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Political exchange, crisis of representation and trade union strategies in a time of austerity: trade unions and 15 M in Spain

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Summary

This article analyses the strategy of major Spanish trade unions in the context of economic crisis through the theoretical framework of political exchange. It focuses on a frequently ignored dimension of political exchange, namely the relationship between union leaders and the rank-and-file, which, under certain circumstances, can lead to a crisis of representation. Based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews, this article explores the strategic behaviour of Spanish trade unions and their relationship with the so-called 15 M movement. It concludes that the ambiguous strategy of the major unions can be explained, not only as a result of their effort to preserve their institutional power and their political influence in the public sphere, but also as a response to the emergence of the 15 M movement, which has made these organizations confront the threat of a crisis of representation.

Résumé

Cet article analyse la stratégie des grands syndicats espagnols dans le contexte de la crise économique au travers du cadre théorique de l'échange politique. Il se focalise sur une dimension souvent ignorée de l'échange politique, à savoir la relation entre les leaders syndicaux et la base, qui dans certaines circonstances, peut conduire à une crise de la représentation. Sur la base d'une analyse de documents et d'interviews partiellement structurées, l'article explore le comportement stratégique des syndicats espagnols et leurs relations avec le mouvement dit 15 M. Il conclut que la

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stratégie ambiguë des grands syndicats peut s'expliquer non seulement comme la conséquence de leurs efforts pour préserver leur pouvoir institutionnel et leur influence politique dans la sphère publique, mais aussi comme une réponse à l'émergence du mouvement 15 M, qui a confronté ces organisations à la menace d'une crise de la représentation.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel analysiert die Strategie großer spanischer Gewerkschaften vor dem Hintergrund der Wirtschaftskrise. Die Autoren nutzen den theoretischen Rahmen des politischen Austausches (*political exchange*) und befassen sich in erster Linie mit einer seiner oft verkannten Dimensionen, nämlich den Beziehungen zwischen der Gewerkschaftsführung und der Gewerkschaftsbasis, die unter bestimmten Umständen zu einer Repräsentationskrise führen können. Auf der Grundlage der Analyse von Dokumenten und semistrukturierten Gesprächen untersucht dieser Artikel das strategische Verhalten spanischer Gewerkschaften und ihr Verhältnis zu der so genannten Bewegung 15 M. Er kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die unklare Strategie der großen Gewerkschaften nicht nur aus dem Versuch des Erhalts ihrer institutionellen Macht und ihres politischen Einflusses in der Öffentlichkeit erklärt werden kann, sondern auch als Reaktion auf die Entstehung der Bewegung 15 M, durch die sich die Gewerkschaften mit einer drohenden Repräsentationskrise konfrontiert sehen.

Keywords

Political exchange, trade unions, social movements, representation, 15 M

Introduction

The relationship between governments and trade unions in the political arena has been analysed primarily by means of the concept of *political exchange*, which was introduced in the social sciences at the end of the 1970s by Alessandro Pizzorno (1991). During the 1980s and 1990s, this theoretical perspective was the main analytical framework for addressing the type of exchange – systematic and long-term – by means of which social pacts were made, particularly in cases in which political power and labour organizations played a central role. Among others, Miguélez (1985), Rehfeldt (1990) and, mainly, Regini (1991, 1997, 2000) have applied this analytical framework to the study of bargaining and 'power exchange' relationships between trade unions and governments, which were characterized by social partnerships in different European countries throughout these years (Regini, 1991: 188). The current economic and financial crisis and its effects on public policies have revitalized academic interest in this concept.

In some of the southern European countries hardest hit by the crisis – mainly Spain, Italy and Portugal – corporatist dialogue has come under strong pressure, due to governments' renunciation of efforts to achieve consensus on certain economic, social and labour market policies, particularly regarding the implementation of reforms and austerity policies imposed by European institutions. This recent shift in the formulation of public policies, which passed 'from negotiation to imposition' (Molina and Miguélez, 2013), and labour's strategic response to the shift, have been examined in various studies whose main argument is based on the logic of political exchange, as proposed by Pizzorno (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011; Culpeper and Regan, 2014; Gago, 2014; González Begega et al., 2013; González Begega and Luque, 2014; Luque and González Begega, 2014; Köhler et al., 2013; Hamann, 2012).

According to these analyses, and in response to the unilateral imposition of austerity measures and labour market ‘reforms’ by the various governments, trade unions have resorted to an ambiguous strategy that has fluctuated more or less erratically, depending on the country, between general strikes – on occasion followed by demonstrations – and social agreements. This strategy, described by some authors as ‘boxing and dancing’ (Luque and González Begega, 2014), is justified by the need to react against the decline in the working and living conditions of the majority of the population, as well as – indeed, mainly – by the need to operate as ‘responsible’ social partners, avoiding open political confrontation in order to avoid being excluded from social dialogue. From this perspective, the strategic response of the trade unions in southern Europe has been met by their exclusion from social dialogue and, in this context, their priority should be to preserve their institutional power and political influence.

These analyses ignore part of the explanation, however. As Pizzorno (1991) and Regini (1991) have pointed out, trade union strategies of political exchange are also strongly conditioned by their relations with the rank-and-file. When a trade union operates in the political arena, two circumstances usually intervene to complicate such relations. These circumstances tend to be exacerbated in times of crisis. On the one hand, in the political arena the trade unions are not the only natural representatives of members’ interests and can be forced to share representation with emerging social organizations with new collective identities. On the other hand, the limitation of trade union autonomy and the moderation that is required during political exchanges can generate tensions between union officials and the grass-roots. Both processes – which may become intensified in times of crisis – together or separately, can lead to a *crisis of representation* that has the effect of limiting the unions’ room for manoeuvre during political exchange (Pérez de Guzmán, 2012).

The aim of this article is to examine this aspect of political exchange theory which has been less studied but has significant explanatory power, particularly in times of crisis. It will focus on analysing the processes that favour the emergence of crises of representation and the way in which these crises affect trade unions’ strategic behaviour. Specifically, we look at the response of trade unions to the challenges arising from their dual roles as institutional social partners and as ‘organizers of discontent’ (Martinez Lucio, 2008: 130). To this end, we shall look at a particular case involving the complex relations between the major Spanish trade unions, the General Union of Workers (Unión General de Trabajadores-UGT), the Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras-CC.OO) and the 15 M movement, in the context of the social crisis generated by the austerity measures imposed by the Spanish government.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of the Indignados (outraged) or 15 M movement constitutes a milestone in Spain’s recent history. This movement, promoted by a small network of activists, arose from a protest convoked through Facebook on 15 May 2011, under the slogan ‘Real democracy now! Take to the streets. We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers’. It ended in a massive and horizontal mobilization against the consequences of the economic crisis and highlighted the widespread disenchantment with the political system. Without the initial support of any political party, trade union or civil society organization, a growing number of activists organized protests in hundreds of towns and cities with mass attendance and major impact. Quickly, protest camps, public square occupations, networks, assemblies, workers’ committees and protests were extended throughout the country, building a new movement characterized by self-management and the use of new information and communication technologies (Castells, 2013). The surge of this new social movement caught the Spanish left by surprise – including major and radical trade unions and they were not able to channel social discontent. Since then the Indignados movement has passed through several stages, crystallizing into a wide

spectrum of new social movement organizations and establishing alliances with other actors (Martínez and López, 2014). More recently, it has evolved into a new leftist party, Podemos.

Trade union responses to the stunning rise of the 15 M movement can be described as erratic: sometimes they have provided timid support to these new social initiatives or have even given more decisive backing; sometimes they have tried to discredit their proposals with the apparent goal of distancing themselves from them; on other occasions, they have converged with them; at times, they have ignored the movement's requests. The major trade unions have tried to restore social dialogue, despite the government's clear lack of interest and the passing of measures designed to undermine workers' rights (González Begega et al., 2015). Furthermore, occasionally they have cooperated with 15 M in an open opposition strategy by organizing general strikes and protests.

However, this erratic behaviour should be understood in the context of the financial and sovereign debt crisis, which has imposed a considerable strain on the national socio-economic governance regime and on industrial relations institutions, and has caused the collapse of corporatist dynamics in social dialogue (González Begega and Luque, 2015). As González Begega and Luque (2015) have stated, the shift from national social pacts to EU impositions as an argument to justify public decisions has left trade unions with limited room to manoeuvre. In this situation, the unions have tried to maintain social dialogue in an attempt to limit the implementation of anti-labour policies and austerity plans (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011).

With these constraints as a background, this article argues that the Spanish unions have acted in response to the strategic challenge originating in the emergence of the 15 M movement and its acquisition of the legitimacy to represent the interests of those hit by the economic crisis and, at the same time, to assume leadership in social mobilization. In other words, the unions face a crisis of representation.

In order to test the hypothesis concerning the crisis of representation, this article starts by explaining the theoretical basis of this aspect of political exchange theory and its recent developments. Then it analyses the discourses and practices of the 15 M movement in relation to employment and the labour movement. Finally, it examines the strategic behaviour of the major Spanish trade unions within the framework of their complex relationships with the state, their grass-roots, 15 M and other social movements.

Data for this qualitative research were collected by means of 10 semi-structured interviews with 15 M activists and union members in Seville during 2014, and the analysis of online and off-line documents of 15 M and the major trade unions (slogans on posters, websites, blogs, micro-blogs, magazines, assembly minutes, leaflets and so on). In order to assess the information, the authors discussed their findings with an expert on Spanish industrial relations and trade unionism and used fieldwork notes from their own experiences at demonstrations and meetings of 15 M in which they participated in several cities of the provinces of Seville, Cadiz and Madrid in the period 2011–2014.

The theoretical framework of political exchange revisited

Pizzorno (1991: 384) defined political exchange as a type of relationship between the state and labour organizations, according to which the one who:

has the goods (generally the government) is disposed to undertake exchanges for achieving social consensus with another actor who can threaten such consensus (or, in other words, put social order in danger) unless he gets the goods that he needs.

Authors such as Keeler (1988) have connected the interest of trade unions in accepting or promoting a process of political exchange with the organizational benefits that these organizations – or its leaders – can obtain from this relationship. From this perspective, by participating in political exchange, trade unions take a strategic decision, according to which they facilitate consensus or the moderation of their grass-roots in return for more power, thereby increasing their options for achieving other goals in the future (Rehfeldt, 1990). According to Pizzorno (1991), this strategic choice is related to the fact that the trade union, like all permanent organizations, must develop its own interests and, in this context, its interest in increasing its power as an organization drives it to renounce immediate benefits for its grass-roots in exchange for future improvements. Nevertheless, he agrees with Regini (1991: 189) in arguing that, although these factors can be very important, a trade union cannot consider the possibility of getting involved in a stable political exchange only in terms of power for its leaders and benefits for the organization: the relationship that these organizations have with their grass-roots is also a key issue. In this sense, the room for manoeuvre of any trade union that participates in political exchange processes will be strongly conditioned by its ability to control a potential crisis of representation.

Because the benefits obtained in the political ‘market’ can be more abstract and more long term than those coming from traditional labour strategies, a breach – or, as Pizzorno (1991: 391) calls it, an ‘interpretation lapse’ – can occur between the interests of the represented and those of the representatives that can make their relationship tense. If this breach widens too much because the grass-roots perceive that the decisions of the organization depart from their goals too much, a crisis of representation looms. The consequences of this, according to Regini (1991: 191) can vary:

from a weakening of the loyalty of the members or a decline in membership, to a loss of the monopoly of representation or the retreat of the tacit representation right to the trade unions in favor of other social groups external to its membership.

According to Crouch, in order to prevent these consequences, trade unions should become articulated organizations:

in which strong relations of interdependence bind different vertical levels such that the actions of the centre are frequently predicated on securing the consent of lower levels. (Crouch, 1993: 54–55)

More recently and taking into account the increasingly complex multi-level industrial relations environment, Molina (2008) has delved into this argument in an effort to understand the concept of articulation as a two-dimensional variable that includes both intra-organizational participation and the democratic empowerment of members.

But for the trade unions that participate in the political field, the risk of a crisis of representation grows, not only because in this arena the process of transmission and definition of labour interests is considerably more complex, but also because in the political arena labour organizations are not the natural representatives of their interests. For this reason, as Pizzorno (1991) warned, ‘trade unions can be threatened as organizations by the rise [or construction] of new collective identities’ that question and compete for the right to represent general social interests and to act as effective agents of social mobilization, which will end up affecting their ability to maintain the strategy of political exchange.

The question of the legitimacy of the trade unions as representative social actors – or, as Dufour and Hege (2010) call it, the problem of the ‘representation relationship’ – has been underlined in some recent studies as a key aspect of the explanation of trade union strategies, in the current

context of economic crisis and decline in political exchange in most European countries, particularly in the south. None of these studies focus explicitly on the analysis of how the need to face the risk of a crisis of representation conditioned trade union strategies before the economic recession and the imposition of austerity policies; however, they address this issue indirectly by examining the role of these organizations in the recent collapse of social dialogue.

Some analyses explain the legitimacy crisis currently experienced by the trade unions in many countries in terms of what Regini (1981) defined a ‘crisis of results’ translated to the political field. Thus, according to Hassel (2003), at times of economic crisis, social partnership is no longer a tool for economic policy and becomes instead an instrument for adapting to a new economic environment in the hands of governments. The trade unions, with limited sources of power, can choose between abstaining and losing all their influence over government decisions, or participating and attempting to reduce the impact of the adjustments by accepting the lesser of two evils (Bernaciak et al., 2014). If, however, with the aim of maintaining their political influence and their institutional status, the trade unions opt for this last role – which supposes sharing responsibility for the implementation of adjustments and cutbacks – they will be exposed to the dissatisfaction of their grass-roots and the erosion of their legitimacy as representatives of general social interests and as political intermediaries (Hyman, 2001).

Other studies, for example, that of Culpepper and Regan (2014), identify the questioning of trade unions’ implicit representativeness by part of the working class as the origin of the current weakening of political exchange. Based on empirical evidence related to Italy and Ireland, these researchers point out that, without this position, the trade unions have nothing to offer governments because their loss implies the reduction of two other essential abilities of this type of exchange: the ability to mobilize wide sectors of society and to promote social support for – generally unpopular – measures resulting from collective agreements. Without the ‘carrot’ with which to attract the government in order to participate in political negotiations, and without the ‘stick’ to insist on it, the trade unions would be excluded from political exchange.

Finally, other studies focus on the strategic challenges that these organizations face in the current context. Campos Lima and Martín Artiles (2011), for example, show the ambiguities that labour organizations must face when acting as representatives and advocates of workers’ interests and, at the same time, as responsible social agents. In this respect, they conclude that strikes and other types of conflict:

are, on one hand, necessary means to demonstrate the dissatisfaction among trade union members who are supposed to pay for the capitalist crisis. Such demonstrations are also part of the political game, in which they, on the other hand, can enhance trade unions’ power resources in acting as co-partners in governance by negotiating social pacts. (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011: 399)

From a different perspective, based on an analysis of the French case, Le Queux and Sainsaulieu (2010) identify another issue that could be considered a collateral effect of this political game: the emergence of social movements, whose demands overlap with those of the trade unions and that do not always accept trade union leadership with regard to representation and social protest. These researchers argue that social movements have destabilized the balance of political exchange and, consequently, their relationship with the trade unions is, to say the least, uncomfortable.

When trade unions operate in the political arena, ‘the power *for* demands a power *over*’ (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010: 515), which these new actors question. This article will explore this situation by analysing the strategic behaviour of the major Spanish trade unions before the challenge that, according to Beroud (2014), led to the emergence of the 15 M movement.

‘Trade unions, thanks for coming’: the ambivalent relationship between the Indignados and the trade unions

The cultural framework of 15 M initially included certain ideas that showed hostility towards trade unions. These ideas had different sources: first, from the autonomist post-workerist character of some of its pioneer social movement organizations, such as Juventud Sin Futuro (Youth without a Future) or No les Votes (Do Not Vote for Them) (Candón, 2013); secondly, from the inter-classist profile of its participants; and thirdly, from the influence of a general suspicion about trade unions, in part as a result of a vigorous delegitimizing campaign launched by the right-wing mass media.

The 15 M groups have stressed their ‘non-union and non-party’ character on various occasions; furthermore, the movement has clearly expressed its rejection of the status quo and all its institutions, looking instead for new formulas. The idea that the representation of institutions, particularly unions, is part of the problem instead of part of the solution has been openly expressed in messages, placards, internal documents and press releases: ‘Politicians rob us, unions sell us, employers’ organizations enslave us, banks cheat us, the press lies to us’; ‘on strike despite the trade unions’; and ‘leave the union and join the fight’.

But, in spite of the rejection of the trade unions by the Indignados, there has been a relative permeability between both social movements: on a personal basis, many trade union members were involved in 15 M, taking part in the demonstrations and in the neighbourhood assemblies (Beroud, 2014). Although many of them were militant members of radical labour organizations (Roca, 2015), other activists were members of the major trade unions. One of them, Antonio, complained about the indiscriminate rejection of the traditional institutions of the labour movement:

It hurts me because it is not constructive: ‘What all the others have to say is bad and I have the truth, and the key to it all is our way of seeing the union struggle, because CC.OO has sold out, UGT has sold out’ (...) the best way is to choose the good things from everyone. If the institution makes an agreement that is far from the aspirations of the workers, it must be criticized. But all the good things shouldn’t be thrown away. (Antonio Martínez, male, 55 years old, member of CC.OO. Interview conducted in Seville, 10 June 2014)

The rejection of unions does, however, go hand in hand with an awareness of the need to approach them somehow. We have to keep in mind that Spanish unions are the organizations with the highest levels of affiliation in Spanish society and that the participation of workers in union elections is very high, exceeding participation in elections for political representatives. The need to approach unions was evident in the August and September 2011 protests against the reform of the Spanish constitution. The socialist government had yielded to pressures from Angela Merkel oriented towards incorporating budget deficit controls into the Constitution under the guise of ‘calming the markets’. On 5 September, the day before the vote in the Senate, both the Indignados and the trade unions organized parallel demonstrations in Madrid with different slogans calling for a referendum on constitutional reform. Both demonstrations converged in the Puerta del Sol and, as Manuel Castells recounts, one of the protesters carried a placard with an ironic message: ‘Unions, thanks for coming’ (Castells, 2013: 119), which reflected their ambivalent relationship.

The ambivalent nature of the relationship between the unions and 15 M is largely explained by the fact that labour issues are a major concern of the latter. We must not forget that precariousness and unemployment constitute the basis of the discontent that fuels 15 M. It is precisely the labour dimension of this new social movement that leads it to cross swords with the old labour movement

and its past achievements. But it is in relation to the general strike – a confrontational tool characteristic of unions – where the contradictory relationship between 15 M and the main unions becomes readily apparent. Thus, while demanding that unions call for a general strike, they launched proposals such as ‘Take the strike’ or joined the calls made by unions but clearly stating they were not with them, but were ‘at the same time as them’, with their own repertoires of action.

The complex situation of the major trade unions

The first years of the crisis did not result in high levels of social conflict. During its first stage, the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was so strongly supported by UGT and CC.OO that authors such as Redondo (2015) noted that, in this period, major unions lost the autonomy they had gained in the 1990s. However, the situation had changed by May 2010, when the government, following the demands of the European Council and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), launched an ‘austerity’ plan which these bodies claimed would reduce the financial deficit. Major trade unions reacted by breaking off the negotiations on labour market reforms taking place at the time, and the government passed the reforms unilaterally on 6 June. The trade unions CC.OO and UGT called for a general strike on 29 September and thus began a period that has been described as an ‘ambiguous relationship between general strikes and social pacts’ (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011: 400).

Among these pacts, the agreement on pensions that was signed by the major unions and the government on February 2011 should be outlined. It was signed only four months after the general strike, when it seemed that the renewal of social dialogue in Spain would be impossible (Gago, 2014). By signing this agreement, unions accepted, seemingly without significant compensation, the increase of the statutory retirement age from 65 to 67 years, a proposal they had considered unacceptable a few months previously (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011; Gago, 2014). According to Campos Lima and Martín Artiles (2011), the socialist government, business representatives and the major trade unions spent the last months of 2009 and the first half of 2010 negotiating a social pact that ended in failure, mainly due to the opposition of unions to the proposed pension reform. Why did unions sign such a pact, especially after the government’s unilateral imposition of the ‘austerity’ plan?

There are several answers to this question that, together, make clear the difficulties faced by the major unions in balancing their identity as representatives of workers’ interests and their role as responsible social partners in such a critical context. Some researchers consider that, as it seemed out of the question that the IMF would intervene in Spain, the unions intended to reduce the international pressure and thereby prevent more negative social consequences (Campos Lima and Martín Artiles, 2011). Others describe this strategy as ‘a fundamentalist bet in favour of social dialogue’ (Antón, 2012: 87). From this point of view, after the challenge of the general strike, the major unions perceived that continuing with political confrontation entailed the risk of being definitively excluded from social dialogue (Antón, 2012). Thus by means of that agreement unions were seeking to enhance their capacity to participate in longer-term negotiations; that is, to halt the decline of their political influence (González Begega et al., 2013). This effort to maintain social dialogue would determine, to some extent, the course of the unions’ strategies throughout the period in question.

In any case, and despite the observation that the unions’ efforts to maintain their institutional representativeness implied a restraint on protest, the major trade unions were the first social actors who mobilized against the ‘austerity’ measures and labour market ‘reforms’. However, because they were far too absorbed in their own strategies against such government policies, these

organizations did not pay attention to groups who had successfully promoted the mobilization of 15 May 2011. The emergence of the Indignados movement caught the unions by surprise. Some informants highlighted the confusion generated by the protests among the leaders of the major unions:

CC.OO and UGT weren't even aware of the calls for mobilization and 15 days later they were still unaware. A month later they were still saying the same things as PSOE [Partido Socialista y Obrero Español] and PP [Partido Popular]: stand for election if you want to change things. So I think that these people are still not conscious. (Kiko López, Secretary of Social Action de CGT-Andalucía. Interviewed in Seville on 22 June 2014)

However, on 16 May at an ETUC conference, Cándido Méndez, General Secretary of the UGT, spoke in favour of 15 M. He said the protesters were making use of their constitutional right to protest and that this social response was 'logical and predictable' because similar expressions of social discontent had already developed in other countries. At the same time, however, he expressed both his disagreement with the critical attitude towards trade unions displayed by this new movement, and his belief that, as in other countries, new social movements should converge with the unions: 'If this movement solidifies, a process of convergence will occur sooner or later because there is basically much more that unites us than divides us' (UGT, 2011). This union leader expressed the vision of the 15 M movement shared by the main unions at the time: in his own words, 'undoubtedly, the centre of gravity had moved for all', but the weight of the historical legitimacy gained by these organizations and their role as a critical tool to defend the rights of workers and to maintain social stability would eventually put things back in place. This diagnosis is confirmed by an informant, a member of CC.OO:

I have heard CC.OO positions from Andalusia, Seville. There are no specific documents. But what has been said from the institutional sphere is: first, 15 M is not bad at all, second, we are not the same, organizations have their trajectories and 15 M will also have its own, and third, we will see over time how everything turns out, we will see how it develops with time, because it is so diffuse, so ethereal, not like us . . . then we'll see. Not much else in CC.OO. (Antonio Martínez, member of the Executive Board of the Regional Federation of Public of Public Administration of CC.OO. Interview conducted in Seville on 13 June 2014)

In general, and based on this initial assessment of the situation, unions kept following their traditional strategies of collective action. But these strategies were surpassed, first by the strong public support that the 15 M movement had gained, and secondly, by the passing, in February 2012, of the Labour Bill that led to the final rupture of the social dialogue (Baylos, 2012). Both circumstances caused most of unions to undertake a strategic reorientation, the aim being to hold on to the leadership of the social conflict (Köhler et al., 2013). Thus on some occasions the major unions have joined or supported the initiatives of the new social movements or radical unions; on others, they have done exactly the opposite, with the apparent goal of distancing themselves from them. We hypothesize that this erratic strategic behaviour of trade unions was based on fear of a crisis of representation and should be analysed in the context of what is termed a '*forward step strategy*'. This strategy, which has led unions to incorporate new forms of protest from outside their usual repertoire, would not only put pressure on the political powers but also challenge the hegemony of the 15 M movement regarding social mobilization, thus legitimizing the unions in the eyes of their social base and the public.

There are numerous examples that clarify these union proceedings. For instance, there have been initiatives in which there has been a degree of convergence – although questioned by some – between the unions and the mobilization of citizens. This is the case with the so-called ‘Social Summit’ that succeeded in bringing together 150 organizations to form a united front against the cutbacks, headed by CC.OO and UGT. Another example relates to the popular initiative to promote a change in the Mortgage Act, designed and promoted by the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, in which both union federations participated. Furthermore, there have been what has been called *sector tides*, coalitions of workers and users in defence of public services, particularly green (education) and to a lesser extent, the white (health); these also provide examples of collaboration between the unions and the Indignados (Beroud, 2014; Romanos, 2014).

However, there have also been certain demonstrations of suspicion or competition on the part of the major trade unions towards the 15 M movement. To a great extent, this provides evidence of the difficulties experienced by the unions in adapting to a new context in which they have to share their previous monopoly on social protest leadership with new actors.

One example is the call for a general strike in March 2012. On 13 February of that year, Basque nationalist trade unions called for a general strike in the Basque Country and Navarra on 29 March (Expansión, 2012) against the Labour Reform passed – unilaterally – by central government. On 21 February the general secretaries of both major union federations sent a letter to the President demanding the restoration of social dialogue in order to change the Labour Reform (El País, 2012). The government refused to open negotiations and to make substantial changes to the law, so on 9 March 2012, CC.OO and UGT called for a general strike on the same day as the nationalist unions (La Vanguardia, 2012).

From the order of events, it is clear that CC.OO and UGT were led by the initiative of the nationalist unions. The strike of 29 September 2010 set off such an intense media attack on the unions that the leadership of CC.OO and UGT were reluctant to carry out this action, despite the demands of some of its grass-roots and of social movements such as 15 M. Nevertheless, the 2012 strike, and especially the demonstrations that took place in the afternoon, were very successful; the strike was supported by more than three million workers throughout Spain and, according to the Ministry of the Interior, 800,000 people attended the demonstrations. One of the new characteristics of the mobilizations around 29 March was that a good part of 15 M joined the actions of radical unions, such as CGT, SAT or CNT, which created their own coalitions separate from the major unions.

Another example of the ‘step forward strategy’ concerns the uneasy relationship between the main unions and the so-called ‘Dignity Marches’. On 22 March 2014, one of the biggest protests against cutbacks in Spain took place. After several days walking from various locations and passing through hundreds of towns and cities, eight columns of demonstrators entered Madrid demanding ‘bread, houses and work’. According to the organizers, this action gathered two million people, filling up the Colon Square and its surroundings. The protest was organized by the ‘Dignity Marches Platform’, which was launched by the Andalusian nationalist union SAT with the support of several assemblies of 15 M, other radical unions such as CGT and CNT, leftist parties and other civil society organizations. Only the ‘critical sector’ of CC.OO (a faction linked to the Communist Party) publicly manifested its support for the marches. The leaders of CC.OO and UGT remained silent in relation to this massive demonstration, although a good part of its rank-and-file supported it. Not only did they not attend the protests, but also on the eve of the demonstration, Cándido Méndez (UGT) and Ignacio Fernández Toxo (CC.OO) held a meeting with the government in a new attempt to re-establish social dialogue, signing a document that accepted part of the

government's claims about the 'incipient economic recovery'. This behaviour was criticized even within the major unions.

The day after the protest, the only reference that the union leaders made to the marches was to criticize the media debate for focusing on the violent clashes and not on the contents of the demands. Nevertheless, the main response of CC.OO and UGT was to call for a demonstration against austerity policies in several Spanish cities on 3 April. Unlike the Dignity Marches, the demonstration of CC.OO and UGT in Madrid was only supported by a few thousand people. Several days after, in a debate forum organized by a firm of lawyers, the leaders of CC.OO and UGT made a public statement regarding these events. Méndez said: '[As an organization] we are closely integrated in the system. We are representative of the democratic system', whereas Toxo justified himself explaining that the natural spaces of unions were places of work rather than the streets, and that their action was focused more on collective bargaining (Vozpopuli, 2014). Again, the loss of leadership of the social protests led unions to emphasize their institutional role and to distance themselves from 15 M and the radical unions. Despite taking this position, a few months later the major trade unions replicated the same strategy. On 29 November UGT and CC.OO called for a demonstration under the slogan 'Dignity and Rights' against the social and economic policies implemented by the government. Precisely on the same day, the Dignity Marches had previously called for their own protest. On this occasion the major unions publicly showed interest in converging with other social movements (CC.OO, 2014), but did not support formally, nor adhered publicly to the Dignity Marches' call. Because of that, CC.OO and UGT were accused by a spokesperson for the Dignity Marches of tricking them and of trying to take advantage of the popular march to serve their own interests.

Conclusions

The need to act in response to the financial and economic crisis and its dire effects on the working and living conditions of the majority of people, particularly since the emergence of the 15 M movement, has put unprecedented pressure on the major Spanish trade unions, disrupting the (usually complex) balance between their institutional role as social partners and their function as representatives and defenders of workers' interests. Analysis of the trade unions' responses to such challenges has demonstrated the explanatory capacity of Pizzorno's theory, and specifically of the concept of crisis of representation. This helps us to develop an understanding of the strategic behaviour of these organizations when they are involved in political exchange processes in times of crisis.

During the first stages of the crisis, with little leeway for action due to the European pressure on the government, the major unions had little option but to resist. Their strategies were directed more towards maintaining their political influence and their institutional status than to channelling popular discontent. Thus the unions signed an agreement on pensions that eroded key social rights in an effort to avoid open political confrontation. They called for a general strike only when social dialogue had been unilaterally broken off by the government. This course of action fostered the emergence of an 'interpretation lapse' (Pizzorno, 1991: 391) between unions and a large section of society, based on a widespread belief that, because of the extent of their institutionalization and dependence on state resources, UGT and CC.OO had been too indulgent of the government's reform agenda (Molina and Miguélez, 2013).

However, it was not until the emergence of 15 M on 15 May 2011 that the major unions' leaders realized that the interpretation lapse could turn into a crisis of representation, in terms of political representation and mobilization capacity. The emergence of 15 M compelled the major unions to

undertake a strategic reorientation, which soon came to be characterized by doubt and disorientation. 15 M as a social movement gained strong social support and developed a certain degree of affinity with radical unionism, whose demands overlapped with those of the trade unions and competed with them for legitimacy in representing general social interests. In an effort to avoid the crisis of representation, the unions followed a strategy that combined their current role as responsible social partners with an attempt to recover the initiative and leadership of social conflict. This strategy, on the one hand, entailed establishing some distance from the government in order not to be considered its accomplice in the implementation of austerity measures. This went hand in hand with demanding the restoration of social dialogue. On the other hand, the trade unions sometimes disregarded or demonstrated suspicion of the new social movements and radical unions, but sometimes supported their initiatives or even clearly converged with an open oppositional strategy by organizing general strikes and protests. The ambiguous – and even erratic – strategic behaviour of Spanish unions is due to two main reasons: first, it was a result of their efforts to preserve their institutional power and their political influence in the public sphere, in a context in which the government was little predisposed to negotiate; and secondly – and especially – it was a response to the emergence of the 15 M movement, which brought them face to face with a looming crisis of representation. The crisis of social pacts has thus to some extent driven Spanish trade unions to look back at their ‘socio-political’ origins and work on social mobilization in order to develop renewal strategies (Martinez Lucio, 2008).

It is difficult to measure the extent to which the crisis of representation has affected the major trade unions. As Miguélez (1991) has pointed out, there are at least three indicators of trade union representation: (i) the affiliation rate, (ii) the outcomes of union elections and (iii) their mobilization capacity. While it seems clear that the emergence of the 15 M movement has challenged the trade unions’ capacity to speak as representatives of working people and to mobilize them, recent research data related to union elections (Alós et al., 2015) show an uncertain evolution. According to these data, between 2007 and 2012, UGT and CC.OO suffered a slight decrease in their number of representatives (–2.7 per cent for CC.OO and –4.1 per cent for UGT), while the category ‘other trade unions’ saw an increase of 32.2 per cent. The main type of unions within this category which have increased their number of shop stewards are corporatist/yellow unions, which are reluctant to embrace left-wing politics and industrial militancy; however, radical unions have also experienced moderate growth in this regard.

Evidently, the strategic path taken by the major unions has eroded their social power – albeit to a limited extent – and, at the same time, radical unions have reaped the benefits of their active involvement in the mobilization dynamics instigated by the 15 M movement. Nonetheless, this tendency does not mean that the Spanish trade union landscape is going to change significantly. The major trade unions have preserved their hegemony and the core of their sources of social power. The social forces born from 15 M, such as Podemos, have not been able to launch their own trade union for two reasons. First, because competing with major unions would undermine the strategy of the new party in the electoral arena. Some militants have launched a new trade union, called Somos (We are), but it has not received clear support from party leaders. Secondly, trade unionism has its own dynamics (spaces, sources of power, political languages) and problems. Applying strategies designed for the political field to trade unionism is, to a considerable extent, a futile enterprise. The lack of a solid alternative to the major unions in Spain demonstrates this fact.

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