

Economic and Social Catastrophe: Spain's “Indignados”

Wherever you focus in Europe you hear the same cries of indignation

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While “Europe’s slow-motion financial collapse” – as Mother Jones magazine described it in a June 6th article – continues to unravel, Spain, like other European states continues to implement anti-social-neo-liberal policies with strong opposition from the citizenry.

It has been one month since the country’s ‘Indignados’ (Indignant Ones) movement claimed nonviolently sixty city-squares in cities across the country, calling for economic democracy, political justice and peace. Since then, much has happened within Spanish borders, and what is happening there is clearly spreading across Europe, where we have already witnessed social movements making similar demands. We have seen the Bastille in Paris, taken nonviolently by French ‘Indignados’ only to be quickly reclaimed by the country’s police force. We have observed the rise of a parallel movement in Portugal where most city squares have also been camped on by ‘Indignados’, and where only hours before the country’s general elections protestors in Lisbon were attacked and beaten by police. We have witnessed how on that same night, in Athens, Greece, 80,000 protestors congregated in the city’s main square in opposition to the country’s ‘austerity measures’, waving banners in solidarity with the ‘Indignados’ of Spain and of other European country’s.

Wherever you focus in Europe you hear the same cries of indignation. In some countries with more intensity than others, but the cry is becoming louder everywhere, and what seemed like a slow-motion financial collapse, is rapidly becoming an accelerated social catastrophe. Specifically in Spain, despite the political elite presenting a country recovering from the financial collapse, everyday things are getting worse economically, politically, and socially, and protest although nonviolent for the most part, could be on the verge of becoming violent unless political and economic elites begin to make some concessions.

On the economic front, Spain began June with comments from the European Commission about the potential of the country missing its economic growth and budget-deficit targets for the year; its recommendation was further economic reform. Then a report from the ratings agency Moody’s, pointed out that the high Catalan deficit was affecting the solvency of the whole of Spain. A few days later, in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, the incoming administration of the rightwing Popular party (PP), before even taking office, had already proclaimed that the region was “totally bankrupt”. Then, the National Statistics Institute revealed that Spain’s property sales in April had been the lowest since the institute began reporting in 2007. Obviously, this stream of negative news coupled with discussions taking place in Europe regarding a potential debt default by Greece, affected Spain’s bond sales and moved the country one step closer to a bailout, or a default followed by its subsequent

debt restructuring.

On the political front, June has been equally intense, the government has approved by decree reforms against collective bargaining agreements, despite failed negotiations with the two major trade unions in the country. It has approved the extension, indefinitely of the country's Spanish military mission in Libya, and has announced the creation of a new NATO operations centre, which will control Spanish airspace and will help in missions coordinated from Southern Europe.

In regards to the social front, as of the first of June, the government warned that the 'Indignados' could not remain camped on city squares for much longer. Then, using a visit from Tony Blair, in which Blair said, "demonstrators should be heard but not allowed to govern", Spain's prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, addressed the request for electoral reform by the 'Indignados', by telling them this could only be possible through consensus from all political parties – a cowardly way of responding without complying.

In response to these numerous events, commissions of the 'Indignados' from squares across the country met in Madrid's Puerta del Sol Square, to discuss the future of the movement. Through a long process of popular assembly, they agreed to three important actions: First, to boycott the country's Town Halls as the new governments were sworn in following the recent regional and local elections; second, to abandon city squares, and move their social action into city neighbourhoods – in an attempt to broaden the movement's involvement with the rest of the citizenry; and third, to continue organizing protests on specific dates focused on particular issues – including a firm commitment to a global protest of 'Indignados' on October 15th.

The movement's first nationwide coordinated initiative since the spontaneous movement mushroomed on May 15th, the boycott of Town Halls, was well represented over the weekend by 'Indignados' across Spain. Demonstrators across the country blocked entrances to Town Halls, climbed onto the balconies, blocked official cars from exiting carparks, disturbed investiture sessions with incriminating speeches, and followed politicians across cities as they celebrated their victories, shouting to them, "shame on you!"

Sadly, the police force was equally mobilized. In Valencia, where the new government has ten of its members including its president facing corruption charges, police charged at demonstrators injuring twelve and arresting five. The vice president of Spain, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, was forced to cancel a planned trip to the city in order to avoid further protests. In the city of Santiago de Compostela police also attacked the protestors. In the city of Madrid, police batons hit them. In the city of Salamanca five 'Indignados' were injured. In the city of Burgos two were arrested. In the city of Castellón, they were violently dispersed. In the city of Vigo, they were also dispersed; and, in the city of Palma de Mallorca, three were arrested. Following the numerous arrests across the country, spontaneous demonstrations followed in front of police headquarters demanding the prompt release of those detained. Most protestors were released on bail.

As things stand in Spain right now, according to a survey published by newspaper *El Pais*, there exists wide support (81%) amongst the Spanish population for the movement. In fact, in addition to public intellectuals such as Vicent Navarro, Arcadi Oliveras, or Eduardo Galeano giving them support, political figures such as Santiago Carrillo, who was the secretary general of the Spanish Communist Party during the country's transition to democracy – a

key voice throughout the transition, and Cayo Lara, the coordinator for the third largest political party in Spain, Izquierda Unida, have both aligned with the movement's views. Even Rosalía Mera, who is Spain's richest woman according to *Forbes Magazine*, has expressed public support for the 'Indignados'.

It seems clear, when one has an in depth look into current events unfolding in Spain, that these protests have hit a nerve throughout Spanish society, and although the movement is practicing a form of nonviolent direct democracy which is not familiar to most Spaniards – indeed to the majority of citizens in Western style democracies –, the present Spanish political, social, and economic climate is beginning to be shaped, at least partially, by its cries of indignation. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight, that unless economic and political elites begin to listen and engage in some serious dialogue with the 'Indignados' instead of sending out the police force to hit them on the head, the nonviolent stance of the majority of protestors could quickly turn into a violent response to sustained police brutality. After all, it is important to remember that this is a one-month-old spontaneous and heterogeneous movement, which is only now beginning to organize and present specific demands.

The nonviolent protestors on Spanish streets are not Gandhi's exemplary well-trained and disciplined nonviolent peacemakers, these protestors have not made pledges of nonviolence or have endured months of rigorous nonviolence training in Gandhian Ashrams. Whether the 'Indignados' can refrain from violence as the police continue to beat them, we will only learn as events unfold. However, if the country's elites have any dignity left, they will not continue testing their endurance and will instead begin a credible process of reform, which examines and addresses all of their demands. At the time of writing, Artur Mas, the President of the Generalitat (the government of the Catalan autonomous region) was forced to arrive to parliament in a police helicopter, as thousands of 'Indignados' blocked the entrance in an attempt to boycott the region's budget approval. They were shouting: "You do not represent us!" The parliamentary session began with only half of the representatives able to enter the building.

Pablo Ouziel's articles and essays are available at www.pabloouziel.com

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