

Spain's 15-M protests and the politics of “autonomy”

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Protesters in Madrid's Puerta Del Sol square in Madrid have insisted to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that the demonstrations by “los indigandos” have “no leadership” and are organised by “autonomous” collectives, commissions and assemblies. Above all, they stress, no parties should dominate over “the movement”.

However, there are political tendencies at work in every spontaneous movement. The issue is, what social forces do the various tendencies represent and what direction will they impart?

The insistence on “no politics” finds traction because of the widespread hostility to the major parties, including the ruling Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) and the Stalinist-led United Left. But its effect is to provide a political amnesty for these parties—and to facilitate the activities of various fake left groups whose overarching aim is to prevent any political challenge to the domination of the PSOE and the trade union bureaucracy.

The views of two representatives of the camp were typical: both said they did not belong to any political organisation and expressed hostility to both the PSOE, which is imposing mass austerity, and the conservative opposition Popular Party (PP).

Marian Martínez Mondejas was clearly animated by the social concerns of middle class layers that dominate the core of the 15-M protests. “The small and medium businesses sustain the whole country,” she said. “If these go bankrupt more people lose their jobs”.

The “proposals of the movement are very coherent, they are being demanded by the whole people, and we are all conscious of what we want. We all must try and change the country, for a just and responsible politics.”

Such all-embracing references to “the people” and “just and reasonable politics” is at best naïve. But it is also inseparable from her opposition to mounting a political challenge to the PSOE. “It is not a struggle to destroy the government but for the government to change course,” she stressed. “They have to hear the voice of the people.”

Mondejas was at pains to reject any connection between the mass movement against austerity in Spain and the movements that erupted in response to mass unemployment and poverty that ended with the toppling of hated rulers in Egypt and

Tunisia. “The movements in Tunisia and other Arab countries have nothing to do with what is happening in Spain,” she declared. “Egypt is not a democracy, Spain is.”

In fact, the capitalist class in Spain, like its counterparts internationally, is doing away with long standing democratic rights precisely because the savage cuts it is imposing on behalf of big business cannot find a popular mandate among the very people targeted for attack. That is why workers and youth are involved in something far more than a fight to pressure politicians to change course. The struggle is against the failed capitalist system itself and demands a socialist perspective and leadership.

Pablo, 27, a part-time worker and university student, was helping staff the camp information stall. He told the WSWs that a principle of the camp was “not one based on political parties, but one where the existence of an assembly culture of the citizens will decide and influence the decisions that are taken by society, and that they may influence them as much as possible.”

“The assembly is very clear since the outset that we won't accept the mediation of political parties,” he continued. “I want to make clear that this is not one movement, a type of social political tendency. Here we have assemblies based on horizontalism.”

Rather than the assemblies' ruling out of open participation by political parties leading to genuinely democratic debate and organisation, it imparts to them an entirely undemocratic character. Without an open political struggle, everything is reduced to a formless discussion of generalities that allows the most conservative elements to dominate.

Pablo, too, stated that the assemblies are “are open to all social groups”:

“I would not even talk of participating in them on behalf of certain social groups, but on behalf of oneself, individually. One thing that the assemblies must start to do is *break with all the categories that defined us previously*” [emphasis added].

Echoing Mondejas, he stressed, “Decisions such as bailouts, the external debt, should not be in the hands of a small group of bureaucrats, but they should be decided by all of us, *because they affect all of Spanish citizens*” [emphasis added].

By railing against the “categories that defined us previously,”

what is being deemed impermissible is any attempt to define the independent interests of the working class based on the development and promulgation of a revolutionary socialist perspective. Everything must be subsumed into a general movement uniting “all social groups” and “citizens”.

Of course, there are political tendencies that are more than happy with this state of affairs; not just the open supporters of the PSOE, but also the various ex-left groups who routinely conceal such support behind socialist phraseology.

Pablo made the revealing observation that whereas different political formations were involved in the protest camp, the “people who do come from *different parties and movements have to readapt their programs and speeches in some way*, because of the structure of the assemblies” [emphasis added].

What does this mean?

The various forces that comprise the fake “left” are intimately involved in the assemblies, but do so while concealing their identity and draping their political perspective—fashioned entirely in the interests of the labour and trade union bureaucracy—in a false-flag.

In this respect, all those who have illusions in the political role played by the demand for “autonomy” should study carefully the writings of the *En Lucha* (In Struggle) group, the Spanish affiliate of the British Socialist Workers Party.

An article published on May 31 by Andy Durgan, a leading *En Lucha* member, is a perfect illustration of how a movement which fraudulently trades itself as “socialist” and “revolutionary” works to ensure that the necessity of socialism and a revolutionary struggle against capitalism is never once raised.

Durgan begins by claiming that “the call for real participatory democracy has revolutionary implications, even if most of those demanding it don’t necessarily see it like this.”

En Lucha is not in the business of explaining the “revolutionary implications” of anything. Durgan continues, “Just what forces make up the camps varies from place to place, though there is a general consensus that no organisations should be allowed.”

In this situation, discussions are taking place regarding the way forward for the protests and “revolutionary socialists like us in *En Lucha* ... are intervening in them.

“We’re very active in the camps’ main assemblies. Everywhere we’re involved we work hard to make the assembly and the camp function at every level—shoulder to shoulder with activists. And although we have our own ideas about how things should develop—and put these forward—it is *important to respect the mass direct democracy that runs the camps.*” [emphasis added].

Helping maintain political silence on the central issues of programme and perspective is dressed up as respect for “mass direct democracy”. But when it comes to the danger of a break with the union bureaucracy and the PSOE, then *En Lucha* makes clear the central purpose of their working “shoulder to

shoulder with activists”.

Durgan acknowledges that, shortly after a token general strike in September, the unions “signed agreements with the ruling Socialist Party which attacked workers’ rights. These made it easier to sack people, attacked pensions and raised the retirement age.”

But even as he details the filthy exploits of the union bureaucracy, he insists, “We are convinced that we have to tackle anti-union ideas if the movement is going to broaden and deepen. We work with other anti-capitalists and left union militants active in the camps with this aim.”

Walking through the camp at Puerta del Sol one sees many people in avid discussion. There are numerous stalls, including a feminist commission, an animal rights section, ecological groups, a legal group, an electoral reform area and an artist’s section, with young people busily creating banners, slogans and various pieces of artwork.

Each of these collectives has regular assemblies, with dozens of such meetings being held each day. But what is striking is that amid all this activity, among the hundreds of slogans one sees everywhere within the headquarters of what has been termed the “Spanish Revolution”, there is not a single one that simply calls for the bringing down of the PSOE government.

One young participant at a stall in Puerta del Sol told this writer that they were collecting suggestions and proposal solutions from people involved as to how to resolve Spain’s many social, economic, political and environmental problems. She explained that the proposals would then be discussed and voted on in an assembly before being sent off for the PSOE government’s consideration.

Asked if she thought the PSOE would listen, she replied, “I don’t think so, but we hope they will”.

Asked if there had been any talk of bringing the PSOE government down, she said she “didn’t know if such a thing was possible”.

This is the dead-end into which “horizontalism” and the politics of “autonomy” leads. Those responsible for this state of affairs are the likes of *En Lucha*, whose political function is to deaden the critical faculties of workers and youth.



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