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Spanish State

A strike with 100 per cent participation in the Basque Country

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Euskal Herria [1] experienced a day of total general strike, in the literal sense of the word: a strike with 100 per cent participation on March 29. The sector of workers who worked was residual and the 30 per cent of minimal services imposed by the governments did not make it possible to give the impression of normality that they sought. More than that, in the transport sector, the requisitioned workers circulated while announcing: “We are on strike â€” minimum service”. Only the banks showed some activity on the inside, but the establishments remained closed to the public.

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From the earliest hours of the morning, strike pickets could see the success of the strike in the different sectors and in the four capitals (of the Basque provinces): you have to go back to 1988 (the historic strike against the Youth Employment Plan) to remember such a level of participation. Very significant, because they are important points of reference, was the total closure of Volkswagen in Navarre, Mercedes Benz in Vitoria, CIF in Beasain, Naval in Bizkaia and the Mondragón Co-operative Group.

This strike, moreover, was marked by a very high participation of retail outlets (bars, groceries, department stores, etc). A significant fact is that the Corte Inglés shopping mall in Bilbao â€” an emblematic bastion against strikes â€” could not even open because the personnel was mainly on strike. Another remarkable fact: the strike pickets did not have much to do, as they found the majority of shops and enterprises closed.

The demonstrations were the crowning glory of the day, very massive both at midday and in the evening. Not only was the participation very high (never before had a general strike produced such a great human flood traversing the four capitals of Euskal Herria) but the demonstrations were largely made up of young people, who from dawn had made the pickets lines massive. That is significant and bodes well for the future.

Undoubtedly one of the elements which made it possible to attain this degree of mobilization (over and above the enormous social crisis in which we are plunged and the successive waves of attacks) was the convergence of calls for the strike from the whole trade-union spectrum, even though the calls were separate. It should be remembered that the Basque trade-union majority â€” the ELA, LAB, ESK, STEE-EILAS (teaching), EHNE (farming community) and HIRU (transport) unions â€” which since 2009 had already organized three general strikes, responded on February 17 to the counter-reform of the Rajoy government by calling a general strike for March 29. This call was also made by a vast range of social movements, including those who contributed to the success on February 25 of a national mobilization against the social cuts of the governments of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (CAPV) and the government of Navarre.

The CCOO and the UGT, which four days before Rajoy’s decree had just signed a framework pact for collective agreements (which in addition to the freezing of wages, accepted the discourse according to which in order to get out of the crisis it was necessary to increase the competitiveness of companies and for this reason to develop, among other things, geographical, functional and wage flexibility) and were still enmeshed in a useless social dialogue, only decided to mobilize against this reform on March 9.

These two elements â€” the participation of the social movements in the trade-union united front and the calling of a strike by the CCOO and the UGT the same day â€” created the broad social consensus which made such a massive strike possible. The fact that all the political forces which make up the Amaiur coalition (Batasuna, Aralar, EA, Alternativa) called on people to take an active part in the strike also played a very positive role in the mobilization, as

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too did the decision of the majority of the Parliament of Navarre to go on strike that day, and the support of the Socialist party (PSE-EE in the Basque Country).

Beyond this success of the strike, we cannot hide the heavy baggage that we have to drag behind us after years of defeats, nor the difficulties we face to raise our heads high again. The dynamic on the level of the workplaces is not yet up to the challenges we face, general meetings of the workforce were still rare and, contrary to 1988, the general strike was not preceded by a dynamic of mobilization at the local or regional level, with public assemblies followed by mobilizations.

After the day of mobilization, this strike also raises the question of how to follow it up. It seems clear that the CCOO and the UGT do not have any other objective than to take up again the social dialogue with the government. This is a perspective rather distant from that of the Basque trade-union majority, for which this reform is not negotiable: the only demand is its withdrawal. That means building a social wall against this decree and the austerity policies of the government and the employers and against agreements like those signed by the CCOO and the UGT (the pact on pensions, the one concerning collective agreements ...).

It remains to define how this dynamic of confrontation, expressed on March 29, will be concretized and how we will be able to respond to the vacuum which appears between the different days of general strike, because that is where the relationships of forces are built and that is where we must confront the enormous difficulties of putting a brake on the employers' attacks.

Finally, for the Basque trade-union majority, the mobilization today was also the moment to demand, with more force, a Basque framework of labour relations. "We live here, we work here, we must decide here". A demand which, considering the configuration of the trade-union and political movement of this country, becomes more important with each passing day.

Bilbao, March 29, 2012

Josu Egireun, a Basque trade unionist, is a member of the editorial board of the review *Viento Sur*, from which this article comes: <http://www.vientosur.info/articulos...>

[1] The term Euskal Herria refers to the three provinces of the autonomous Basque region plus the neighbouring province of Navarre

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