

Spain's Feminist Strike

SINCE 2016, INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY has become the rallying point for a new feminist activism in many countries. Poland, Turkey, Italy and large parts of Latin America have seen demonstrations of tens of thousands on March 8th, raising new and old slogans against sexist violence, for reproductive rights and equal pay. But Spain stood out on 8 March 2018, both for the scale of the mobilization—an estimated 5 million—and for its militancy: not just a demonstration but a nationwide women's strike, *una huelga feminista*, a stoppage of waged work, care and shopping. In Madrid, the action began at midnight on March 7th with a traditional *cacerolazo*, the sound of hundreds of banging pots and pans ringing out from the central square, Puerta del Sol. Women teachers, hospital workers, students, housewives and journalists joined the strike *en masse*. The evening of March 8th saw a million-strong demonstration, six kilometres long, transforming the city centre into a vast fiesta with music and carnival puppets. In Barcelona organizers counted 600,000 parading through the streets to the feminist rally in Plaça de Catalunya. In Bilbao, a crowd of 40,000 packed the Plaza del Sagrado Corazón and sang along with the women's group onstage in a feminized version of the old militant song, *A la huelga!* Many spoke of a *15M feminista*—a turnout comparable to the Indignados' occupation of the squares from 15 May 2011 in its scale, autonomy and social diversity. Yet plenty of those celebrating this year's International Women's Day were too young to remember 2011.

What accounts for the Spanish 8M? Certainly, there has been a growing consciousness of the state of inequality in which women live, in terms of workloads, precarity and responsibility for care—female labour-force participation has soared, while the pay gap and the burden of reproductive work are unchanged—and in terms of the sexualization and objectification of women's bodies, which is tinged with violence. According to surveys, young women perceive this inequality to a greater degree, and there are very few women who haven't experienced machismo in their lives. Intensive public debate was sparked by a gang rape in Pamplona, where the five men—one an ex-soldier, another from the police—were taking videos of it and boasting to their friends on WhatsApp. The inequity of the judicial process—the

young woman was effectively put on trial, and the men acquitted of all serious charges—had a powerful impact. Domestic violence has also been a major issue in Spain for many years.

In addition to growing awareness of gender inequality, 8M was also the result of intensive organizing efforts, going back several years. The Argentinian women's strike of 2016 had an electrifying influence on Spanish feminists, via Hispanic social media. On 8 March 2016 there was a huge demonstration in Spain, the biggest for years, with large numbers of young people marching; but there wasn't enough time to prepare the strike. That's why, from 9 March 2016, organizing began. Meetings were held on the 8th of every month in cities across the country, with loose national coordination by the 8M *comisiones* under the umbrella of *Hacia la huelga feminista*—towards the feminist strike. Participation in the meetings was very high, with many different women's groups involved—the whole fabric of organized feminism, campaigns and collectives; activists from other struggles; but also thousands of young women, who are just beginning to organize themselves. At the same time, no one group could dominate the strike call; it was an appeal from the local coalitions, without partisan control or hidden agendas.

The strike call worked well as a form of struggle. It provoked numerous debates in the media and the public sphere—what's the legitimacy of a feminist strike? Is it ideological, rather than work-related?—which in turn sparked discussions in homes and workplaces: how do I strike if I'm unemployed, self-employed or a precarious worker? What should we men do? The questions around the care strike were very interesting: what do I do about my children, if I want to strike? Is a 'care strike' possible? Do I want to do it? Then, in activist networks, there was the issue of men taking on the cooking and childcare, so that women could strike. In other words, the form of mobilization had a material effect. It mattered in the public sphere if you withdrew your labour and went on the demonstration.

Significantly, the call also opened up the possibility of involving the trade unions. The largest unions, CCOO and UGT, only called for a two-hour stoppage, but their influence is very broad and their participation extended the strike to wide layers of workers. The radical unions, the CGT and CNT, called for a 24-hour strike and also offered legal back-up, which was indispensable. Again, the impact of the unions' support was amplified by the debates about it in the mass media, which triggered numerous personal and workplace discussions. So, too, did the calls by Manuela Carmena, the Podemos-backed mayor of Madrid, and Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona. There has been much debate on the Spanish left about the use of women as political figureheads—is their gender deployed, not least by themselves, to sell an image that doesn't correspond to the policies they promote?—while still

recognizing that it is symbolically important to have examples of women on the political frontline.¹

The role of the corporate media was undeniably important. It meant that the political parties all had to take a position on the feminist strike, which helped make it an event of national importance. The ruling conservatives were the only ones to come out against it, though even they had to adjust their position from one of outright hostility; Rajoy appeared sporting the purple ribbon of the 8M movement on March 8th. All the other parties, including Ciudadanos, which tries to position itself on the liberal centre-right, came out in support. 8M became, as they say, 'trendy'. *El País*, Spain's answer to the *New York Times*, became a major proponent of 8M. More than this, however, hundreds of female journalists supported the strike, which meant that a lot of the press coverage in the run-up was sympathetic, giving it a high degree of social legitimation. In fact there was a specific network of women journalists who organized both to put out the call for 8M and to strike themselves. There were TV and radio programmes on the major channels that couldn't run that day, and famous TV presenters spoke out publically in support of the demands. The media, then, had to scramble to find men to cover the actual demonstrations.

It's true that the media focused the debate on two very general topics: salary inequality and violence. This simplification helped towards the sheer size of the turnout, but it also reduced its radicalism. For the feminist movement, the question of reproductive labour is almost more important than salaries, but this issue was pushed into the background in the mass media. By the same token, the question of violence was linked to rape and domestic violence without signalling the daily violence suffered by migrant women, for example. Yet this was the importance of the 'care strike', whose demands—for society to take more responsibility for carework: more nurseries, better housing, less precariousness, giving women a real 'right to choose'—went far beyond the liberal feminism of Ciudadanos. Whether the shock of the 8M feminist tsunami—alongside pensioner and labour protests—can play a part in derailing the rightist turn of Spanish society over the past few years, powered by the authoritarian crackdown on Catalonia by the Rajoy government, with Ciudadanos and PSOE support, remains to be seen.

¹ For example: Mònica Galcerán, 'Feminismo de gestos', *Diagonal*, 20 September 2016; Nuria Alabao, 'Feminizar la política: ¿ganar primarias o cuestionar el poder?', CTXT, no. 129, 9 August 2017.