



The march to Brussels

The 15th October has been declared a day of action by an inspiring movement in Spain. Could it be a first small step towards a progressive response from the grassroots to the EU's challenge to social justice and democracy?

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“On the 15th October, one major question will be if the dynamic we now have in Spain can inspire the rest of Europe.” These are the words to a pan-european audience at a meeting in Barcelona in September of a dedicated and passionate Spanish activist, Javier Toret from Democracia Real Ya! (Democracy Now!), one of many groups involved in the protests. The Spanish movement for real democracy and against austerity – often dubbed the 15M movement or ‘the indignados’ – issued a call for a Global Day of Action against austerity and for social justice and real democracy this summer, and it seems to have successfully spread, with events in a large number of European cities and in other parts of the world. And as if to make sure the message reaches Brussels, about a hundred people started marching to Brussels from Spain in early August – and are due to arrive a few days before the 15th October.



Sol, Madrid

The EU context

The day of action comes in the midst of an economic crisis in Europe in general and in the Eurozone in particular. Major cuts are being made to social benefits and to wages in Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Greece and elsewhere in the European Union. While all countries were to some extent hit by the financial crisis of 2008, few were hit as badly as these countries, now known as 'the periphery' of the eurozone. Integration of these countries in a single market and single currency alongside more developed countries had made German industry the winner, and industry in the periphery countries lost out. Their economies had become dependent on credit, and once credit was not readily available, they slid quickly into recession. Billions were poured into loan packages intended primarily to keep risk-taking and irresponsible banks afloat.

The crisis has developed against a background of growing income inequalities in the last 30 years that have created explosive imbalances in economies and society. In response to the crisis, the EU is not tackling inequalities or addressing the fundamental flaws of the euro. And it is not embarking on ambitious plans for public investment to steer clear of the kind of downward spiral seen during the crisis in the thirties. Quite the contrary. Austerity is either imposed or encouraged, and a cascade of new laws and procedures are being set up to keep member states economic policies within the confines of neoliberalism, promising many difficult years to come. In other words, the struggle against austerity and for social rights has become a European struggle, and it's a struggle that will define the future of the European Union. It's indispensable to have a national agenda, and a national movement against austerity, but that's not enough.

Indignados – a short history

Only a year ago, Spain seemed an unlikely candidate to spark European action against austerity. Not that Spain didn't have its problems. With unemployment on the wrong side of 20 per cent of the work force, and youth unemployment at about 45 per cent, Spain is in a deep social crisis. But parliamentary opposition to the measures was and remains weak. Trade unions have not been able to mount much resistance since a one day general strike in September 2010. But then on the 15th of May 2011, a week before regional and municipal elections, a demonstration spearheaded by Democracia Real Ya! was joined by tens of thousands of people, mostly young, to denounce the lack of democracy in Spain, the self-centred behaviour of the elite, the politicians' inability to see the warning signs, and their disregard for people's welfare.

The demonstrations in May were followed by mass actions. Starting in Sol, the central square in Madrid, the movement occupied squares, inspired by events at the Tahrir Square in Cairo that led to the downfall of President Mubarak in Egypt. Soon after people occupied squares in Barcelona, Valencia and other cities. The police made a number of attempts to remove them, and became notorious for using indiscriminate violence, but were unsuccessful. In fact, it had the reverse effect. In Madrid the square was originally occupied by approximately 1,000 people. After several police attacks, 25,000 filled the area.

Only shortly after, on the 19th of June, a new wave of demonstrations swept through Spain's major cities, this time against the infamous Euro Pact, the agreement signed by 24 of 28 EU member states, which obliges them to attack wages in the name of competitiveness, and to cut social expenditure in the name of 'sound public finances'. The demonstrations drew hundreds of thousands to the streets in what was the biggest sign of public opposition to the emerging neoliberal model of 'economic governance' in the European Union. Far more than the numbers reached by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) at their demonstrations against austerity and attacks on wages.

Assemblies and democracy

In no time, a movement has been built in Spain – mostly but not entirely by young people., creating what is one of the biggest movements for democracy and against austerity in Europe at the moment. On top of the demonstrations and the occupation of squares, assemblies have sprung up all over the country. Meetings in neighbourhoods on local issues that requires action, or meetings on the big global challenges and what to do about them - mostly with a large number of people present. These assemblies were often followed by action to defend people from the wave of evictions that followed the collapse of the housing bubble.. Participatory democracy at work!

A testimony from a Spanish activist

“Inside the movement we see the same difficulties as always: people from very different backgrounds and of different opinions, small groups with a predefined agenda. But also loads of brand new people, hard working and with a lot of enthusiasm, but who have to make themselves experts on the issues at the speed of light as they are dealing with these issues for the first time. And working side by side with them there's the veteran activists who have to find patience and hope where there is no time.. They are at moments hopeful because of the 'the emerging strength' of the movement, and at others desperate for having to say the same for the umpteenth time in the umpteenth neighbourhood, feeling they have to reinvent the wheel every day. Apparently not much new under the sun, but people have touched the dream of unity, of creativity, of the ability to express oneself, of the taking of the squares with their own hands. A considerable number of people who think that they're capable of changing the system, and that –whether it's true or not – is worth gold.”

The form of the movement is inherently Spanish. The ruling social democratic PSOE party is making ferocious cuts and offers no hope to young people. They will most likely lose the November parliamentary elections to the conservative Partido Popular, and what will ensue will be even deeper cuts. The Spanish political system offers young people no future, and as a result, a considerable proportion is turning its back on the political system – and many are also rejecting the trade unions. This has given the movement particular characteristics that are unlikely to emerge elsewhere.

Next Step: To Brussels

Since they left Madrid in early August, the Spanish marchers have been received in a large number of French cities. Upon arrival in Brussels, they will be joining activists in Brussels for

several days of actions, debates and demonstrations. But inspiration from Spain has spread much faster than feet can walk.

Other countries have their own 'indignados movement'. The taking of the squares in Spain was soon repeated in Greece where activists seized Syntagma Square in Athens, and in Portugal the central square of Lisbon was quickly seized too.

The strength of the Spanish indignados movement is its capacity for launching broad movements, and for inspiring resistance elsewhere. It lies too in its remarkable social and political composition completely outside the framework of political parties and trade unions, free from stifling and formal procedures and with a clear intention of letting everyone have a say. Though activists from many veteran organisations and some left wing parties take part, the majority of the people in the streets do not have these roots. The demonstration in May served as the spark that revealed how quickly the profound sense of alienation from the world of traditional politics, felt by tens of thousands of Spanish, can be turned into action.

It will of course be difficult for this movement to define precise medium term objectives and demands. To succeed in the long term, given the clear connections with the EU austerity drive, it must become a European struggle, with clear medium term and long term demands. For that to happen, many other players will have to join the Spanish marchers and square occupiers. At the moment the EU political elite fear the financial markets, not social movements. To reverse that situation, it takes more than a Spanish movement. The marchers on their way to Brussels, including those joining on marches from Germany and the Netherlands, and those who have chosen their own involvement in the day of action, can only see the 15th October as a first small step, and as a first march to Brussels.

Javier Toret from Democracia Real Ya! will speak in Brussels on the 13th October at the ALTER-EU annual assembly: http://www.alter-eu.org/sites/default/files/documents/programme_assembly_2011.pdf

Join the Global day of action (site with list of events)

<http://15october.net/>

Democracia Real Ya!

<http://www.democraciarealya.es/>

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www.scoop.it/t/the-marches-to-brussels

www.marche-paris.fr

www.walktobrussels.eu

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