

Spain's Protest Movement

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Global Research, June 17, 2011

17 June 2011

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

MADRID, Spain, June 15: Spain is justly proud of the Paella, a distinctive dish that mixes diverse vegetables or seafood into a tasty fusion of delectability.

They have now created a political version in the form of Tarir Square type encampment in Madrid's Puerta del Sol where a diverse mix of activists—old, young, male-female, disabled, immigrant, activists from Western Sahara, have created a beachhead for what many say is the closest this country has come to a popular and distinctive revolutionary movement since the 1930's.

Its been a month now since Real Democracy, a grass roots "platform," as it called, began a march that initially only attracted a relative handful of activists but by the time it reached the shopping district at Puerta del Sol, it had swelled to over 25,000, surprising its organizers, participants and politicians from the two major parties.

Only this march turned into a movement when many of its supporters decided to stay in the Square, no doubt inspired by events in Egypt, In Cairo, the vast multitudes agreed on one demand—Mubarak Must Go—even its causes were later traced to a collapsing economy and mass joblessness among the young. Their story was driven by social media and echoed in live TV broadcasts. Protests were underway elsewhere in Spain,

The movement became known as "#spanishrevolution" after the Twitter hashtag used to spread news, pictures and footage of the revolt, began with the internet call for a May 15 protest to demand "Real Democracy Now!" The marchers were dubbed "indignados" (The Indignant.)

Activist Pablo Quiziel articulated the feeling, "Amidst local and regional election campaigns, with the banners of the different political parties plastered across the country's streets, people are saying 'enough!' Disillusioned youth, unemployed, pensioners, students,

Immigrants and other disenfranchised groups have emulated their brothers in the Arab world and are now demanding a voice - demanding an opportunity to live with dignity."

In Spain, the activists said they were expressing "indignation" with their country's economy and the parasitic nature of its two main political parties—the Socialists (PSOE) and the Center Right People's Party (PP)—which carried on business as usual in a predictable dance of mutual bashing and few new ideas while markets melted down,

They also denounced corruption demanding fair housing, jobs, and a more responsive government.

But they had moved beyond electoral politics creating a liberated village with tents and

makeshift structures. They had no leaders and didn't want any. They practiced a form of consensus backed small d democratic decision-making. It reminded me of what I read of utopian communities in which "the people" run the show. Soon, the spirit of what they are doing and asking for resonated in more than 160 cities and towns.

I got there a month after what is known as the May 15th movement was started, and almost by accident. On my way to South Africa, I flew the Spanish carrier Iberia only discover I would have a 12 hour layover. Since I was going through Madrid, my revolutionary tourism gene mandated me to hop on the marvelous Madrid Metro, and three changes later surface face to face with the revolution even if the weather seemed well over 90 degrees.

Yes, there was plenty of sol on hand. Some of the activists like Liam who hails from Ireland were slathered with suntan lotion because of the afternoon rays. "We are all fried," he told me.

Although many in the media have already written this movement's obituary, it seems to keep chugging along, almost amoeba-like, decentralizing, going deeper by organizing popular Assemblies in neighborhoods throughout the city. They have several committees working on a program for what they will fight for. Many are common sense ideas.

While Sol still functions as their public base they already deemphasized its importance by spreading out, almost block by block.

On the day I was there, a small contingent left the Soul to stop an eviction and they were successful after confronting a landlord and the local bank. They exercise an enormous amount of moral authority as they talk about issues in personal ways, free of political rhetoric and bombast. They politicize by example, not by throwing slogans around, acting in a post partisan manner.

This approach seems to make sense to many who see their society in crisis with politicians blaming each other. In contrast, The May 15th movement encourages citizens to voice their grievances and act on their own behalf.

They tend to think like anarchists and talk in terms of self-management as a principle of political economy.

They are very clear about not wanting to replace one conventional hierarchal party with another. They are nervous about grooming or projecting leaders even as one activist told me that rule by consensus can be excruciatingly slow and subject to obstructionist tactic by a few who can hold the majority hostage.

"We have had people praise us for standing up, " Liam told me, " We tell them not to put their faith in us either but to get involved in the process of change. We can't do it for them~"

The movement all over the local press that seems ready to pronounce it a failure even as it documents the free fall of the local economy. There is now a newspaper called Diagonal reporting on their every activity while activists use social media and post blogs on local websites.

A local newspaper sampled public opinion. They found many voters estranged from their

party and disillusioned and many, across the spectrum, sympathetic to the idealism and energy behind their actions. The very presence seems to be politicizing people if just by discussing the alternative to tradition that they represent

Many were open to the new movement's style and interactive discourse, Bernarda told them " democracy is really bad here. There are two parties but no one really likes either one.

Says Juan, "I think it's very interesting that people from different social classes and different groups are joining together."

Cesar agrees, "Everyone's hoping this will not disappear because it is the spark of change."

Adds Juan, "I am really proud of all of us."

My language skills limited my access to Spanish speakers but I did talk with David Marty, a lawyer by training, a teacher by necessity and a writer by choice. He sees the movement spreading all across Europe.

"We need a new approach, he says, singing the praises of May 15th bottom up, participatory approach.

What I found significant is that he was not a man of the left. Both his father and grandfather were policemen. His dad won his spurs as a member of the French CRS unity fighting protesters during May June 1968 when Paris was a battleground, Now, his son writes for Z Magazine and contributes ideas for what changes the movement should ask for.

Like many in the Mayo 15 movement, he is a staunch critic of neo-liberalism, policies that both major parties embrace

As we sat in the Square as its distinctive clock tower, struck six, I listened to more speculation laced with hope. No one can predict this movement's future with any certainty, but its active core seems to agree that it has already done more than they ever imagined.

Writes Quziel, "Spain is finally re-embracing its radical past, its popular movements, its anarcho-syndicalist traditions and its republican dreams. Crushed by Generalissimo Francisco Franco seventy years ago, it seemed that Spanish popular culture

would never recover from the void left by a rightwing dictatorship, which exterminated anyone with a dissenting voice; but the 15th of May 2011, is the reminder to those in

power that Spanish direct democracy is still alive and has finally awaken."

That is the hope at least, that I saw in the Plaza of the Sun,

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