

Expanded abstract

Natural allies? Trade unions, social movements and third sector during the economic crisis of 2008 in Spain

Objectives

This article tests John Kelly's thesis that trade unions and social movements are "natural allies". To this end, it studies the actions of trade unions, 15M and third sector organisations in Spain in the context of the austerity policies promoted by the government after the economic crisis of 2008.

Numerous studies have shown that factors such as deindustrialisation policies, the transformation of the class structure, technological change, the rise of individualistic values or the introduction of flexible and managerialist forms of work organisation have reduced the capacity of trade unions to act in defence of the interests of the working class, a class that is fragmented and therefore difficult to organise (Silver, 2005; García Calavia and Rigby, 2018; Las Heras and Rodríguez, 2021).

Workers' organisations have deployed various strategies of renewal with the aim of regaining their social power from multiple sources (Murray, 2017). Experiences of trade union revitalisation often involve changes in the geography of trade union action, typically moving out of the workplace and opening up to other spaces, scales and networks where power resources can be obtained in order to better defend workers' interests. This paradigm shift in trade union strategy has given rise to different formulations such as "community unionism" (Banks, 1991; Wills and Simms, 2004; Tattersall, 2005; 2010) and "social movement unionism" (Waterman, 1993) which have led to a proliferation of empirical studies that interrogate the forms of interrelation between trade unions and other organisations. The results suggest that relationships can be competitive as well as cooperative, and that attention needs to be paid to specific contexts in order to analyse what conditions favour what kind of interaction. According to Upchurch, Taylor and Mathers (2009), economic and political crises are driving forces behind coalition practice. However, Tattersall (2009) considers that, while these factors are important, the process of coalition formation is more complex and points to the study of pre-existing opportunities and choices. Against this background, this article analyses the complex relations between trade unions on the one hand, and social movements and third sector organisations on the other, in the context of neoliberal austerity policies in Spain after the 2008 financial crisis.

Methodology

The information in this article comes from a qualitative analysis based on the observation of documentary sources (such as minutes of meetings, pamphlets and institutional and press releases, most of them available on the Internet), newspaper sources, as well as ten semi-structured interviews (n=10) conducted in 2014 with trade unionists from CCOO (n=3), CGT (n=2), SAT (n=2) and CNT (n=3) who had participated in 15M actions. The selection of informants sought to represent the different discourses and strategies of trade union organisations in the face of the indignados movement. The data were subjected to a thematic categorical analysis; seeking, first, to identify the main trade union strategies and discourses and, subsequently, to investigate the diversity of relations between trade unions, movements and associative fabric, and the factors that intervene in them.

Results

The 15M wanted to operate with movement networks in which the acronyms were blurred in order to achieve the great social support that it effectively achieved. Its first position vis-à-vis the trade unions, keeping them away from the calls and feeding off their affiliates and sympathisers, occurred despite the fact that the very success of the indignados broadened their ideological base in such a way that it was easy for different sections of the indignados and different trade union organisations to coincide in their approaches. These coincidences, the double militancy, as well as the need for ideological and committed activists forced the admission of trade unionism without considering alliances. The attempt to distance itself from the trade union acronym says a lot about the disinterest and fear of this new movement of a formal alliance, but it also says a lot about the undervaluing of the experience and response capacity of the trade union structures.

The halo of 15M was important in the configuration of the tides, but they inexorably required a commitment between movement organisations, the third sector and workers and professionals, as they were the first to be aware of the impact of these cuts on the service provided and on citizens. All the conditions for the construction of alliances described by Tatersall (2010) and mentioned above were present in these organisations, highlighting, moreover, the union around the public sphere. Thus, the thesis that in the post-Fordist society, trade unions were losing protagonism in social conflict in favour of the new social movements should be quarantined or, at least, qualified.

The Social Summit was a circumstantial and strategic initiative of the big trade unions, which were joined by others with ideological affinities. The moment of its birth, at the dawn of 15M, was no coincidence and denotes the original objective of becoming a tool for the trade union organisations gathered there to have, firstly, a role of their own in the mobilisations from which they were being marginalised and, secondly, another support from which to defend their proposals.

The 15M option of not counting on the unions made them invisible and, although it could benefit mass participation, it did not help the workers' struggle. The tides counted on the un-

ions, but they were sectoral and with unequal life expectancy. The summit is the tool to permanently transfer the class perspective to the new social movements. But this cannot be a priority objective if what is sought is a grand alliance, for this, as Waterman, Hyman and Gumbrell-Mcormick warned, is sustained by the complementarity of class and non-class struggles. In fact, the grand alliance through the Summit was undermined by the lack of support from a part of radical trade unionism, which had had an important echo within 15M. In this sense, the Summit becomes a sign of the competition for protagonism within the labour movement.

Conclusions

Factors such as trade union traditions, political economy contexts, competition between organisations and the characteristics of social movements themselves explain the diversity of ways of relating between trade unions and movements, making it necessary to develop more complex approaches that are sensitive to the specificities of each historical and geographical context.