evil of social liberalism against the rise of the far right. Now devoid of strategic sense and

long-term thinking, these parties drift from one election to the next, trying to maintain the minimum share that allows them to continue accumulating public subsidies to sustain their dwindling organisational structures.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that a great disaffection has arisen among young people and that there are predominantly youth-led political organisations in a radical break with this whole world of the institutional left. This is the case with Gazte Koordinadora Sozialista (Young Socialist Organisation or GKS) in the Basque Country and Coordinadora Juvenil Socialista (Socialist Youth Coordinating Committee or CJS) in other parts of Spain, which in this instance have drawn their members from a split within the Unión de Juventudes Comunistas de España (Communist Youth Union of Spain or UJCE, the youth wing of the PCE), from which more than 50% of its members defected to this new organisation. Orthodox communist rhetoric and a highly identity-driven approach to internal self-organisation do not appear, for the moment, to be limiting factors for their growth among increasingly radicalised youth sectors.

As for far-left organisations, there is not yet enough accumulated strength to suggest a qualitative leap is possible in the short term. However, organisations like Anticapitalistas maintain a stable core of cadres and have incorporated a new generation of activists who could be important in future realignments of the radical left.

### 3. The Crisis of Trade Unions and Social Movements

What between 2010 and 2022 resulted in what came to be called the new politics was, in reality, a much broader set of structures, relational forms, popular institutions and frameworks of challenge that traversed the whole of politics, creating common imaginaries and expectations. The experience of Podemos first, and of Sumar and the various municipal movements later, cannot be separated from the trajectory of the main social movements that have marked the era: feminism, environmentalism, and the struggle for housing. Their programmes and structures have been part of, and at the same time affected by, the well-known crisis of the left, as we will attempt to analyse.

On September 23, 2014, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón announced his retirement from politics. The resignation of the then Minister of Justice was a major victory for the feminist movement at the time and the first time a member of the government had fallen thanks to this multifaceted movement that emerged in 2011. The definitive withdrawal of the proposed counter-reform of the Abortion Law that bore his name was, along with protests against right-wing politicians and the increasingly frequent images of massive pickets preventing evictions, a symbol of what social struggle could achieve.

Forged in opposition to Mariano Rajoy's governments, the main social movements had from the beginning a complex relationship with the rise of Podemos and its entry into coalition governments. The leap from the illusion of the social to that of the political meant the mass entry of movement members into institutional management, especially in the field of local politics. The much-celebrated proximity of municipal politics and the shared history of activists with councillors and advisors contributed, along with the absence of political education in parliamentary distrust and democratic controls, to generating a whole network of moral loyalties that made it difficult to clarify objectives and means. What was the role of social groups and the mass movement? Was it the usual opposition to the governments, which suddenly seemed to be ours? Was it defending them? Or was it adapting their demands to what could be strictly possible here and now, based on compliance with existing legislation, not questioning a state structure inherited from the dictatorship, appeasing the wealthy and powerful, and meeting the economic demands of the European Union?

The two main expressions of the mass movement in recent years (the wave of feminist strikes between 2017 and

2020, and the huge youth environmental explosion between 2018 and 2022) created, at least temporarily, the conditions of a possibility to break with this trend. The irruption of hundreds of thousands of people into the field of direct political participation, together with an advanced, courageous and widely accepted programmatic development as necessary and possible (which in many ways played a partial role as a transitional programme), turned both outbursts into precious political phenomena, hardly reducible to the narrow framework of institutional convenience. However, neither feminists nor environmentalists were able to build stable democratic structures that would ensure the survival of the movement beyond specific outbreaks and allow for collective debate and discussion, beyond the errors or successes of informal leaderships and limited local experiences.

Lacking structures in which to crystallise, without concrete victories despite social support, and without mediation between the moment of challenge and the horizon set, both movements began a phase of progressive decomposition and emptying, accelerated by the impositions of the pandemic. We continue to experience this paradox today: while feminism and environmentalism continue to generate significant social consensus and mobilise large numbers of people on specific dates, the movement rests on organisationally precarious structures, severely weakened and with a growing loss of direction and meaning.

On the one hand, mobilisation in response to specific attacks continues to bring together many people sporadically, but the solidification of the movement's structures falls far short of the capacity to react to a specific attack.

In these times of progressive coalition government we have also witnessed another phenomenon that we can link to what Gramsci considered "the expanded state". Many activities or initiatives of social movements are financed by Ministries, public companies or government agencies and the subsidies of these bodies serve to inflate the staff of certain movements and associations, which can barely finance themselves through membership fees and replace that effort outside the State with a source of income that has ties. We are not anarchists, nor are we advocating here that social collectives should be prevented from funding any of their activities through public aid. However, the fact that the majority of the budgets of social movements critical of power (and therefore of the government managing the current capitalist system) depend on the state fosters internal bureaucracy and hinders progress toward an agenda of breaking with the established power structure, turning the self-reproduction of the movement and its wage-earning members into an ultimate goal. This is where the phenomenon of the movement as a lobby towards institutions is inserted, and not as an entity that works to wrest gains from them through mobilisation and social (self) organisation.

Regarding the role of labour unions, their decline as organisers of labour disputes is undeniable. CCOO and UGT have transformed into service agencies for their members, although they still maintain a combined membership base of nearly 2 million people. Their union representatives, with a few honourable exceptions, are largely inactive in companies, where strikes have fallen to historic lows and labour disputes in general are practically nonexistent. Over the last eight years, the major unions have been mere bystanders to the government's decisions, without any serious questioning (as occurred during previous PSOE administrations) of the executive's labour policies. The question remains whether the bureaucratized apparatuses of the major unions will have the capacity to react after so many years of paralysis in the face of a possible new government of the PP and Vox, which will undoubtedly perpetrate strong attacks against the very essence of these organisations.

However, within the nations of the Spanish State, we have other trade union realities that have not followed the path of total adaptation undertaken by CCOO and UGT. The CIG in Galicia, ELA and LAB in the Basque Country, and the CGT in Catalonia are expressions of a trade unionism that, although with limitations, continues to promote struggle to achieve victories.

## 4. Perspectives for a New Revolutionary and Ecosocialist Left

Examining the current state of the social and political left in Spain makes sense because it puts us in a better position to formulate hypotheses and concrete proposals for the reconstruction of a class-based left, with organic links to sectors of the working class, capable of envisioning a credible and desirable ecosocialist horizon.

The reactionary surge makes urgent what was already a necessity: the existence of left-wing political organisations that offer an alternative to the government, with a comprehensive vision, that confront the far right and are not subordinate to progressive neoliberalism, as is the case with the entire parliamentary left today. Building such a political tool cannot be done without taking a candid look at the experiences of the 2011-2019 cycle, where the current in which we are active, Anticapitalistas, participated in the launch and subsequent development of a hybrid anti-neoliberal alliance like Podemos. We acknowledge that we made political mistakes during those years, but also that undertaking that experience was necessary at the time. We won't go into an assessment that has already been made, but it is worth remembering that many of the positions regarding political strategy, immediate tactics, and organisational model that we defended then have stood the test of time. The political situation is new and must be addressed with new parameters, but, without aiming to be exhaustive, here are a few points drawn from that experience that should be essential for a new ecosocialist political mediation:

- The fundamental weight of a disruptive organisation must lie in the construction of an organised social force that is capable of confronting the bourgeoisie and the politicians in its service in all areas. Good political communication is necessary, but not the most important thing. The training of activists and the public political activity of a new, antagonistic mediation must be focused on building mobilisation and strengthening the labour movement, the feminist movement, the housing movement, the environmental movement, the LGBTQ+ movement, and all those movements with anti-capitalist and disruptive potential.
- A relationship of non-alienation must be built with social movements and concrete struggles, based on territorial roots and respectful but firm work within them, aspiring to establish organic relationships with the institutions of the working class and with specific sectors of it, based not on representation, but on direct political involvement and collective self-organisation.
- The programme and ideology are essential elements for developing a new political tool, but this tool, within the framework of basic strategic agreements that we will now outline, should be pluralistic and not limited to a single identity. The minimum common denominator should be red lines regarding potential agreements with social liberalism, the defense of a tradition linked to the labour movement, the inclusion of other emancipatory traditions (feminism, environmentalism, LGBTQ+ rights, anti-racism), and an anti-imperialist, non-campist vision of the new world.
- The organisational culture of a group seeking to overcome past mistakes must be fraternal, fostering freedom of criticism and allowing for the formation of internal factions within a framework of general loyalty. When we speak of past mistakes, we refer both to the cult of personality and the suppression of internal criticism, which proved so prevalent in the new politics, and to the factional culture characteristic of much of the far left, which transforms revolutionary parties into permanent battlegrounds between different factions.
- A new ecosocialist organisation should have finances that depend primarily on its own income and, if it receives subsidies, ensure that these do not become its main source of funding. Furthermore, if it obtains representation in any institution, there must be clear salary and term limits.

These points are merely an outline of what we believe a new organisation should be for the majority of the state's working class (where the migrant working class should play a prominent role). We didn't reinvent the wheel, and we may be accused of devising solutions that are as idealistic as they are difficult to implement. But as our dear departed Daniel Bensaïd said, "Perhaps the construction of a revolutionary organisation is as necessary as it is

impossible, like absolute love in Marguerite Duras. This has never prevented anyone from falling in love.”

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Translated by David Fagan for **International Viewpoint** from [Vientosur](#).

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