

Anarchist Organizing In The Canary Islands

An Interview With Ruymán Rodríguez

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The Canary Islands are a chain of volcanic islands off the northwestern coast of Africa. They've been a colony of Spain since the 1400s, and are today an "autonomous community" under Spanish rule. The archipelago is home to over 2,000,000 Canarians, who are descended from Spanish settlers, the islands' indigenous Guanche peoples and North Africans.

The Canarian anarchist Ruymán Rodríguez was recently the guest of the Alacant Anarchist Bookfair in Valencia, Spain. In an interview with the paper *El Salto Diario*, originally translated by *Autonomies*, Rodríguez discussed anarchist organizing projects on Gran Canaria, one of the largest of the Canary Islands, where he is involved with the Anarchist Federation of Gran Canaria [FAGC] and the *Sindicato de Inquilinas Canaria* [SIGC], a renters'-rights organization.

This wide-ranging interview, lightly edited for length and clarity, also discusses Rodríguez' recent imprisonment and torture by the state, the dynamics of anarchists working with a population that may not share explicitly anarchist politics, and the pervasive problem of "anarcho-tourism," in which Europeans descend on the Canary Islands each summer seeking a so-called revolutionary holiday.

Can you begin by explaining a little the work you do with the FAGC [Anarchist Federation of Gran Canaria] and the SIGC [Tenants Union]?

The tenants' union is a mass organization in which participants don't have to have a particular ideological identity. It is an open organization focused on the issue of housing. Although it is talked about as a tenants union, the reality is that it is a comprehensive tool to address housing issues. It touches on mortgages, rent, precarity, and engages a matter often forgotten by certain housing groups: homelessness. In addressing housing problems it encompasses the different stages through which the working class can pass.

The FAGC obviously has a much more political profile to begin with, being people who consciously call themselves anarchists. Its activity however has also derived almost entirely from work around housing, in the union, and now it is dedicated to a social activity of another kind: it is very much involved now in the issue of migration, especially addressing the fierce persecution of migrants living in Gran Canaria, where there is a virtual hunting of human beings— not by neo-Nazi groups, but by official institutions.

There are now communities specifically organized to house migrants in a situation of persecution. There is also a health care network, because these people are excluded from the Canarian

health service, fearing that if they go to it, they may be deported or locked up in concentration camps. We have an advisory office for women in precarious situations, which is a way of starting an informal union for people who historically are not unionized. We are talking about caregivers of children and the elderly, cleaners, comrades who collect scrap metal, comrades who do sex work. People who want to know how to report their pimp, who want to know how to make their employer pay them for the stairs they just cleaned, what happens when they find themselves practically in a situation of semi-slavery, and other questions of this kind which are quite hard and raw.

We also have self-managed gardens, which are actually very large expropriated rural lands, from which many of the people who work with the FAGC obtain up to 50% of their food. It has to be kept in mind that a lot of the Canarian population has a serious nutrition problem. On an island as rich as Gran Canaria, they never taste fresh food such as fruits and vegetables, but they can get them from the gardens.

Finally, there is a network for the exchange of belongings and shelter, in which appliances in poor condition are repaired and shared, clothes are exchanged and other things, so that people have all their needs covered. What we are trying to create, de facto, is a parallel society.

The FAGC has committed itself to responding to the influx of immigrants from the African continent – migration the media often calls an “avalanche,” with its negative connotations. Under what circumstances are immigrants arriving and in what ways are you helping them?

The first thing to understand is the phenomenon of migration itself. Currently, it is obviously forced by capitalist and imperialist dynamics, but migration is a natural human phenomenon. If migration did not exist, you and I would now be in a pond with fins. We left the pond, we emigrated to have a better life and thus human development takes place.

The people who emigrate from the African continent are emigrating because the West has fleeced them. People do not understand why Senegalese come, but they come because their territorial waters have been sold to Europe and China, and a country of fisherfolk no longer has anything to eat.

Why do people flee Guinea? Because its mineral reserves, in a country of farmers, have been used for international trade, run by the old metropolises. The agricultural economy has been transformed. Now it is mining, but those mines do not belong to the people.

If you add to this civil wars and coups d'états, then that will tell you why the people of the African continent come. But then there is no “migrant avalanche.” It’s a big lie. We received 23,000 migrants in the last two years. For the people who fixate on the sum and do not understand what that means for the bulk of the population, they may be shocked, but they will be much less shocked after I tell them that we also receive 15 million tourists every year- at least until 2018. Nobody talks about an avalanche in this case.

People would also be surprised if they knew that people from the African continent are an ultra-minority of the immigrants coming here for work. The majority are Italians, Germans, English. Many are tourists, but many also come to work. European and white migration does not alarm us. So, this isn’t a matter of avalanches or migration problems; it’s a matter of racism and xenophobia.

The FAGC has had to get involved on this front because the institutions have completely abandoned their functions. They have locked up these comrades in concentration camps, malnour-

ished them, mistreated them. Above all, the NGOs have dedicated themselves to a thriving business in the management of the misery suffered by our comrades.

In these circumstances, we have two options... well, three: we could join the fucking Nazis and go to the streets to defend populism, the demagoguery of hating and spitting on those below us, because we dare not spit on those above us. That is, we continue with the dynamic that the person who's second-to-last in line steps on the person who's last.

Or, we dedicate ourselves to doing nothing and crossing our arms and lamenting on Twitter about how bad things are and how they are treating our migrant sisters, followed by some symbolic gesture, a concert to raise funds, and thereby we continue with a clean conscience and dirty hands.

Or third, we get involved, collaborate and prevent people of our class from being persecuted for a single reason: the color of their skin.

Moving on to the specific work of the tenants' union, how many people has SIGC helped? What is the socio-economic context on the Canary Islands, where real-estate pressure from tourism has so much impact?

If we speak in figures, we are talking about eleven self-managed communities on the island [of Gran Canaria] helped or promoted by the SIGC or the FAGC. In total, adding communities and single-family homes, we currently calculate that there are more than a thousand families living in self-management in Gran Canaria, which is not a bad ratio.

These are people across the panorama of Canarian reality. We are talking about the long-term unemployed, who lost their jobs due to the financial crisis, people in the construction sector who have not returned to work. We are talking about single-mother families in which a single person has to raise her children on a subsidy of 430 Euros. We are talking about these persecuted migrants. We are talking about homeless people who have never before had hot water or electricity. We are talking about terminally ill people who contact the FAGC because they were evicted from the system, and they need four walls to die in peace.

How can these harsh realities be reduced to numbers? Well, the Canarian reality is that of the unrecognized third world. We are talking about the fact that in the Canary Islands, 60% of the population cannot make ends meet between paychecks, and 40% of the population lives in a regime of exclusion or already directly below the poverty line. We have the poorest children in Europe: 35% of Canarian children are poor. We are talking about a third or a quarter of the Canarian population being unemployed. We are talking about the fact that we have the lowest salaries of anywhere in Spain. And we are talking about, even with all this shit, 300 evictions every three months, as many as seven a day.

And we would need to talk about much more, because we have the most expensive groceries in the country, as well as the fourth-most-expensive rent. We have an average rent in the province of Las Palmas of 997 euros. We have 150,000 empty houses. Gentrification has become a sort of genocide. Tourism is not an innocent and innocuous reality. Tourism in the Canary Islands is the new colonialism, and it is an imperialism that seems bloodless because it has no cannons and no weapons, but perhaps it causes far more damage than an armed conquest.

We are being expelled from our neighborhoods. People without resources can no longer pay even the cheapest rents because housing is used for vacation homes. All urban development is intended solely and exclusively for the floating, temporary population. We no longer have outpatient clinics, we no longer have centers for the elderly, we no longer have nurseries. What

we have are terraces, shopping centers and dog groomers. In this context the FAGC has to rise up, because they are destroying us.

A few days ago I heard you say that Sareb and the bank owners announced that they would give homes to those affected by the La Palma volcano, while at the same time in Telde [a town in Gran Canaria], they were trying to evict 38 people, 19 of them minors.

It is a situation that has already become normative. It is something totally normalized and standardized. The banks, the same ones that talk about social responsibility, pro-childhood campaigns, that provide breakfasts for children and scholarships, are the ones that later violently throw those same children out on the streets.

The institutions and political parties on the left and right that speak of guaranteeing human rights, that no one is going to be left out on the street, that no one is to be left behind, allow evictions when they do not promote them. An entity like the Sareb offers housing for the victims of La Palma and later, on the sister island, it evicts 38 people, 19 children, 13 families. Those people are not being evicted from their houses by the lava, they are being thrown out by Sareb. A court is throwing them out, the police are throwing them out.

What psychological impact does that have on families? Initially despair, when the official world that is supposed to watch over you collapses. When the people who supposedly have some kind of responsibility are rubbish, you panic, you feel alone, defenseless. But then something occurs that I like more, and that is much more interesting from our point of view: when those above lose their shame, those below start to lose their deference. If these people have abandoned you, if they don't care about you and will not help, well then, maybe you should start building the solutions from below.

GC, you offer people direct action as a tool to solve these real problems. Is this anarchism for people who were initially not ideological?

I don't want to encourage self-deception. In the union and in the FAGC, we distinguish ourselves by being honest. Of the thousand families that we have helped, a low percentage remain militant and committed. We are talking about 10%.

The level of involvement is always going to be much lower than the number of people it reaches. The problem is reaching more people. If you want to have 1000 affiliates, then you will have to reach 10,000 people. If you want to become like the classic CNT that so many still have a hard-on for, you will have to reach a million people. This is how it is.

But this is like sowing seeds. People who work in agriculture know: when you open the furrow, you do not put in a seed, you put in several, because you know that some are not going to take and others do. And when you have a neighbor, when you encounter her desperate, anguished, wrecked, and then you see her grow by overcoming her low self-esteem, that is, she begins to feel valid, she realizes that she can bend the arm of the City Council, she can bring Sareb to its knees, she is not afraid of a bank but rather the bank is afraid of her... when that woman has her little pictures of saints and her virgin on an altar, and one day you go to the house to bring her a microwave, and you see that next to all that she has the FAGC logo printed, and suddenly she starts talking about anarchism, when the same woman who, when the press once interviewed her, said "please help me," and was directed to the institutions, now when they interview her as a union spokesperson says "we are anti-system, we don't want governments," something significant has happened. I believe this process, even if it only occurs in one out of every 100, already deserves everything that can be done.

Has your own legal ordeal also generated attention and brought people to the FAGC and the SIGC? Your complaint against the Civil Guard, since the last hearing in March, must make a difference.

We obviously don't want to invite further repression, but the reality is that things have backfired for them. When you seek an 18-month jail sentence for a person, along with a fine, after having tortured him in the police station, you must believe others will be scared away. Well, the opposite has happened. People whose trials coincided with mine on the day that they were going to prosecute me saw the news, and they said, "if they are going to give you 18 months in jail for stopping an eviction, then I will join the FAGC."

For comrades already familiar with us, who perhaps were looking for which group they should work with, all doubts were cleared away as soon as they saw the repression against us. The reality is that the FAGC is now more numerous than ever; we have never had such a large number of members, and the tenant union has grown unprecedentedly. We don't give it too much credit and say, "thanks for the repression," but yes, we must recognize that the judicial system and the Civil Guard have contributed to strengthening the anarchist federation (laughs).

And about the process, I was going to trial on March 24, but because of the media campaign and the support from social groups – truly, I am entirely grateful, I do not deserve it – I think that the state felt intimidated and gave up on the judicial process then due to the tension. [The Civil Guards] asked the court for the trial to be transferred to the higher, Provincial Court. The judge granted the request and now we are waiting for the court to determine if they tortured and illegally detained me, and if I kicked one of them in the crotch. That's more or less where things stand.

It is curious how the media, most of the more honest counterinformation media, have reported the thing correctly. Only some local media has reported this story as an attack on authority rather than the story that a person in the 21st century can be picked up, be placed in a prison hole, be beaten, insulted, humiliated and subjected to torture with strangulation until the person begins to spit blood.

However, it would be a mistake to think this has only now occurred in Gran Canaria or that it was only with me. This has happened in the 21st century, and the Basque and Catalan people, and many people before me, can talk a lot about it. Torture is a standardized and generalized fact in the Spanish State and in the Canary Islands. What happens is that it goes unreported for fear of reprisal.

More than the torture, what has stuck with me the most and what's indicated most clearly what our political direction should be was something the Civil Guard said when the detained me: "If you are an anarchist, why are you here helping families, housing them? What you should be doing is burning dumpsters and ATMs." They preferred me burning dumpsters and ATMs to helping families. Well, thanks for the clue of where we should go; that is the direction we're going.

Your case dates back to 2015 and is also part of a wave of repression, affecting musicians and many others.

Nobody should think that this was spontaneous. It's an orchestrated campaign to see how far the repressive levels of the State can go without a popular response. It's setting a bar for the future. The same was done, as we know, with the *ley mordaza* [gag law] after the financial crisis. And it is now being done with the management of the Covid crisis, and with anything that may lead to anger and personal or collective frustration. Artists have been repressed, people whose

crime is a crime of opinion, people whose crime is saying that things don't seem right to them. From puppeteers to Hasél, to fellow rappers and more.

All of this is to send the message that what's wrong is fighting, whether you do it at the barricades or in front of a house. It does not matter if you have a stone in your hand or you have bolt cutters to break a lock; what is wrong is to stand up to the system, and they have addressed the whole wide spectrum of resistance. However, within all of this, I am lucky. For better or for worse, we have been involved in many projects. Some people know me, they have spread some of what I have written, and when I have been repressed, people have been able to talk about my case.

Our Italian comrades have not had the same luck; they are still in preventive detention, which is a very serious thing that has not gotten the attention it should. The same holds for the comrades from Granada who were retaliated against. There are many reprisals, of a second and first order, and we can't afford to allow these precedents. We must give all our comrades the support and attention they deserve. Today you can ignore them because you do not know their names, because you have not seen them on TV or in a documentary or read anything about them, but tomorrow that anonymous person may be you. So I think it is important to open the doors of solidarity to all.

To conclude, I wanted to ask you about a statement that you published on Twitter from the SIGC a few months ago in which you announced that you would stop responding to activists from different countries requesting accommodation in exchange for volunteer work. To what extent has that become a problem?

Ever since the FAGC became somewhat well-known for its work, every summer is a fucking horror. Every summer, an avalanche falls on us, mistaking us for a libertarian AirBnB. People from all over the European continent ask us for houses with terraces, or houses near the beach. They can't get around, because they are anti-car... but not anti-aircraft, since the bastards came by plane.

People want to stay in the communities as if on safari, and treat the neighbors paternalistically, holding men and women who already have gray hair and running their hands over their heads as if they were dealing with children. It bothers these visitors that people here watch football or listen to reggaeton; they're bothered by what people say or what we eat.

It is not about whether there can be good tourists or not— I don't think there can be— but we don't even get the good ones. In the end, it is a hyper-unpleasant situation and we have very bizarre cases, such as people coming and asking us if they can rent a place in our self-managed communities, or those who do not come to ask us for free housing, but who tell us that they have rented somewhere but that it is suddenly very expensive... that they did the same two years ago and it was much cheaper. And they ask why we think rents have risen. You bastard, it's because of you! It's because you and so many others like you have come here that rents have increased!

“Revolutionary tourism” is not very different from other types of tourism; it only attempts to do tourism with a clear conscience. The terms are changed: they are no longer tourists, they are *travelers*, but the damage they cause in the territory is exactly the same. They consume resources that they do not replace, and they come with a European colonialist mentality, to come and tell us that we are doing anarchism badly and that they would do it better, that our assemblies are a mess because there are children running around, and so on... I'm sorry, but in the soundtrack of the FAGC, there will always be children playing, people screaming in the background, the sound

of football and the sound of reggaeton. Our assemblies are assemblies of real people, and real people on the streets are like this.

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An interview for the spanish newspaper, El Salto diario (05/10/2021)

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