

Dreams, Demands, and the Pragmatic Pitfall: The Barcelona Bus Drivers Strike

Peter Gelderloos

2008

When the bus drivers of Barcelona took to the picket lines under the red and black flag, not seventy years ago but just these past months, it was an occasion for excitement and an opportunity to learn about the relevance of radical syndicalism in a post-industrial world. Catalunya has a culture and history that make it a likely spot for a major anarcho-syndicalist transportation strike, but on the other hand we should not romanticize it so much to imagine it as much different from the rest of the hyper-consumerist, alienated Global North.

The CNT was a major force in Spain and Catalunya in the 1930s, with over a million members and a leading role in the war against fascism. During the Franco years, they played a major role in coordinating the resistance from exile, though according to many they had a moderating, stifling effect, owing to a conservative mentality and their legal status, exacerbated by pressure from the French authorities. Accordingly, most of the anarchist urban guerrillas who fought through those decades against Franco's police did so outside of the CNT. Nonetheless, the weight of their legacy made the CNT a major rallying point for the "insubmission" movement when the fascists cosmetically altered the state into a constitutional monarchy after Franco's death (and the assassination of his handgroomed successor by the Basque group ETA). That movement, though it brought out hundreds of thousands in the streets in what appeared ready to become a revolution, failed, hindered according to some by the moderating effect of the behemoth CNT and according to nearly everyone by a terrorist arson occurring at a key point in the mobilizations, engineered by the military and blamed on the anarchists.

Recently, the CNT has been a tiny force in social struggles, though in parts of Spain they are vital for spreading the memory of social struggles. Recently they were also involved in important strikes among transportation workers in Madrid, and workers of the Mercadona supermarket chain in Catalunya. In 1979 the CNT lost most of its members to a split. A majority formed the more reformist, quietly anarcho-syndicalist CGT. Contrary to CNT principles concerning self-organization, the CGT adopted syndical elections, a legal form that creates committees of representatives from the major unions in a workplace, and guarantees state subsidies.

The CGT still flies the red and black flag, but they are no longer a part of the International Workers Association, owing to the split. They do, however, have clout among the Barcelona bus drivers, and this is where our story begins.

For a long time, the bus drivers were demanding two days of rest a week. They only received one day, with a full weekend off from work only coming to them about once every month. Over the past years the CGT had won several added benefits for the drivers, but never the cherished “dos dies de descans,” two days of rest. In November, 2007, they decided the time had come for a strike. The first strike days came in December, including the days just around Christmas and New Years. But the strike started off with more than just picket lines. People from an entirely different social sector pitched in as well. In general not employed by TMB, the bus company, or by anyone else, they nonetheless got up early in the morning to sabotage buses driven by scabs.

It’s worth explaining how the CGT found this unlikely ally, and who they are: squatters, or autonomists. In principle, the autonomous movement opposes work. Its members squat, dumpster, share, and avoid commodity relationships and the need for money as much as possible. A large part of the anarchists in Barcelona are squatters, and a widespread anti-syndicalist, anti-work critique distances many of them even from the CNT, who are nearer and dearer, for old times’ sake, than the CGT. Nonetheless, there are great feelings of solidarity in the movement, and high connectivity between particular struggles. An important factor in this connectivity is that they all come together in the social centers, mostly squatted, that provide the premiere event space for social movements in Barcelona.

In one case, the CGT helped the squatters of Can Vies, an important social center that has been occupied more than a decade, win their court case against the owner (who happened to be TMB). So when it became known that many striking bus drivers just might appreciate sabotages against scab-driven buses (unfortunately we cannot be more specific about how this was communicated, or by whom, only that there was little presumption and great accountability involved), the squatters obliged, in force. They were bolstered by the guarantee that anyone arrested would be defended, and all legal costs and fines would come out of the strike committee’s war chest.

The CGT had agreed to allow minimum services during the days of the strike, to service neighborhoods without metro or tram access. All other bus lines were targets. The pickets outside the bus depots were quickly cleared by police. Adherence to the strike was between 50–85%, depending on the source. But there was no shortage of scabs, so the morning the strike began, buses began to roll the streets, delayed but not denied. Then something started to happen, still early in the rush hour. Tires mysteriously started leaking (caltrops — four-pronged metal spikes that always land with one side up, would be discovered protruding from them, having been surreptitiously dropped in the way at the previous bus stop). Bandits, masked or disguised, would emerge from the crowd, smash a rearview mirror or paint the windshield, and disappear. In some neighborhoods, particularly Sants, gangs roamed the streets with impunity, searching out buses to stop, sabotage, or even board and evict. In every case, the damage dealt to the bus rendered it, by regulations, inoperable. The best part was, there were only two cranes in the city capable of bringing buses back to the depot.

On the first day, there were forty sabotages — by the strike’s end, a total of around eighty. Other creative tactics emerged as well. The strikers printed out tens of thousands of fake bus tickets, demanding the two days rest, and announcing that the rider would not pay the bus fare during the strike. These tickets were passed out at bus stops around the city, and many of the drivers received them happily. The forceful beginning to the strike was important in demonstrating the bus drivers’ clout and willingness to fight outside the civil parameters that always disadvantage dissidents. But the fake tickets provided a calm, friendly form of subversion that encouraged an easy solidarity from a wide population that would be unwilling to pop tires. There were com-

plaints of major inconveniences to plebian transportation, so the bus drivers obliged with free transportation, accomodating the needs of fellow proles, whom the corporate media were trying to distance from the strikers, and still hurting the profits of TMB. And let's not forget that tactically, encouraging mass illegality is no small contribution to a revolutionary struggle.

Naturally, there was a major media campaign against the selfish strikers, each article featuring one-line interviews with Common People thoroughly disgusted with the individualism of the bus drivers, which had cost them a half hour delay. A necessary part of the strike was counter-information. Bus drivers held talks in social centers throughout the city, and printed out thousands of newspapers explaining the struggle, and their reasons for striking. Walls and bus shelters throughout the city were spraypainted or pasted with posters, calling for solidarity with the strike. .

Though squatters and other supporters helped out a great deal, most of the work for the strike and all the supporting tactics – printing newspapers and fake bus tickets – came from the bus drivers themselves. It was largely a grassroots strike, that made decisions in general assemblies. The CGT supported it, and provided resources and organizational capacity, but it was not their initiative so much as the initiative of the majority of bus drivers, whether members or not. It should be noted that the other major unions, the UGT and CCOO, did not support the strike.

After several more periodic days of strike, the assembly of workers announced an indefinite strike, to begin in mid-April. They had already demonstrated their ability to endure repression, mobilize support, keep even in the propaganda war, cause financial losses to TMB, and slow, if not paralyze, city transportation. Almost immediately after the beginning of the indefinite strike, TMB offered to negotiate, and in a general assembly on April 15 that brought together over a thousand strikers, the drivers voted to accept the offer and declare victory. The offered agreements, which will be finalized in coming discussions, include 26 more days off a year, and more minutes of rest every work day. The 26 days are not the full amount initially demanded by the bus drivers, but they will allow the bus drivers to enjoy a two-day weekend the majority of weeks of the year. In exchange they do not have to give up any pay, nor do they lose any previously won benefits. Also, punitive procedures will be dropped against all 54 workers sanctioned by the company for participation in the strike (this was a major demand).

In meeting short-term goals, developing dynamic tactics, and strengthening relationships of solidarity, the strike was a success. What does it offer the long-term struggle against capitalism. For decades there have been, with good reason, critiques of the conservative influence of labor unions, their role in mediating conflicts with capital, or at worst, capitalizing on these conflicts: selling the obedience of workers to pay the entrance fee for the club of the political elite. In a way, unions do provide employers precise information on how much their employees need to keep working, if not satisfied then at least complacently. You want two days of rest every week. What about three weekends a month. Done deal. The profits keep rolling in, slightly diminished, but the workers go back to the job for the next few years, during which time new ways will be devised to squeeze more money from them and the customers.

A respectful critique of the syndicalist strategy appeared on the front page of Barcelona's anarchist newspaper, *Antisistema*. The article, in issue 13, April 2008, calls for continued solidarity with the strike, but also points out a number of disconnects between the short-term goal of better working conditions and the long-term goal of revolution. "It's not a question of reformism or revolution, the interesting thing is to tighten the cord of social conflictivity, extend solidarity, create consciousness... And while, as noted, the strike did extend solidarity, it seems, and

the authors of the critique agree, that it came at the cost of creating consciousness. Abolishing capitalism through labor struggle requires, among other activities, increasing class conflict and empowering workers step by step, through small victories won in the workplace. But the common approach for a union, and in this case an anarcho-syndicalist union is no different, is to appeal to the masses by making the present demands seem imminently reasonable. *These bus drivers aren't crazy radicals. They're just like you and me. All they want is two days off.* Thus a minimum goal — the next step in a long struggle — is presented as a maximum goal to avoid shocking the Common Person.

Instead of building consciousness, this approach hinders consciousness. The tens of thousands of newspapers and other propaganda handed out all over the city to win support for the strikers did not use the opportunity to even hint at concrete social transformation — the workers eventually taking over the bus company, for example. For anti-capitalists, subverting alienation by appealing to the Common Person is especially problematic since the Common Person is a construct of the mass media, not just a capitalist product but a producer and consumer suited to living in a capitalist society. She is the person quoted in the newspapers complaining about how those selfish strikers made her late for work. She does not want to take over her workplace because that would be a bother. She wants to work for a good salary, go shopping, and watch television.

Why disguise revolution as a modest demand and avoid bold dreams like a politically incorrect plague, when people so clearly want dreams that they buy them from Hollywood. With rising food prices, housing problems, the diminishing value of salaries, there were always be more immediate iniquities to protest and go on strike against, without ever getting closer to worker control. The pragmatic approach is hopelessly unrealistic.

Labor struggles will go on, though they have a decreasingly visible place in information and service economies. Strikes such as the one organized by the Barcelona bus drivers enter into popular consciousness, overcome isolation, and grab the center of attention more than many other conflicts. It is unlikely that labor organizations will play a proactive role in abolishing capitalism, but in the meantime these conflicts can extend solidarity, develop militancy and a strong diversity of tactics, and make social struggles apparent. What is lacking is the ability to spread our criticism of the system at its roots and to spread our dreams for a new world. Doing so may strip us of our disguise as unthreatening, unimaginative Common People, and it may seem an unwise move in a particular campaign. But improving short-term conditions at any cost is entirely different from fighting to improve our lives on the path to a world without capitalism, in which people and communities organize their own lives, free of bosses and politicians. We can see from here that the short road does not get us there.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Peter Gelderloos
Dreams, Demands, and the Pragmatic Pitfall: The Barcelona Bus Drivers Strike
2008

Znet July 22, 2008

theanarchistlibrary.org