

# Origins and Development of Workers Autonomy in Spain (1970–1976)

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*“AUTONOMY: Independent decision-making. The autonomy of the workers movement with respect to political parties, the government or any other kind of leadership is indispensable to guarantee the power of the workers struggle, to prevent it from being held back by excessively rigid control.”*

*(The Militant Worker’s Dictionary, Nuestra Clase, September 1970)*

1970 was a crucial year for the class struggle in Spain. After a decade of industrial development, a new working class was consolidated and resumed the class struggle with new fervor. There were eight million blue collar workers, 65% of the active population. Although they lived in a situation of full employment and had a certain degree of access to consumer goods, their wages were low and the cost of living was constantly rising. The pressure of high prices and the wage freeze decreed by the Government, and the combative habits acquired during the previous decade, combined to drive the workers to commence the struggle. In 1970 there were three times as many strikes as in 1969, posing a serious challenge to the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship. The workers of the large enterprises, located for the most part in Barcelona, Madrid, the left bank of the Nervión and the Asturian mining region, yielded the leading role in the struggle to the young proletariat—which had in the meantime absorbed many women—which had been born in the industrial outskirts of the two capitals and in the industrial zones of the Franco regime; in Goierri (Guipúzcoa), Valladolid, Pamplona, Vitoria, Seville, Saragossa, etc. The active solidarity it was capable of organizing around a strike was quite surprising, and was even at times capable of affecting an entire province, as was the case, for example, with the strike at Orbegozo, a steel mill in Zumárraga (Guipúzcoa), soon after the New Year. The heroic strike of the Cold Rolling Mill at Echévarri, between January and May 1967, is widely acknowledged to be the first radical strike; while the strike at Blansol, a factory employing a hundred workers in Palau de Plegamans (Barcelona), which took place between November and December of 1968, was the first strike conducted by assemblies. In fact, the Government had to declare a state of emergency in Vizcaya in order to break the wall of solidarity that protected the strikers at the Rolling Mill, and as for the workers at Blansol, even though they were surrounded by the Civil Guard, they met either during their lunch break or in a pine forest near the factory gates after

work to make decisions, organize pickets and even to discuss how to deal with scabs or plan acts of sabotage. The first specifically assembly-based strike, however—that is, the first strike that was completely outside the control of the vertical trade union—the first to impose the leadership of a committee of twelve workers elected at an assembly, was the strike at Authi, at the Landaben industrial park (Pamplona), during the month of March in 1970. This tactic expressed a greater degree of determination on the part of the workers, and it began to have repercussions in reformist circles. Even the Workers Commissions [*Comisiones Obreras*—CCOO] resorted to assemblies in the union halls of the vertical trade union to debate contracts and to vote on strikes, even though their usual practice was to call for demonstrations at the factory gates to support their negotiators. This was the case in the construction workers strike in Granada. A large part of the surplus agrarian population that emigrated to the cities found jobs as construction workers, the only way that many of them could gain a foothold in the labor market. The conditions on the job sites were so deplorable that class consciousness arose spontaneously, without any need for agitators, and this drove the construction workers to action. In July, in Granada, when a demonstration called by the vertical trade union was dispersed by the police, three workers were killed, the first casualties of the proletariat in its second assault on Spanish class society. The wave of repression took a qualitative leap forward (up until that point the regime thought the students posed the greater threat; its secret services had not yet infiltrated the working class milieu). This galvanized the whole country and the debate on whether or not to use the Franco regime's trade union institutions became more heated. Overall, the working class had acquired sufficient maturity to question the need for a vanguard leadership and the legalistic tactics typical of the previous period. The common experience in the factories had raised their level of consciousness and posed problems such as self-organization, final goals, and tactics of struggle. The reformism that had dominated the workers movement up until that time was seriously questioned in more and more factories. Many workers straightforwardly rejected both the tutelage of the parties and labor organizations as well as the methods of struggle based on the respectful and timid attitudes of the negotiators. They did not want to have anything to do with the Franco regime's Trade Union Organization; besides, the very needs imposed by self-defense against police repression led the militants to decide to dilute the leadership elements in assemblies and to act by way of secret committees. Nor were they disposed to reduce the struggle to negotiations over contracts, which is what the Christian-Stalinist sector of the Workers Commissions wanted. At the end of the 1960s, Factory or Enterprise Committees appeared in the Basque Country and, in the industrial belt of Barcelona, somewhat later, the Commission Platforms or Independent Workers Commissions, ephemeral organizational experiences that encouraged collective participation and management of conflicts. The strike at the Harry Walker plant, a factory in the Sant Andreu neighborhood of Barcelona, which occurred between December 1970 and February 1971, is said to be the first major assembly-based strike in Catalonia. There were, however, several previous strikes coordinated by committees that proved to be decisive; for example, the strike at Maquinista, in January-March 1970, and at Macosa in December of 1970, both in Barcelona. The influence of the French May was not immediately felt in the Spanish working class milieu, in part because its radicalism irritated the parties and political groups, whose vanguardism was being challenged, but by 1970 the ideas of self-management, self-organization, workers councils, occupations, sovereign assemblies, etc., became commonplace among class conscious workers and gave rise to the birth of ephemeral groups tailored to different situations such as the GOA, the MIL and the MCL (in Barcelona), "Barricada" (in Valencia), the group known as "Acracia" (in

Madrid), the CRAS (in Asturias), the people associated with the publisher ZYX, and many others. Anarchosyndicalism and council communism ceased to be ideologies buried in the closets of history and became instead the current topics of study and the arsenals of ways of life and ideals. The incipient interest in the history of the workers movement and the civil war connected the new working class with its revolutionary past.

On December 1, 1970, the Government publicly announced the secret trial of 16 members of the ETA; the prosecutor was calling for the death penalty. The Burgos Council of War unleashed a wave of protests that were only exacerbated after the announcement of the sentences and the death of a demonstrator in Eibar. Various committees were formed to continue the struggle, holding assemblies in churches and public squares attended by thousands of people. On December 14 the Government proclaimed a state of emergency in Guipúzcoa in an attempt to bring the situation under control; then it extended the state of emergency to the whole country until June. The social and political struggle forced the regime to mount a more obdurate repression, abolishing the few guarantees of civil rights that it still offered and even resorting to martial law, but in the end it had to yield and revoke the death sentences. On December 31, the death sentences were commuted and replaced with other penalties. On the other hand, however, the repression, under the shield of the suspension of civil rights, only grew more fierce. The new trade union law of February reduced the representation of the workers in the vertical trade unions even more, but this only harmed the Stalinists. The working class was not intimidated and severed its connections with the regime's trade unions, which the Catholic and Stalinist trade union militants were unable to rejuvenate. The trade union elections of May 17, 1971 were widely boycotted except by the PCE and the USO; half the eligible workers abstained from voting. Although the Workers Commissions were no longer a movement and were nothing but a group of Stalinist workers or their sympathizers, they enjoyed a certain amount of prestige among the most backward workers, and, for that reason, exercised a real, although declining, influence. In the big factories of Barcelona and the Basque Country the rate of abstention was higher, and even more so if you take into account the null votes (hundreds of workers voted for media celebrities like Raphael, El Cordobés or Cassius Clay). They only recognized their own direct representatives elected in the assemblies. It was precisely the refusal of the employers to recognize these representatives that was the cause of the Potasas strike in Navarre and the Eaton Ibérica strike (whose workers sent a delegation to the Harry Walker assembly), destined to have repercussions in the Pamplona industrial zone. A similar case was that of the strike of the female workers at Bianchi in Rentería. This radicalization was manifested in Vizcaya, Guipúzcoa, Asturias, and especially in Barcelona (strikes at Maquinista, Miniwatt, Roca, and the Water Company), with "wildcat" strikes that were often accompanied by violent demonstrations. Given the government's policy of zero tolerance for protests, the strikes became a problem of civil order from the very start, and the least significant demand became a political question. The police violence aroused enormous indignation that divided society into two parts: on the one side, the workers; on the other, the regime and the employers. In September, a worker in Madrid was killed during the construction workers strike. In October, during the strike at SEAT in the duty-free zone (Barcelona), the entire negotiating committee, composed for the most part of certified liaisons and authorized officials of the vertical trade unions, that is, of legal representatives, was arrested and imprisoned. The workers occupied the factory and when they were evicted one worker was killed and several others were injured. With the death of the Madrid construction worker and the deaths in Granada still fresh in people's memories, the incident had enormous repercussions. Numerous solidarity strikes and

protests took place. Every fallen worker only further strengthened resolve among the proletarian ranks.

1972 got off to an explosive start due to the combativity of the concentrations of workers that were usually the most active, the same ones that boycotted the elections to the vertical unions: the industrial belt of Barcelona, the big factories in Vizcaya (Spanish General Electric, Babcock & Wilcox, the shipyards, Euskalduna, Endesa, etc.), the factories in Guipúzcoa, the white collar employees in Madrid.... The panorama was completed with the entry into the social fray of the workers from the provinces without any tradition of struggle. On January 26, 1972, a strike was declared at the Michelin factory in Vitoria. For a month the workers held daily assemblies, organized pickets and attended demonstrations; at times they confronted the forces of public order, and paid for it with several wounded. The strike made history among the workers of Álava and gave rise to the groups known as Workers Action [Acción Obrera]. Its delegates made contact with the general strike of the workers of El Ferrol, which was also conducted by way of daily assemblies and demonstrations. On March 10, two workers from El Ferrol were killed and more than twenty were wounded (one died shortly thereafter). Solidarity actions were carried out all over the Peninsula and the May Day demonstrations were attended by large numbers of people. The workers constituted a very cohesive and active social sector, with a strong sense of dignity, that is, they formed a class. Their proportionate weight in the struggle against the Dictatorship was overwhelming, having almost completely overshadowed the role of the students. All political calculations had to take them into account, and workerist ideologies then became fashionable. Every strike meant much more than a mere labor conflict; without having intended to do so, they acquired the character of a struggle for freedom, for the overthrow of the regime, for the abolition of economic inequalities, for the expropriation of the capitalists, for the self-management of production, etc. The will of the workers to participate in their own struggles could only be expressed by way of assemblies and the delegates elected at the assemblies; the factory was relegated to a minor role once the conflict commenced, because the workers took to the streets and defended themselves against the thugs mobilized by the forces of repression. Repression only awakened solidarity and extended the scope of the struggle. Layoffs, firings, arrests and fines often prolonged strikes or even caused them. Social groups which had up until then been dormant, such as bank employees, hospital custodians, disabled people, truck drivers, administrators and teachers, mobilized and held assemblies. The prestige of the proletariat was so great that these people happily called themselves Bank workers, Healthcare workers, Administrative workers or Educational workers. The army itself was challenged by the first conscientious objectors who, together with deserters, introduced the seeds of subversion into one of the fundamental pillars of the Franco regime. General strikes comprised the response to the stagnation of any particular conflict with a long-forgotten libertarian tactic, direct action, that is, the extension of the strike to the other industries of the county or province. The general strike in Vigo, which began on September 11 and lasted fifteen days, raised questions that completely surpassed the bounds of reformism. In this case, the initial cause of the strike was the firing of workers at the Citroën factory. The workers extended the conflict by way of pickets which, as an innovative tactic, gave rise to assemblies in the factories that were visited by the picket squads to inform the workers of the cause of their strike.

The overall tone of 1973 was similar to that of the previous year. Class consciousness only grew stronger in a climate of constant struggle. A minor detail like the refusal to work overtime or work longer hours meant much more than a simple labor demand: the workers preferred to

have free time rather than more money. Reformism experienced its darkest days. Leftists challenged the PCE for the leadership of the CCOO, ousting it in some places like the Basque Country and Navarre, and, on the opposing side, the advocates of working class self-organization were becoming more and more numerous. Workers committees, groups of autonomous workers, anarchosyndicalist cells, etc., were rising up from the ashes of previous organizations and from the strikes, contributing their efforts in favor of the radicalization of the struggle. Meanwhile, the PCE, taking advantage of the publicity that the repression had provided for its cadres, worked to cultivate leadership cliques. The judicial investigation associated with the “1001 Trial” [*Proceso 1001*] was just what was needed to transform a dozen mediocre labor bureaucrats [*bonzos*] into martyrs of the proletariat, who were as useful for the “party” in prison as they were later when they were released, when it was the party’s turn to squelch the workers movement. At the end of March the workers employed in the construction of the Besós Power Plant called a strike based on job-related demands. The owners of the power plant responded by laying them all off and shutting down the project. When the workers attempted to occupy the worksite on April 3, they clashed with the police. The result was one dead worker and one worker seriously wounded. The response was immediate: partial work stoppages in protest of police violence spread throughout the whole region of Barcelona; on April 6 there was a general strike in the towns of Sardanyola and Ripollet, and later in the whole Vallès district. The climate of agitation spread to Navarre, which was truly prodigious in its strikes. One of these strikes, that of Motor Ibérica, caused by the employer’s refusal to abide by the terms of a court order in favor of the workers, gave rise to the well-known series of events that concluded during the month of July in a general strike in Pamplona and other cities in Navarre (Tafalla, Estella, Alsásua...). At the other end of the Peninsula, at the same time, the workers of Intelhorce occupied the Málaga Cathedral.

This was the first incidence in Spain of the phenomenon that was later called the “hot autumn”, although this term was actually first used to describe the events of the following year. After the summer vacation, the assemblies of the workers of FASA Renault of Valladolid and Seville made their debut, and the strikes in Barcelona and its vicinity continued unabated. In the county of Baix Llobregat the strikes led by the Workers Commissions had succeeded in diverting the struggles into legalist dead ends thanks to the tolerance and connivance of the bureaucrats of the regime, although they were unable to prevent the development of the assemblies, not even with the common maneuver of creating self-designated committees composed of members of the vertical trade unions and alleged “leaders”. In the factories of Vallès, although the demobilizing impact of the Workers Commissions was a significant force, the assemblies and the strike committees elected by the assemblies continued to grow stronger. There were minority and “anti-capitalist” tendencies that defended the assemblies. In the Basque Country, the other focal point of working class unrest, an atmosphere of solidarity and combative fervor prevailed like never before; daily assemblies were held in Pasajes, Beasoain, Tolosa, Andoain, Irún, Sestao and Eibar, the momentary capitals of the proletariat. The bureaucrats of the vertical trade unions tried to mitigate the combativeness of the workers by regulating trade union rights in the workplaces by way of a decree and by elaborating a new law on labor agreements that went into effect in December. According to this law, should disagreements arise concerning the proposed contract, the parties must abide by “compulsory arbitration”; strikes were still prohibited, however, which was why no one expected the workers to pay much attention to this stipulation. To the employers, however, this decree seemed to go too far. They thought that it made intolerable concessions that undermined their power in the workplace and they accused the officials of the Franco regime

who were responsible for this law of trying to compensate for the lack of political freedom with an increase in the rights of labor. Many employers had to ignore the new rules and negotiate directly with the Workers Commissions in order to prevent strikes. These employers advocated concerted negotiations with professional representatives of the labor force to establish contracts for whole industries, rather than negotiating factory by factory. Thus, by entering into relations with disciplined trade unionists they could spare themselves the trouble of dealing with the committees elected by the assemblies, which were all-too-prone to force them to agree to pay higher wages than the rates established by law. The Franco regime could no longer guarantee the stability of labor relations that was nonetheless being offered to them by the semi-vertical trade unionism led by the CCOO. For the first time, a significant sector of Spanish capitalism was prepared to undergo political modernization by making political concessions to ensure order in labor affairs, something that would accentuate even more the class collaboration line of the PCE and the Workers Commissions.

The assassination of Carrero was used by the reactionary majority of the regime's supporters to bring a halt to modernization, temporarily suspend the "1001 Trial", and sentence Puig Antich, a member of the MIL, to death; Antich, ignored by the opposition, was executed on March 2, 1974. The radical trajectory of the proletariat was not at all diminished, however. The number of strikes tripled in 1974, many of them solidarity strikes. There were many more strikes in Spain, where they were prohibited, than in the rest of Europe, where they were legal. The workers displayed a high degree of combativity and acted with total disregard for official labor liaisons, scabs, forces of public order and informers. In certain milieus, one could pay a very high price for being conservative. In February, in Valencia, the workers movement came to life with the strike of the Unión Naval de Levante. For several years in Valencia, the arrests of militants, and agreements made outside of the framework of the trade unions between employers and workers—negotiated by law firms specializing in labor relations—had prevented the appearance of assemblies. Particular attention is merited by the strikes at Elsa and Solvay, in Baix, in July, for providing a before and after picture of the social struggle in Barcelona. The biggest factories in Catalonia were located in the county of Bajo Llobregat (Hospitalet, Cornellá, Martorell, Sant Boi, Sant Just, Sant Feliu, Gavá, El Prat, Molins...), but this county was also the region that was most deeply penetrated by the Workers Commissions. Baix was synonymous with reformism, the paradise of bureaucratic usurpers and manipulators, the lair of Stalinists. But their margin for maneuver was not very large and for this reason the solidarity with the workers who were fired at Elsa led to an assembly-based general strike. The PSUC, the Catalanian branch of the PCE, had to prove to the employers that it could control the workers, and thus display the "legal vocation" of the Workers Commissions. The Stalinists sought the support of the employers association to liberalize the regime; furthermore, their self-designated coordinating committees boycotted the general strikes. But they not only tried to obtain the support of the employers; there is evidence from this period of Stalinist claims that the workers respected the efforts of the forces of order, or that the armed police and the Civil Guard "are workers, too". With such a bewildering discourse, its demobilizing labors were not always easy. The combative enthusiasm of the workers overflowed the legal framework, ridiculing the mediation of the vertical trade unions. The legal representatives of the latter, liaisons and certified negotiators, were forced to resign, or resigned voluntarily, rendering the assemblies necessary at least to elect new delegates. At SEAT, one of the fiefdoms of the Stalinists until the failed strike of 1973, elections were organized in workshop assemblies at the initiative of the workers of Workshop No. 5, the most combative. In Baix,

the Stalinists had to accept the assembly delegates, but they created, with the agreement of the authorities, at least at the provincial level, an institution for mediation based on the CNS, the "*Intersindical*" [Inter-Trade Union Liaison Committee]. Supporters of the vertical trade unions and the leftists of the Workers Commissions collaborated in this institution, a sinister alliance, but they were unable to stop what came next: the general strike in Baix. In the Basque Country, the Stalinists of the Workers Commissions created a phantom coordinating committee, the CONE, which did not succeed in recruiting any members outside of the largest enterprises. The PCE always acted like this, fabricating leadership committees without bothering about the rank and file base that these committees were supposed to represent. On the other hand, however, the Workers Committees of Álava promoted a broadly representative Workers Coordinating Committee in Vitoria that was established in October. It was the first institution of its kind that advocated "all negotiating power to the assembly" and that only admitted elected and revocable delegates who were vested with no other prerogatives than "the imperative mandate of the assembly". All the tendencies of the workers movement were represented in this Committee except the Stalinist Workers Commissions. In Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya and Navarre, despite the increasingly more numerous autonomous and Basque nationalist groups (such as the "Komiteaks" who had split from the Workers Front of the ETA, the groups that subsequently formed the LAB trade union, and the Commissions of Anti-capitalist Workers), the leftist parties (MC, ORT, LCR, OIC) still exercised a significant degree of influence on the workers movement. The product of the confluence of all these forces was the general strike of December 11, 1974, which was strictly social and political in nature. Although their only purpose was to replace the PCE in the "vanguard" of the movement, the leftists (Maoists and Trotskyists of every stripe) supported the assemblyist tendencies of the proletariat in order to outflank the communist "leadership" and take its place. The creation of the Coordinating Committee of Euskadi of Workers Commissions (CECO) in April of 1975 was part of this tactic of substitution. They soon became just as pernicious as those whom they sought to replace and returned to the fold to combat the assembly movement alongside the Stalinists.

The wave of repression continued unabated; in 1974, 5,000 workers were fired and 25,000 temporarily suspended for political reasons. The Tribunal of Public Order conducted about two thousand trials, affecting approximately 5,000 people, but in 1975 the world of labor was aflame; half of all labor contracts signed were imposed without the consent of the workers (in 1972, this figure was only 6.5%). The number of labor conflicts acknowledged by the authorities of the Franco regime amounted to 3,156, a thousand more than the previous year, affecting 650,000 workers. The year commenced with nothing less than a labor conflict at Potasas de Navarra which led to a week-long general strike in all of Pamplona. At the same time there was a general strike of the metal workers in Saragossa, which signaled the resumption of the workers movement in that city, which took two different directions: one reformist (that of the Inter-Industry Workers Commission); and the other assembly-based (that of the Autonomous Workers Commissions). Between December and January, due to an employers' lockout, the workers of SEAT of Barcelona held daily assemblies at the Plaza de Cataluña. Management, allied with the Workers Commissions, never admitted the legitimacy of the representatives of the committee elected by the assembly to engage in contract negotiations. The collaboration of the Workers Commissions with company management was so obvious that from then on negotiations concerning the contract were carried out exclusively between them alone; even so, the workers demanded and in many cases obtained the resignation of the trade union's certified liaisons. The strike ended with more than five hundred workers fired, but the CCOO never regained control over the factory. Between January and

February, stage actors conducted a picturesque strike in Madrid. First, they held assemblies to elect a committee outside of the official channels to negotiate their contract. These assemblies resulted in arrests, and the arrests provoked the strike. On February 3 and 4 there was a general strike in Asturias and a long strike in the old factory of Duro-Felguera (Gijón), followed by the Firestone strike in April (Basauri), which lasted three months. The “anti-capitalist” platforms participated in this strike. Working class unrest in Barcelona was constant, but unlike the Basque Country, the assemblyist workers were in the minority. The assembly-based strike at Tabauto in Hospitalet, in the Stalinist fiefdom of Baix, was isolated and miserably sold out, like the SEAT strike. The workers, exhausted after five months of fighting alone, reached an agreement with the employer through the mediation of the vertical trade union for a return to work in June, accepting dozens of firings and disciplinary measures. The Stalinists advised them not to “provoke” the police with slogans and occupations, much less confront them directly, even going so far as to call upon the workers not to attend demonstrations and to go on trips out of town instead. This did not have much of an impact, for in April the government proclaimed a state of emergency in Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa, and on May Day, while trying to disperse a demonstration, the police killed a worker in Vigo. There was a general strike in Ondarribia on June 11. The revolution of the “carnations” in Portugal was gradually beginning to have an effect on the Spanish proletariat. The Portuguese workers took advantage of the vacuum of power caused by a military coup to advance their own interests; with each passing day, there was news of strikes, occupations and soldiers’ movements. Unfortunately, the revolution collapsed at the end of 1975 and ceased to be a stimulating factor. The Spaniards did not have it as easy as the Portuguese, because the vacuum of power in the factories was filled by the Workers Commissions and the leftists who on many occasions assumed the repressive tasks of the bureaucracy of the vertical trade union. The industrial bourgeoisie lost confidence in the regime’s trade unions and in the judicial handling of labor conflicts; the workers had the support of independent labor lawyers and the verdicts of the judges were increasingly more favorable for the workers, which is why the latter, conscious of their strength, broke off contract negotiations on the slightest pretext. The practice of accumulating strike funds began to spread. And to top it all off, the government promulgated a decree on strikes on May 22 that was greeted with dismay by the employers association and the liberal government ministers. For the first time, the Franco regime recognized the right to strike, although with numerous restrictions. Furthermore, it expressly prohibited solidarity strikes and strikes that extended beyond the framework of a single enterprise. And, for the first time, it limited the employers’ right to engage in lockouts. It prohibited the employment of strikebreakers and the indiscriminate refusal to abide by the terms of labor contracts. The opposition, basically the PCE and the PSOE, was indifferent to this decree; it had established its institutions for political negotiations in order to form a bourgeois opposition to the regime, the Junta and the Platform, and did not cease to offer its services to the liberal employers and the disaffected former supporters of the Franco regime. This was why, beginning in 1974, the Workers Commissions opposed all actions that seriously disturbed the employers. Their goal was to become the sole valid interlocutor by displaying moderation when the moment came to resort to a strike, and to embed their organizations within the vertical trade unions. The trade union elections of June offered an opportunity to legally take them over and the Workers Commissions mobilized their militants, enrolled in “Unitary Democratic Slates”, to monopolize the trade union positions. If their purpose in 1971 was to destroy the CNS from within, as the communiqué of a spectral General Coordinating Committee of Workers Commissions explained, now it was a question of becoming its masters. The affair



of the elections divided the working class into two blocs: one conservative, pusillanimous, ready to obey the pseudo-coordinating committees and the old trade union bureaucrats [*bonzos*] who acted the part of “leaders”; the other radical, in favor of developing rank and file control and extending the struggles by way of assemblies and general strikes. In August and September there were demonstrations due to the fact that four Military Tribunals had sought death penalties for members of the ETA and FRAP. The Government confirmed five death sentences and on September 27, Txiki, Otaegui and three Maoists were executed. On September 29, there was a general strike in the Basque Country. The protests continued in October, while numerous factory assemblies debated the new contracts and elected delegates. The third Basque hot autumn led to the establishment of various coordinating committees that were opposed to the pro-vertical trade union line of the Workers Commissions, and which prepared the strike wave of December.

Franco died on November 20 and the Monarchy was proclaimed, whose first government was presided over by Carrero’s successor, Arias Navarro. Closely associated with the extreme right, he was kept in his position in order to counteract the allegedly reformist efforts of the executive branch. A conditional pardon lifted restrictions on the freedom of those affected by the “1001 Trial” and removed any remaining impediments to the Stalinist plan to create a contingent of “leaders” of the Workers Commissions. The situation of revolt in the factories had forced a rapprochement between the employers, the vertical trade unions, the reformist elements of the Franco regime and the opposition, but it did not lead to any tangible results. The economic crisis was now added to the permanent political crisis. It marked the end of the Franco regime’s model of economic development based on a national industry led by a partnership of the seven big banks. The crisis was the consequence of the oil price hikes of 1973. In Spain, with an economy that was dependent on hydrocarbons, the crisis began to have an effect in 1974. The State thought that the crisis was temporary and subsidized fuel prices, which emptied its coffers. The balance of payments deficit grew, industrial expansion came to an end, and new foreign investment ceased. Due to competition from other countries that had also developed their national industries, in some productive sectors (steel, shipbuilding, textiles) there was overproduction. The strike wave prevented the implementation of a policy of adjustment, since contracts were frequently signed that exceeded the maximum wage increases stipulated by the government, and the capitalists reacted to their losses by raising prices—in 1974, the rate of inflation was 20%—with layoffs, which began to be a significant factor at the time, and with capital flight. Numerous enterprises declared bankruptcy. The Arias government then sought to rein in the workers by intimidating them, promulgating in December a wage freeze decree that unleashed the largest strike movement in the history of Spain.

At the end of 1975 there was a qualitative extension of class consciousness whose effects were immediately apparent. Throughout 1976 there were more than 40,000 strikes involving approximately three million workers. There were whole provinces, like Barcelona, where half the labor force was on strike at one time or another. The most outstanding aspect of this strike wave was the fact that its forms of struggle were based on a generalized system of assemblies, which eventually forced the numerous enemies of the assemblies to join them in order to liquidate them. It all began in Madrid, when the employers, sheltering behind the pretext of the wage freeze decree, refused to negotiate any new contracts, which immediately resulted in strikes. First, the factories on the highway to Toledo were shut down, especially those affected by the metal workers’ contract. The center of the movement was the Intelsa factory, in Getalfe, whose victorious workshop, general and delegate assemblies were able to extend the range of their influence through

the intelligent use of pickets. The strikers had to confront not only the employers, but also the vertical trade union apparatus supported by the Workers Commissions for whom all decision-making powers must belong to the official liaisons and certified representatives of the vertical trade unions and to the self-appointed strike committees of the CNS. In January of 1976 the strikes spread to the whole industrial belt of Madrid, and to all the towns on all the major national highways: Getalfe, Villaverde, Leganés, Pinto, Fuenlabrada, Móstoles, Coslada, Parla, Torrejón, San Fernando, Alcalá de Henares, Vallecas, Alcobendas, San Sebastián de los Reyes, etc. A total of 800,000 workers participated in the strikes and wage increases approached 40%, although they were considerably undermined by the devaluation of the peseta. In some factories, the high rate of abstention in previous trade union elections favored the appearance of managing commissions and strike committees elected directly by the assemblies; in others, the dynamic of the struggle itself overflowed the framework of the structures of the vertical trade unions and imposed direct democracy. The immense majority of the delegates did not belong to any party or trade union. The movement penetrated the city of Madrid with the strike of the Metro workers, which was followed by strikes in the construction, banking, telecommunications, postal, insurance, education and rail sectors, until a general strike was underway without anyone having proclaimed it. The Metro and the postal service were taken over by the military. The plans of the PCE did not involve a war of attrition against the system, but rather forcing it to make a political deal, which is why it tried to cause the criterion of negotiation to prevail over that of popular mobilization. Its control over the proletariat was its best, and indeed its only, bargaining chip. Supported by the leftist parties and by its allies “within” the bureaucracy of the vertical trade unions, the Stalinists tried to convert the regime’s trade union organization into the apparatus for regimenting the whole working class, but the development of working class assembly democracy exploded the framework of the vertical trade unions and ruined their plans. As a result, they had no scruples about dissolving the Inter-Trade Union Strike Committee, formed after the work stoppage on the Metro, when the Committee decided to enlarge its membership to include delegates elected by the assemblies. Nor did they have any scruples about liquidating the strike in the construction industry when workers were still being fired and arrested. In general, they did everything they could to prevent the strikes from leading to the formation of specifically working class institutions of power, so that they did not become a revolutionary movement for socialization, and instead depicted the movement as a “movement for civil liberties”. They tried to make the workers movement repudiate its class content and adopt a bourgeois language like that of the PCE, the Workers Commissions and the PSOE. The socialists, only recently having organized their party, and enjoying abundant financing from the German social democratic party, proposed that the direct representation of the workers should be replaced by trade union committees composed of representatives of the UGT, the USO and the CCOO. They were the first to understand the need for a united front against the proletariat, because the task of neutralizing it exceeded the capacities of any single party.

Unrelated to what was transpiring in Madrid, on November 11, 1975 a labor conflict broke out at the Laforsa factory in Baix Llobregat. A worker was fired for shouting at a foreman and his comrades walked out in solidarity with him, which in turn led to more workers being fired. The workers went from one factory to another explaining the situation until they decided to occupy a church. Workers at various other enterprises held assemblies to address the issue and on January 13 a large crowd of workers assembled in the vicinity of the occupied church. The police violently attacked the crowd and severely injured one person. In response, several enterprises

went on strike, more workers were fired and finally the working class of Baix proclaimed the general strike, the third in its history. The militants of the Workers Commissions faced a serious problem. They were against the strike but they could not totally turn their backs on it. They set to work in earnest in the county assemblies to ensure that the demonstrations were small and did not have self-defense pickets. Two leadership groups acted in parallel: the assemblies and the Inter-Trade Union Committee [*Intersindical*]. The latter appointed a Workers Negotiating Commission for the purpose of obtaining interviews with the civil governor, a recently-converted “democrat”, and with a commission appointed by the employers’ association of Baix. The workers’ demonstrations failed to have any effect. They could not join forces and, without defensive preparations, they were easily dispersed. The Stalinists succeeded in obtaining their interviews. The strike was now without any basis and was therefore unilaterally called off on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, leaving unresolved the matters of the fired workers and their demands. The workers were confused and defeated, having paid the price for trusting such abject “leaders” and their hardly recommendable fellow travelers, yet the strike movement did not come to an end, but crossed over to the other side of Barcelona. The brutal repression of a demonstration of teachers, parents and schoolchildren in Sabadell gave rise to a general strike in the Vallès, extended by a strike at the Bultaco plant and in the chemical, education and construction sectors, which affected such towns as Vic, Tarrasa and Badalona. The resort to shop-floor, section or district delegates illustrated the total bankruptcy of the “unitary democratic slates”, although the innocence of the workers with respect to the Stalinists gave much leeway to their maneuvers. No radical autonomous current crystallized in order to provide even a small degree of strategic clarity to the working class, and this despite the existence of numerous autonomous groups and of a climate that was favorable for self-organization. The confused situation could not be resolved to the benefit of workers autonomy, and facilitated the repressive work of the parties and trade unions. This incipient bureaucracy sought a legal framework to institutionalize its existence, in order to thus put an end to any possibility for working class self-organization, but the forces that could have conceded this legality were too divided among themselves with respect to the degree and the magnitude of the concessions. In January and February assembly-based strikes broke out all over the Peninsula, mostly in the construction industry: in Tarragona, Valencia, Cordoba, Seville, Cadiz, Vigo, Cartagena, Badajoz, Asturias, Navarre.... The conflict at the Astano shipyards (El Ferrol) lasted a whole year. On February 24, during the demonstrations for the shoe industry labor contract, the police killed a young worker in Elda (Alicante). In Valladolid, a strike broke out in the construction sector on January 22. The workers met in a general assembly, elected a Representative Commission and demanded the resignation of the certified trade union liaisons. Various factories took advantage of the occasion to pose their own demands and to elect their own Representative Commissions. On February 3, an assembly of delegates composed of Representative Commissions and members of the assembly of unemployed workers was convened. The employers’ association used a trick to defeat them: it accepted without any discussion the wage hikes that were demanded in order to force a return to work and left the combative workers isolated, most of whom were then fired. Thus, the economic success of the strike signaled the weakening of the workers movement at a crucial moment and in a key zone.

In Vizcaya the strike movement began in December of 1975, in two bargaining units that worked for the nuclear power plant at Lemoniz. The work stoppage spread to other bargaining units and from the latter to the big factories on the Nervión River, most notably Altos Hornos de Vizcaya. Two forms of struggle arose; on the one hand, that of the bargaining units, through strike

committees elected in assemblies, which merged into a single strike committee. On the other hand, in the big factories, where the influence of the two currents of the Workers Commissions or the UGT was strong, through the resort to the legally certified representatives and the vertical trade unions. There were no strike committees, assemblies or joint platforms for demands in the latter; furthermore, all attempts to form a coordinating body, a “central strike committee”, were aborted. In Álava it was different. The Forjas Alavesas plant went on strike on January 9 and was followed by another ten metal-working factories. As in Valladolid, the workers held assemblies to elect their Representative Commissions and demanded the resignation of the legal trade union liaisons and certified representatives. Later, they unified their demands, which were similar to those of the other strikers in Spain: abolition of wage ceilings; negotiation with the real representatives of the assemblies; and an end to firings and arrests. The last point was the most important, insofar as a momentary victory could entail certain defeat in the future if reprisals were not taken into account, that is, if the solidarity of the workers was broken, the strong point and at the same time the Achilles Heel of the proletariat. The Workers Coordinating Committee of Vitoria became the Coordinating Committee of Representative Commissions, an authentic workers council. The struggle took place amidst constant assemblies until, faced with the refusal of the employers to recognize the representative commissions, the workers took to the streets. Some enterprises then ended up recognizing the workers delegates while others denounced them to the police. In mid-February, there was a general strike that succeeded in obtaining the release of the arrested workers. Another mobilization in favor of the workers who had been fired was less successful and then the assemblies decided to call a third general strike for March 3. The day dawned with the whole city shut down. When the workers marched to the Church of Saint Francis, in the Zaramaga district, the police launched a fierce attack against them, beating people in the crowd and firing tear gas canisters. Then the police received the order to shoot to kill, and as a result four workers were left dead and more than one hundred wounded with bullet wounds, one of whom died shortly thereafter. While the entire working class was overcome with shock, the police reestablished control over Vitoria. On March 8 the general strike was declared in the Basque Country and Navarre. In another region where representative commissions had arisen, Basauri, the police killed another worker. The Government, headed by Prime Minister Fraga, eager to put an end to the “soviet” of Vitoria and to the “anarchy” in the factories, expressly prohibited every kind of meeting and proceeded to arrest the most prominent workers in the assemblies. The intelligence services of the State and the Army were convinced that a proletarian insurrection was only hours away. With all of Euskadi [the “Basque Country”] paralyzed and in a state of extreme tension, the time was ripe for calling the general strike in all of Spain, but the workers of Vitoria, exhausted and disoriented by the repression, preferred to return to work beginning on March 14, leaving their best comrades in jail, accused of sedition and therefore in the hands of the military justice system.

The Stalinists had a better grasp of the pre-revolutionary nature of the situation than the workers themselves and devoted themselves body and soul to defusing it. The first step was the unification of the central political institutions of the PCE, the PSOE and the Christian Democrats, the Junta and the Platform, in a Democratic Coordinating Committee, which was also joined by the leftist parties. At the same time, they renounced any intention to radically transform the fascist corporative structures and in April created the Coordinating Committee of Trade Union Organizations [*Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sindicales*—COS], in accordance with the UGT’s February proposal, whose purpose was to wage a merciless war against assembly democracy. For

its part, the Government was convinced that the absence of any participation on the part of the illegal trade unions and the opposition parties was even worse for capitalist interests, but pressure from the Army, the other essential pillar of capitalism, which began after the events in Vitoria, prevented this necessary convergence. The opposition responded on March 29 with a manifesto that rejected the government's proposed political reforms. It was a simple invitation to make the reforms more meaningful. The shrewdness of the Arias government and the opposition in their mutual relations cannot be denied: on April 8 the Law of Labor Relations was promulgated, which mandated the 44-hour working week, with Saturday afternoons off and 25 paid vacation days per year, demands which had already been achieved by many of the ongoing labor struggles. The law had nothing to say about "the right of assembly" demanded by thousands of strikers. Its concessions were the least that could be done given the circumstances; but the article referring to the prohibition of firing workers for political reasons, responsible for so many solidarity strikes, aroused the ire of the employers, who saw themselves deprived of the most effective weapon against strikes, which, despite the deaths in Vitoria, continued unabated. In order to retake the streets the Government had to once again declare a state of emergency, which did not seem to bother the opposition very much, which was now very deeply entrenched in its repressive role. In early May, Fraga, the Prime Minister, met with Felipe González, the secretary of the PSOE, and the Government approved Martín Villa's proposal of trade union reform in accordance with the principles of the OIT [International Labor Organization—ILO], which opened up the door to "free" trade unionism. The regime's toleration of the COS was blatant, for while the workers participating in the assemblies were stigmatized as provocateurs by COS militants and persecuted by the police, that same month the "clandestine" UGT held a reconstruction congress without any attempt at concealment, authorized by Fraga, the very same person who had given the order to open fire on the workers of Vitoria. During the next few months the arrested demonstrators who did not possess trade union cards were preferentially held in custody. For their part, certain sectors of the Workers Commissions controlled by leftist parties were submitting to Stalinist discipline (in June, the CONE and the CECO merged; shortly before, the "Sectors" of BR had submitted to the authority of the National Workers Commission of Catalonia), while others split from the Stalinists: on July 11, during the general assembly of Workers Commissions in Barcelona, when it definitively proclaimed its intention to form a separate trade union instead of merging with the central organs of the CCOO, the UGT and the USO, the tendency that would subsequently form the Unitary Trade Unions split from the COS.

The political situation satisfied no one. The movement of December-March, rejecting the idea that the cost of the economy's failures should fall upon the shoulders of the workers, and upholding the direct democracy of the assemblies, had gone beyond both the dictatorship and the opposition, putting both of them on the same side of the barricade. Not only were the remnants of the old Franco regime incapable of allowing themselves the luxury of an opposition, but the opposition could not allow itself the luxury of fighting against the reforms proposed by the Franco regime. Carrillo, secretary of the PCE, now spoke of an "agreed break". The opposition, and particularly the PCE, understood that while the central power was incapable of winning the recognition of the working class masses, the PCE was itself capable of winning their recognition as an interlocutor with the Franco regime's apparatus. The international environment was favorable; the United States remained neutral. Just then, the opposition publicly proclaimed that it was on the side of order. It was necessary to fill the gaps created by the vacuum of power in the factories and the streets. The old regime, however, was in such a state of political decomposition that it

was incapable of taking even one more step in the direction that it was heading. On June 1, Arias Navarro resigned and the failed reformers were isolated. He was replaced by the last leader of Franco's Movement, Adolfo Suárez, an obscure functionary without any noteworthy pedigree. Those who selected him—it is said that he relied on the support of the financiers—assigned him the mission to create “a new democratic framework” for the strikes and avoid economic collapse. Suárez formed a government with a reformist in the background, Osorio, and with his friends, the Catholics of the ACNP. Without any apparent biases, this government began where the previous reformers had failed: by opening up a dialogue with the opposition. It maintained a series of contacts with the socialists, with the Catalanian nationalists and, through intermediaries, with the communists. On July 30 an amnesty was proclaimed that did not free all the prisoners, nor did it provide guarantees for the return of the exiles, but which allowed the leaders of the opposition to appear in public. The ordinary prisoners, entirely excluded, rioted. In August, the government's Minister of Trade Union Relations spoke with the leaders of the UGT, the USO and the CCOO. He promised all of them freedom for the trade unions, a labor amnesty and the transfer of the patrimony of the CNS. The decomposition of the vertical trade union was accelerated and its useful bureaucrats were shared out among the UGT, the USO and the Commissions. The meetings continued in September, and ensured that the opposition compromised its credibility among the working class masses by fighting against the strikes and protests. The hostility of the army was the most convincing argument offered by the reformist elements of the old regime to dissuade the opposition from choosing any other option. As a result, the legalization of the parties was a fait accompli, although the reticence of the military made it advisable to postpone the legalization of the PCE, which the Stalinists accepted.

In the barracks there was a certain amount of unrest among the troops, but there was not enough agitation, although the commanding officers saw conspiracies everywhere and increased their vigilance. Suárez counted on the invaluable help of Carrillo, who, through the mediation of the lawyer, José Mario Armero, sincerely offered his party's assistance in the fight against wage struggles and the task of demobilizing the strike movement. Nor was this assistance a trivial matter, for it was feared that there would be a repetition that upcoming autumn of the strike movement of the beginning of the year. The usual practice consisted in allowing the assemblies to be held while capturing the negotiating commission, and thus, the whole working class democratic system of decision-making could be destroyed all at once from a commission that was answerable to no one. This is what happened in the strike of the construction workers of León that took place in September, which spread to La Coruña and Burgos. In other conflicts involving more experienced workers, the trade unionists were expelled from the factories and jobsites by saboteurs and then the police were set to work in earnest. The exacerbation of the repression directed against the workers was a prominent feature of the first stage of the Suárez government, a selective repression, clearly aimed at the assemblies and their most active members, taking care to give the trade unionists a wide berth. On September 9 the mining basin of Asturias was shut down by a strike. On September 12, the small metal workshops of Sabadell went on strike. This time the workers, who in their immense majority did not belong to any trade union, faced an employers' lockout and mass firings, the prohibition of the assemblies and the open opposition of the CCOO to pickets and the general strike. In addition, the COS kept the big metal factories out of the conflict (SEAT, Pegaso, Hispano-Olivetti...). Torpedoed by the “leaders” of the Commissions that dominated the deliberating committee, the workers of the sector of small metal-working enterprises held a daily assembly attended by large crowds in the church of Can

Oriac, until the unprecedented violence of the police crushed the spirit of the strikers. After two days of activities, the strike ended on October 12 and resulted in a defeat for the advocates of the assemblies that would have profound consequences. 450 fired workers were thrown onto the streets. On September 21, the police killed a student at the door of his home in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, which unleashed a general strike and a violent demonstration on the day of his burial. On September 22, the third postal workers strike began in Madrid, which one week later spread to 34 provinces and to the Telegraph sector. Because of the death of a student on October 1, also in Madrid, there was a day of militant demonstrations attended by more than two hundred thousand strikers. On October 8 the police shot a young man in Fuenterrabía and in response a general strike was declared in Vizcaya, which on the 13<sup>th</sup> spread to all of Euskadi. Because the assemblies were behind the struggle, the authorities prohibited them and the COS opposed their decisions. The unitary institution that led the struggle, the Coordinating Committee of the Factories of Vizcaya, was far from being the voice of the assemblies; it was instead the playing field of the struggle between the leftist parties and the PCE and the COS. The former were trying to seize control of the struggle to reconstruct their own trade union, since the unification of the CCOO had failed, while the latter were simply trying to put an end to the struggle. Amidst all these machinations, the few assembly delegates were powerless to impose at the highest levels the dynamic of the rank and file and convert the Coordinating Committee of the Factories into a real Coordinating Committee of Representatives, that is, a Workers Council. Nonetheless, they managed to coordinate the activities of about one hundred factories. It was the high point of councilism; everything went downhill after that. The PCE thought that the workers had provoked the Government with their strikes and were an impediment to dialogue, but it could not remain totally separate from them if it did not want to lose all its influence, which was the only thing it had that made it a viable negotiating partner. It could not prevent the Coordinating Committee from calling a general strike in Euskadi on September 27 for a total amnesty and to commemorate the executions of Txiki and the other four anti-fascists. In revenge, the Government suspended the article referring to workers fired for labor activism in the law passed in April, to the satisfaction of the employers. Between October and November the construction workers strike took place in Vizcaya, conducted by a real system of assemblies. Since the COS could not liquidate it, the Government prohibited all meetings, and thereby succeeded in isolating the Managing Commission, which was incapable of accounting for its activities to a general assembly that could not be convoked. This coordinated division of the labor of repression between the COS and the Suárez government functioned quite well, preventing conflicts from spreading like wildfire. For example, the strike of the EMT in Madrid was simultaneously broken by the trade unions and militarized by the Government. The compromise worked; on October 7 the Democratic Coordinating Committee, or the "Platajunta", which in August had declared its willingness to arrange a "a negotiated break" with the government, broke with the leftist parties and formed a Negotiating Commission to draft a plan for governmental reform. The opposition thought that it was necessary to embark on a radical change of course for labor peace, which is still its "specialty". There were alarming symptoms that indicated that the energies of the workers might converge towards an assembly-based strike movement. Thus, for the purpose of preventing it from concentrating its power all at once, the COS called for a day of struggle on November 12 "against the economic policies of the Government". The appeal was only heeded in part (two and a half million workers participated), which led Suárez to congratulate himself on the fact that the power of the opposition was relative, while the opposition could express its satisfaction at having a more

disciplined mass of workers than it had predicted. We do not need to point out, of course, that the Government's economic policies, which were used by the opposition as a mere pretext, followed their course. The radical workers did not seize the initiative, neither in the resistance nor with respect to taking the next step forward. At these levels no stable coordinating committees had been established and they were far from having elaborated a revolutionary alternative that would learn from the experiences of the assemblies and transform them into a practical force. Properly instructed, on November 18, the legislature of the Franco regime passed the "Law for Political Reform" proposed by the Government. Meanwhile, now that the Democratic Coordinating Committee was defunct, the plot was underway to integrate the opposition. The referendum on the law was a major victory for Suárez; three months later the trade unions were legalized and general elections were scheduled. With the workers movement in retreat, the COS, the trade union front against the assemblies, had fulfilled its mission and it was not long before it dissolved.

The demonstrations of November 12 broke the back of the assembly movement, facilitating the mutually agreed-upon reform between the opposition and the government. The opposition renounced the strike as a political weapon, but used those it could not stop as a weapon against workers autonomy. The dissolving action of the repression, the firings and the political-trade union maneuvers succeeded in disorienting the workers. The latter, who were still capable of seeing clearly, attached themselves to what was safe, to material demands and employment, and avoided committing to making a choice between putting an end to capitalism or helping modernize it. Their immediate material interests were separated from their class interests; this favored the development of trade unionism, forced them to neglect the question of self-defense and caused them to ignore the barracks. During this time of decomposition the Army, due to a lack of discipline among the troops, was of fundamental importance, but it was a task that would have required the domination of the workers on the streets. The workers returned to work, which was not so bad, and shut themselves up in their homes, in their private lives, which was bad; the discouragement spread among the workers committees and autonomous groups, which tried to launch parties in favor of autonomy, or else they dissolved or joined trade unions (many of them participated in the LAB or in the reconstruction of the CNT); the assemblies declined in number and the coordinating committees languished. But workers autonomy would have one more great moment with l'Assemblea de Treballadors de l'Espectacle, the Roca strike, the formation of the Factory Council at SEAT, the Assembly Movement of the shoe industry in Elche and the occupation of Cadiz by the demonstrations of the Workers Coordinating Committees, but no current on any significant scale that could work on its behalf was capable of taking shape. While it is true that the movement did not end immediately, it nonetheless lost its capacity for self-organization and went into decline. Time was not on its side. The workers collectives that had preserved the assembly mechanism were isolated, on the defensive. Assemblies of soldiers were never formed, and revolutionary options, dependent on the independent development of the proletariat and on the dissolution of the military apparatus, were gradually losing all opportunities for success, even partial success, until they totally evaporated during the next four or five years.



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