

1951: Barcelona general strike



A brief description of social conditions in post-Civil War Spain followed by an account of the Barcelona general strike of 1951. The events in Barcelona led to strikes across the country and signalled the potential for a return to working class combativity in Spain after over a decade of rule under the Franco regime.

The situation of the Spanish working class at the turn of 1950 was a desperate one. Franco's regime had ruled over the country for the last eleven years, and severe conditions fuelled by austerity measures imposed on workers after the end of the Civil War were becoming rapidly worse.

Wages had rapidly decreased since 1939, and the basic cost of living had increased rapidly. Official prices for basic goods quoted by the government showed a 700% increase for many items. Many were forced to turn to the black market for their essentials, where they could expect to pay up to double the official price. Food was rationed, and supplies were woefully inadequate. Starvation was a real problem in rural areas, particularly Andalucia, where 22% of Spain's deaths from deficiency diseases occurred in 1950.

Unemployment in the countryside was endemic; the regime estimated in 1950 that of 3,700,000 peasants and rural labourers only 500,000 were in regular employment. 40% of the land was owned by the church, with the remaining 60% owned by landowners making up 2% of the population. 400,000 people around Madrid were forced to live in caves and mud huts, and 150,000 lived in caves or open fields around Barcelona, with many thousands more sleeping on the streets of the city.

Areas bombed or otherwise damaged during the Civil War had seen no repair work, and two-thirds of the population lived without plumbing or electricity. Tuberculosis rates were the highest in Europe, and it was estimated that 75% of children in Spain suffered from the disease at some point. Illiteracy was also the most widespread in Europe, and many thousands of children hadn't the opportunity to learn even basic reading and writing skills.

The savage repression started in the nationalist zones during the Civil War had continued unabated; hundreds were executed by military tribunals every year, and in 1950 around 200,000 political prisoners were being held in prisons or labour camps.

Political parties and unions, including the anarcho-syndicalist union, the [Confederación Nacional del Trabajo \(CNT\)](#), and its socialist opposite, the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), were banned. Representation in the workplace was confined to the state-run Sindicato Vertical (Vertical Syndicate), the only legal 'trade union' organisation in Spain. Modelled on the 'syndicates' of Mussolini's Italy, they organised both employers and workers in the same structure. Being not much more than a means of ensuring shop floor discipline, the stated function of the Vertical Syndicates was to "succeed in harmonically balancing workers' and employers' interests".

The sole legal party was the FET y de las JONS (Traditionalist Spanish Falange and of the Unions of the National-Syndicalist Offensive), the party formed by Franco during the Civil War which reorganised itself into the Movimiento Nacional in 1949. The [guerrilla campaign](#) waged by isolated bands of militants since the fall of the Republic had been mostly suppressed by 1949. Broken by years of war, repression, and the failure of the armed campaign, working class resistance in most areas had been stamped out.

Underground political activity was not completely absent in Spain however; small socialist and communist groups existed in their former strongholds, and the CNT retained an underground presence in several cities, including Barcelona. But with most of their militants in exile, locked up, or dead, these groups were very weak, and exercised minimal influence outside of these locations.

Both the UGT and CNT had maintained a small presence in the Basque region, and several strikes broke out in factories there in the late 40s. On the whole, these strikes were isolated and easily defeated. One strike in 1947 proved more effective. Started by a walkout of metalworkers and miners in Vizcaya, the incident became a near-general strike when it was joined by other workers in the province. After ten days around 60,000 were on strike, including thousands of workers in the industrial towns of Guipúzcoa province. The authorities were quick to react, and the repression was severe; Vizcaya was placed under a state of siege, 15,000 were dismissed from their jobs, and hundreds arrested. Coordinating action with representatives of influential Basque separatist groups, the unions are known to have played some role during the strike.

Small strikes also took place in other cities in the late 40s, including a strike by 3,000 Madrid taxi drivers at the end of 1949. Limited clandestine organising by workers in Barcelona was going on during this time, and it was this underground activity that contributed to the spread of the general strike in 1951

In February the Barcelona authorities announced a 40% rise in tram fares, from 50 to 70 centimes. The fare rise was due to begin on March 1. Agitation against the rise began immediately, posters calling for a boycott were put up, and protest leaflets protesting the rise were distributed: "Be a good citizen, show your courage. Starting March 1, hoof it to work". Youths took to the streets in the early morning, handing out leaflets and urging workers to join the boycott with chants of: "If you want your morning jolly, stay away from the trolley."

According to figures, around 97% of tram users joined the boycott on the first day, and by March 4 this figure had risen to 99%. The streets were filled with people walking, in some cases several miles, to their workplaces. Tram drivers were mostly on strike, attacks were made on trams still running, and police units were stationed around the city to protect them. Taking it upon himself to set an example for strikebreakers, Governor Baeza Alegria stormed out of a meeting at city hall and boarded a tram, which after several minutes took a wrong turn and drove into a stone barricade.

The boycott was so successful in fact, that hopes held by the authorities of it being broken by the thousands of football fans who would travel to Les Corts stadium on Sunday, March 4,

were completely dashed. After watching their team win 2-1 against Santander, FC Barcelona supporters chose to walk home through pouring rain instead of catching the trams as usual.

Several days later the authorities caved, the tram company had lost 5,000,000 pesetas, and the old fares were reinstated. It was also announced that 70 people arrested during the boycott would be released.

The damage had already been done though, and preparations to turn the boycott into a strike to protest more general grievances were already underway. A manifesto calling for a strike had been distributed on March 4, and a meeting held two days later by political and union elements, including those in the lower ranks of the Vertical Syndicates, had decided on a date of March 12.

Beginning in the textile mills of the Pueblo Nuevo area, the strike quickly spread to involve workers in metallurgical and chemical plants, communications, construction, government workers, and taxi and tram drivers. 300,000 workers had joined the strike, including many in the nearby cities of Badalona, Sabadell, Tarrasa and Mataro.

Initially bewildered by the success of the strike, the authorities again mobilised thousands of police and Civil Guard units. Troops were deployed, and four warships carrying hundreds of marines were docked in Barcelona harbour. Demonstrations and clashes took place across the city, and thousands of strikers were arrested and imprisoned for the duration of the strike.

As well as acting as a general protest against the regime, other demands were put forward included wage increases, and a reduction in the cost of living.

Despite Barcelona having been turned into an armed camp, the strikers managed to hold out for fourteen days, after which most workers returned to their jobs. Terrified by the prospect of further unrest, the authorities released the vast majority of those arrested, and ordered employers to pay full wages to those who had been on strike. Although little was done to meet the strikers' demands, the encouragement given by the strike to workers across the country was significant, and the continual outbreak of further disturbances plagued the regime in the following months.

Several weeks after the end of the general strike, disturbances again flared up in the Basque region, especially in Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa, echoing the strike of 1947. In late April a general strike took place in Bilbao, involving some 250,000 workers from docks, arms plants, metal factories, and textile plants. Strikes also broke out in the Navarre region around this time; a large strike occurred in Pamplona during which workers attacked the Falange party headquarters. Strikes of transport workers occurred in Madrid during May, as did further boycotts.

The strike in Barcelona heralded a turn in the tide for working class organisation in Spain. From the mid-50s workers in many industrial areas had organised into Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO, Workers' Commissions), which began to operate more or less openly in factories under the guidance of the Spanish Communist Party. Dogged shop-floor organising by the CC.OO, and to a lesser extent the UGT, led directly to the dramatic walkouts and general strikes of the 1970s, which took place through Franco's death, the eventual collapse of the regime, and the transition of Spain to a liberal democracy which culminated in the June elections of 1977 and the formation of a constitution the following year.