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Challenging the Separation of the Economic and the Political

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CGT, *Confederación General del Trabajo*, is the confederation that represents the majoritarian sector of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. The railway section of CGT is among the strongest in the confederation, and the 2015 elections, despite a frontal attack against the union aimed at reducing its representation, secured the presence of CGT in the works’ council of both RENFE and ADIF (*Administrador de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias*, the Spanish railway infrastructure manager), with two members in each.

In the railway sector, CGT pushes for an alternative “public and social railway” (*ferrocarril público y social*). While the most recent articulation of the meaning of the proposal is found in a 2012 document, systematic treatments of this position could already be found in 2001 when the union published what they themselves consider to be the most complete document devoted to the railways.¹ Put succinctly, the CGT alternative can be summed up in ten demands, which, in turn, can be summarized as follows: the railways must

¹ SFF-CGT. 2001. *Nuestro modelo de ferrocarril. Una alternativa de transporte social y seguro*.

continue to be a public service, placed above economic criteria favoring the interest of the few. The railways must be maintained as public property. Investments in railways must prioritize conventional rail, and safety must be guaranteed above all other criteria. The railway system must maintain the concept of integrated planning and services. The accounting criteria must take into consideration the savings in external costs. Users must benefit from these savings in the form of adequate service provision. Accessible and subsidized tariffs must support the development of railway service. Railway transportation must be promoted as a priority transportation service. And, finally, a common employment framework across the sector is needed in order to guarantee work conditions as well as safety, both in terms of work safety and transportation safety.

Flipping through CGT leaflets immediately alerts you to a story told differently. As opposed to the timid recuperation of state ownership that CCOO and UGT (the two majority union confederations) sketch, where the state-owned railway is at best opposed to the private one, the brief historical sketch that the CGT promotes for general audiences speaks of the cyclical history of the railways. Twentieth century railway history, we are told, is a history of oscillation between public and private ownership, where liberalization, privatization, and (re)nationalization represent different moments in processes of capital accumulation. There are phenomena that cut across the public/private divide, it is argued. The discourse of the inefficiency of public management is one of them; the other is the constant issue of the railway deficit, an ever-present pressuring instrument. The capitulation of railway management to economic criteria occurs in both phases, with the state implementing policies that are designed to benefit capital and the private accumulation of profit. So while defending the public railway, CGT appears to qualify the history of public ownership as state ownership.

The case against the AVE that CGT builds can only be understood as an extension of the broader vision of the railway that the

union promotes. The AVE is, in opposition to the public and social railway, an elite railway, built for the benefit of the few at the cost of the many. Subordinated to a model of territorial development that the union rejects, the AVE appears as an element in a broader infrastructural policy that has placed profit, at all costs, ahead of sustainability, broadly understood. One meaningful point of friction between the critique of the AVE as an extension of the defense of the public and social railway and the need to engage with the hegemonic framework is the union's reliance on the data generated by CBA. Although CGT is a staunch defender of a railway model that is placed above strict criteria of profitability, their daily work requires an engagement with hegemonic discourses. This, in practice, has meant that CGT has relied on the type of data provided by CBA to prove that the AVE represents, from the economic point of view, a failed model. The union's argumentative strategy oscillates between a double-edged critique with clear priorities and the ambiguities of resorting to the factual repertoire of liberal economics in order to defend a nonliberal railway model.