

## “They don’t represent us!” Opportunities for a Social Movement Unionism Strategy in Spain

## “Ils ne nous représentent pas!” Nouvelles possibilités pour un syndicalisme de mouvement social en Espagne

## “¡ No nos representan !”. Oportunidades para una estrategia de Sindicalismo de Movimiento Social en España

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Résumé de l'article

Notre but est d'analyser les stratégies de renouveau syndical qui ont obtenu du succès ailleurs et qui sont susceptibles d'en avoir en Espagne. Dans le cadre de ces nouvelles pratiques, le « syndicalisme de mouvement social » se centre sur des alliances avec d'autres groupes sociaux afin d'accroître son efficacité. À l'intérieur de cet article, nous étudions la possibilité d'appliquer les principes du « syndicalisme de mouvement social » au contexte particulier de l'Espagne. Étant donné les transformations de l'économie espagnole et de ses lois du travail orientées de plus en plus vers une déréglementation, les syndicats du pays ont dû réagir. L'émergence de nouveaux mouvements sociaux, tels les indignés (*Indignados*) et les *Mareas Ciudadanas* (marées citoyennes visant la démocratie participative) ainsi que la diminution de la confiance dans les unions par la population d'Espagne, ont rendu pertinente cette approche nouvelle.

Dans cet article, nous nous attarderons à certains aspects du débat sur le renouveau du syndicalisme et les comparerons avec les principales théories sur les nouveaux mouvements sociaux. Nous désirons appliquer ces approches à une étude spécifique de cas : la viabilité de la coopération entre les grandes centrales syndicales espagnoles et les récents mouvements sociaux émergent des mouvements d'indignés (*Indignados*).

À cette fin, nous utiliserons des données secondaires sur le mouvement syndical ainsi que des transcriptions d'entrevues effectuées avec des syndicalistes et des activistes des nouveaux mouvements sociaux. En prenant en considération la totalité de ces éléments, nous concluons en soulevant tant les facteurs peu propices, que les conditions favorables au développement d'un « syndicalisme de mouvement social » pour les acteurs concernés.

# “They don’t represent us!” Opportunities for a Social Movement Unionism Strategy in Spain

Holm-Detlev Köhler and José Pablo Calleja Jiménez

**Unions have been forced to reinvent themselves in order to survive. Despite differences between regions, unions are undergoing crisis and change worldwide. In the Anglo-Saxon area, the experience of considerable deregulation, within the framework of a free market economy, has led unions to implement new strategies such as social movement unionism. There is evidence that Spanish unions can enhance their power and influence by cooperating with social movements once traditional ways of union action have shown to be inefficient. However, this requires profound change in union culture and organization.**

**KEYWORDS: trade union revitalization, trade union power sources, new social movements, trade unions in Spain, trade union strategies.**

## Introduction

Spanish unions are an outstanding example for the Latin or Mediterranean union model, which is traditionally considered to be confrontational but has recently become increasingly institutionalized and integrated into corporatist structures (Visser, 1998). Over the past two decades, while other national union movements have been looking for ways to stop their decline, Spanish unions have been “politically” revitalized from government through institutional integration and concertation (Hamann and Martinez-Lucio, 2003: 63). Since 2008, the economic crisis has hit the Spanish economy extremely hard and fostered a political response that is undermining many of the social and political institutions that had been stabilizing Spanish society since the democratic transition in the late 1970s. One of the most prominent victims of this neo-liberal crisis management is the institutional power of unions. Thus, the weakness of other power sources makes the search for new union strategies an urgent issue among Spanish workers’ organizations wishing to move forward.

However, the causes of the economic recession and its political management have also fostered new social movements (NSMs) with innovative mobilization and protest practices that challenge established politics. Many of the feelings of outrage in the population were channeled through these NSMs, the most important being the *Indignados* movement that emerged in 2011. Since then, this movement has been changing deeply and inspiring other NSMs as well as social and political organizations, which have acquired considerable prominence.

Given these developments, we believe that a union revitalization strategy in the form of Social Movement Unionism (SMU) is a suitable although difficult and risky strategy for highly institutionalized workers' organizations. Our general hypothesis is based on the assumption that an SMU strategy has important potential for revitalizing Spanish trade unions in the current context but faces huge implementation barriers from both the unions and the social movements.

The aim of this article is to analyze what factors facilitate or impede the adoption of an SMU strategy by the major Spanish unions CCOO and UGT.<sup>1</sup> To this end, we also try to bring out possible courses of action for the Spanish unions in their search for alternative strategies. The article begins by stating the theoretical framework on union revitalization strategies, highlighting the SMU strategy and adding some notes about the debate on old and new social movements. Then, we will address the key features of the Spanish unions and the challenges that their organizations are facing, as well as the primary characteristics of the NSMs that have emerged from the economic crisis. After the methodological notes, we will analyze the relationship between both actors (Unions and NSMs) in search of alternative sources of union power leading to the development of an SMU strategy. The facilitating and inhibiting factors identified will be brought out as a conclusion.

## Theoretical Framework

### Union Revitalization Strategies

In most Western countries, trade unions are losing members and power (Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Visser, 2002, 2006). Spain is no exception, and its principal trade union confederations are also facing declining density and influence (Hamann and Martinez-Lucio, 2003; Richards, 2008; Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2008). The experience of trade union decline at the end of the past century gave rise to the academic stream of trade union revitalization studies, first in the Anglo-Saxon context (Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998; Fairbrother, 2000; Milkman and Voss, 2004; Phelan, 2007) and then spreading to other European countries (Pernot, 2005; Hoffmann, 2006; Dörre, 2011). For more than 15 years, researchers have been debating trade union revitalization strategies and their

adjustment to different industrial relations systems (Baccaro *et al.*, 2003; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013).

Reversing union decline implies regaining its social base and its economic and political influence. However, this understanding of union revitalization has different meanings and implications, depending on the context. Thus, in Anglo-Saxon countries, union revitalization usually involves the recruitment of new membership groups, networking and community participation structures at different levels (Moody, 1997; Fairbrother *et al.*, 2007). In continental Europe, the role played by regulatory institutions in coordinating market economies determine the structure and functions of trade unions (Crouch, 1993). As a result, in many institutionalized systems of industrial relations, union revitalization tends to use a compendium of strategies based on specific institutional and organizational characteristics (Senén and Del Bono, 2013). These strategies involve, in all cases, increasing political and union activism at different levels, although when institutional support is greater, the incentive to increase activism, recruitment and mobilization is lower (Baccaro *et al.*, 2003).

Capital-labour relations are structurally asymmetrical with the state tending to support the interests of capital, depending on its resources (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1980). This situation is even more evident in times of economic recession. In this context, union power as the ability to put pressure in favour of their interests is weakened. According to Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013: 30-31), trade unions have four traditional power sources at their disposal:

1. Structural: Possessing scarce skills or occupying strategic positions in the production process.
2. Associational: Membership, willingness to pay.
3. Organizational: Unity to collectively support its policies, willingness to act.
4. Institutional: Legislative support, administration for social welfare, tripartite corporatism, etc.

Regarding revitalization strategies in times of crisis and weakness, these traditional power sources require three complementary sources:

1. Moral: Transmitting a mission and identity to achieve social justice.
2. Collaborative or coalitional: Seeking for allies and sharing resources.
3. Strategic: Intelligent use of scarce resources.

## **Social Movement Unionism**

Emerging among scholars of labour movements in newly industrializing countries (South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, etc.) in the mid-1980s and extended to northern industrialized countries a decade later (von Holdt, 2002: 284), SMU

is the most common concept in the literature on union revitalization and, in our view, the most appropriate regarding the past experience of Spanish trade unions and their current challenges.

Our concept of SMU as an innovative revitalization strategy requires and combines the three complementary power sources. It has been frequently argued that unions need to reconvert into social movements (Frege *et al.*, 2004: 137) by expanding their objectives and including the interests of workers, not only as employees but also as citizens. To this end, unions must change their discourse, include new values and causes, form coalitions with social movements and strengthen their complementary power sources. This strategic reorientation is by no means unknown to them as it forms part of their traditional repertoire.

SMU as a union revitalization strategy primarily requires a change in the orientation of collective action. Trade unions assume a role of social movement for social change focused on the interests of the working class and extended to other issues of citizenship (gender, ecology, democracy, ...). It is an appropriate approach to contemporary challenges in broadening and enriching the role of the labour movement (Waterman, 1993). To achieve this, all components of the unions have to assume an active role in the social and political arena. This implies forming alliances with other social movements, embracing their causes, giving them a class orientation and a strategic approach to the most vulnerable and exploited social groups (Moody, 1997: 59). Thus, unions will be perceived as a "sword of justice" rather than defending "vested interest" (Flanders (1970: 15). To achieve the goals of union revitalization and to develop the particular strategy of SMU, the quality of union democracy is essential (Moody, 1997; Dibben *et al.*, 2004; Lévesque *et al.*, 2005).

SMU, as a strategy of social transformation, implies an increased conflict orientation (Byford, 2009: 42). Situations of crisis where established rules and class compromises are abandoned lead to an escalation of conflict and mobilization (Kelly, 1998: 86). Adopting a more confrontational line of action as part of a revitalization strategy is justified by the increasingly hostile environment in which unions have to operate (Turner, 2005: 395). This conflict orientation, alternatively, requires renouncing the stability of an insider organization and institutional embeddedness.

## **New Social Movements**

Since the 1970s, a new theoretical strand in the social sciences has emerged, considering NSMs as a key factor in social transformation. In this non-reductionist approach, the struggles of workers represent just one among various socio-political struggles of citizens (Waterman, 1993). According to Slater (1985: 6-7), the NSMs are characterized by the following: a- developing new forms of

struggle in response to new forms of oppression; b- autonomy, dissolution of the ‘representation of interest’ model, and creating a new revolutionary subjectivity with new forms of struggle and expression not necessarily anti-capitalist or linked to working conditions; and c- the importance given to the power of grassroots people.

Within the school of thought coined by Mathers, “New Social Democratic Left” (2007: 9), a particular dichotomy between old social movements (OSMs) and NSMs is presented. The transformation of the labour movement into an OSM started in the middle of the twentieth century with the traditional workers’ organizations adopting an increasingly instrumental role, relegating social transformation objectives to the political sphere and concentrating on institutional and bureaucratic processes. NSMs are explained within that strand within the framework of the post-industrial paradigm (Touraine, 1971; Gorz, 1982; Castells, 2004) or second modernity (Beck, 1992; Offe, 1985; Habermas, 1987).

**TABLE 1**  
**Differences between OSMs and NSMs**

	<b>Old Social Movements</b>	<b>New Social Movements</b>
Ideology and goals	Labour rights Economic redistribution Materialist goals	Identity & life-style concerns Quality of democracy Post-materialist goals
Tactics	Institutional Action	Anti-institutional Direct Action
Structure	Centralized Formal/Bureaucratic Hierarchical	Decentralized Informal Non-Hierarchical
Participants	Class-Based	Cross-Class

**Spanish Trade Unions: Characteristics and Challenges**

Broadly speaking, the structure of the Spanish union movement is characterized by a low union density, approximately 19% of the workforce, based on the ECVT (2010),<sup>2</sup> the existence of extension clauses in collective agreements (to declare them generally binding) and a legal framework that promotes trade union concentration in a few publicly supported confederations. Thus, the collective bargaining coverage extends to 70% of all employees and is primarily provided by the two major Spanish trade union confederations UGT and CCOO, which together represent approximately 76% of the delegates elected in workplace elections (Beneyto, 2010: 12). Both organizations’ activities are strongly focused on the election process because the results determine their public funding and institutional participation. Many other union organizations exist but only

gain representation in specific regions, companies or sectors. Recently, UGT and CCOO have maintained a top level political unity of action that becomes more competitive at lower levels, usually due to electoral competition. Both organizations are union confederations with a dual structure that includes geographical areas (region, city) and economic sectors. The former is primarily responsible for socio-political affairs, whereas the latter performs union activity on work-related affairs at sector and firm level, including collective bargaining. This duality is not free from tensions and internal conflicts due to the different interests involved.

Based on Hyman's (2001) terminology, the socialist UGT and former communist CCOO are class-based unions with a deliberate political influence orientation that makes them highly dependent on social support and mobilization capacity. Both became independent from their respective political parties in the late 1980s. The relative success of this union model in the early years of this century, along with a favourable economic environment and growing employment, encouraged the Spanish unions to rely heavily on their institutional power. However, this kind of power is fragile in the absence of other elements, and Spanish unions have a large disconnect between their associative and organizational power and their institutional power. Some authors point out that this institutional power is constructed "politically" and does not necessarily mean more influence (Hamann and Martinez-Lucio, 2003: 63).

The economic crisis starting in 2008 hit the vulnerable Spanish economy particularly hard and was dealt with by the successive governments through neoliberal policies following the orthodox guidelines of the 'Troika' (European Commission, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund). Trade unions are thus affected by the new policy priorities involving control of public deficit and cutbacks in social services and labour costs in order to regain productivity and attract foreign investment ('internal devaluation'). The institutional union power is further reduced through labour market reform acts that foster the decentralization of collective bargaining towards the firm level (Köhler and Calleja, 2013: 15) and a reduction of political concertation (Nogueira *et al.*, 2015). Inertia and lack of strategic reorientation in the Spanish unions shift the model from a "neo-corporatist concertation" to "headline concertation" in response to external factors and unstable relations (Avdagic *et al.*, 2005: 8).

Spanish unions passively watched the erosion of their membership bases while getting organizational resources from the government, generating a feeling of a lack of representativeness among Spanish society. Union density is concentrated in the public sectors and some industries where strong federations hold the capacity to use confederal power in their own interests. Union leadership follows the tradition of pale, male and stale, whereas public confidence in union organizations is dramatically low. In the last CIS<sup>3</sup> survey on public confidence in

institutions, unions ranked the third worst among sixteen (CIS, 2013: 7). In this regard, unions are only better evaluated than political parties and the government. The institutional role played by the unions leads Spanish society to identify them as insiders or as part of the political system in a moment of great political disaffection.

Spanish unions are facing great and diverse challenges at both internal (membership, structure, democracy, representation) and external levels (relationship with society and other institutions). To continue being a relevant actor in Spanish society, they depend on a degree of success in confronting those challenges. Pointedly, they should transform their constant internal debates about the future of unionism into real actions leading to effective changes. So far, as Gago says, the Spanish unions represent the image of a captain that refuses to abandon his sinking ship called “concertation” (Gago, 2013: 1100).

### **The *Indignados* Movement**

During 2011, many social protest movements emerged in various countries and political systems. Similar to all of these protest cycles, the Spanish *Indignados*<sup>4</sup> movement presents a number of distinctive features. Following Steinko’s approach, the best way to understand the *Indignados* movement is to combine the deeper tendencies that configure new political subjects with the social and political conjunctures that triggered the protest (Steinko, 2011: 2-3). With regard to the above mentioned tendencies, they highlight a widespread feeling of frustration among the younger population with low expectations of personal and professional development despite their high levels of education and training. High youth unemployment and the growing precariousness of labour conditions in all occupational categories available for young workers are a daily reality. In the Spanish economic system, innovation and high value-added production are abandoned in favour of low-track sectors. The continuing rise of housing prices due to speculation prevents emancipation or involves a high level of long-term personal debt with mortgages being totally out of sync with salary levels. Although young people are not the only ones affected, they are the most exposed. Moreover, the de-facto bipartisan political system between *PP* (Popular Party) and *PSOE* (Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party) generates a widespread feeling of frustration because both of them have applied neo-liberalism measures, often against their programs and ideological principles.

Therefore, a latent feeling of indignation has existed for several years, especially among youth. The situation got worse with the economic recession and exploded with the austerity measures stressed by the governments to manage the crisis. Beyond the fact that collective indignation was shared by a significant part of society, what generated particular mobilization was the government’s financial



support for banking companies which were seen as responsible for the economic recession. This scenario led to a mobilization convened by several civil society groups and intellectuals, organized in the *Democracia Real Ya* (Real Democracy Now) platform for May 15, 2011. The outrage expressed that day, followed by the repressive actions and hostile attitude against the mobilization by public authorities, led to the development of the *Indignados* movement. Approximately one hundred camps were set up soon after in several public squares all over the country and received worldwide attention.

However, more than four years after it was launched, the *Indignados* movement has changed significantly. The camps have long been abandoned and there are still some gatherings but in different places and ways. A lack of coordination and a certain desire for autonomy led the *Indignados* movement to establish new forms of organization. The movement still has a permanent presence on virtual networks that have been an essential tool for both the formation of the movement and its development.

## After *Indignados* Movement

The movement has changed but still retains some of its original methods of convening power. In this section, we address briefly some initiatives and organizations that are inspired from the movement and, in some cases, participated in the remains of the *Indignados* movement. These developments will be useful for further discussion on the possibilities of an SMU strategy in Spain.

The initial refusal to create stable structures and participate in politics by the general *Indignados* movement has also changed, and some groups have formed political organizations with the objective of political regeneration. They are normally minority options, but a newly created party *Podemos* (We can) is now the third political force in Spain with 22.5% of voter intention, according to a recent survey (CIS, 2014), creating a political pluralism unknown for decades. Although they do not consider themselves to be the heirs of the *Indignados* movement, both share some leading members and their primary source of popular support: indignation against conventional political parties, their neoliberal policies and certain characteristics of the constitutional system. With regard to the latter, we can include the institutional role of the trade unions, to the extent that this political party wants to set up an alternative union. With this new union, *Somos* (We are), they claim to displace the UGT and CCOO which, as they say, have moved away from the workers (ECD, 2014).

Austerity policies, which favour cuts in public spending, have led to a civil response in the form of *Mareas Ciudadanas* (Civic Tides). The defense of universal public services is considered to be so important that the different social

movements and unions come together in protest actions. Some defeats, as well as important victories such as the withdrawal of public health privatization plans in Madrid, have popularized these coordinated actions since they emerged in 2012.

In May 2014, the alternative regional union *Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores* (Andalusian Workers Union) called for the *Marchas por la Dignidad* (Marches for Dignity). Many *Indignados*-related groups responded by organizing and taking part in protest marches across the country, which ended in a massive demonstration in Madrid and motivated further calls for *Marchas*. Disagreement between this NSM and the largest unions was evident. The former called for a general strike on October 22, 2015. This is the first national general strike in the history of modern Spanish democracy that has not been called by the UGT or CCOO. However, several other smaller unions, generally anti-capitalists or anarchists, are integrated in the *Marchas por la Dignidad* movement.

Many businesses have closed down since the onset of the financial and economic crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Spanish workers have been laid off. In the past few years, an increase in worker self-management of industrial disputes has been observed at the expense of the traditional union leadership. Thus, affected workers organized and developed support networks within the community, including assemblies of the unemployed. As an example, in the Asturias region, workers in 17 companies affected by layoffs set up a platform that achieved strong social support and were able to put pressure on employers and public institutions. Against all odds, the platform is achieving a degree of success in their demands, including the subrogation of workers or viability plans for companies with a firm decision to close (Collado, 2015).

Perhaps the primary social contribution of the *Indignados* movement experience has been to guide citizen's indignation through a popular expression of dissatisfaction with a deep democratic sense, creating more stable organizations and demanding reforms and changes to advance in social cohesion and inclusion. In this regard, other forms of protest and ways to express political disaffection based on anti-democratic and authoritarian approaches have been avoided thus far.

## Methods

Our methodology involved a qualitative case study approach. Exploratory single-case studies are the dominant method in social sciences used to study a variety of complex and interacting variables in a concrete and singular historical context. Spanish trade unions and their relationships with emerging new social movements are considered to be a case for SMU as a strategy for trade union re-

vitalization. Based on the prevailing literature on social research methods (George and Bennet, 2005; Silverman, 2011; Yin, 2013), case studies are appropriate for in-depth studies of emerging social processes.

Our aim is to identify the different and often contradictory factors that facilitate or hinder the use of an SMU strategy in the Spanish case. In particular, we analyze the complex relationships among the major trade unions and the NSMs which have emerged since the onset of the economic recession in 2008. We thus combine content analysis, the strategies of the actors involved, with context analysis, the environmental factors influencing strategies and outcome, and with process analysis, the dynamics that underlie the interactions and responses of the different actors involved. The research design corresponds to a single case-study, although it is controlled through continuous references to other similar cases documented in the literature.

Spain is a particularly interesting case for studying the potential of SMU for several reasons. First, Spanish unionism constitutes a remarkable example for the Latin or Mediterranean union model. Second, the economic crisis is challenging the stability of the institutional system, and the integrated unions are losing power dramatically. Third, new social and political movements are also challenging the established political and union organizations. Therefore, unions have to react and face the challenges with strategic thinking. Thus, our general hypothesis and guideline for the fieldwork are based on the assumption that, in the current context, an SMU strategy is pertinent and has the potential to revitalize Spanish unionism. However, important differences exist among actors that need to be considered in order to evaluate the feasibility of this strategy.

The main research method used is in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives, militants of Spanish trade unions and NSMs at different levels. Additional information was obtained through other research methods used to triangulate and verify the information collected. These methods include exploring the websites of the actors involved (trade unions and social movements) and the relevant information in the media. Based on George and Bennett (2005), our approach may be called theory-oriented analytic induction, using the reflexive abilities and "practical consciousness" (Hamel, 1998: 4) of our interviewees.

This grounded research will contribute to the theoretical and empirical debate on union revitalization and social movement unionism. Our case study aims to be simultaneously intrinsic (contributing to a better understanding of the Spanish case) and collective (contributing to a better understanding and theorizing about the general phenomenon SMU) (Stake, 1994).

## Analysis: Possibilities of Developing a SMU Strategy

To analyze the SMU strategy between the largest trade unions and the post-*Indignados* movements, we will use Hyman's proposal relating to complementary sources of union power (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 31). We consider that all three complementary sources (moral, coalitional and strategic) are a prior requirement and mutually support each other in the development of an SMU strategy.

### Moral (or discursive)

A first step towards SMU is to become a "sword of justice" (Flanders, 1970: 15) again and demonstrate that unions are democratic organizations sharing the objective of a better society. This is not unknown for the main Spanish unions, as CCOO began as a social movement against the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975) and later converted into a union. "The fight against Franco's regime was made by CCOO as a socio-political movement including a plurality of ideological options. Then, in 1976, they decided to transform into a union because UGT was strongly supported by German social democracy.<sup>5</sup> The demergers started just then" (Activist 1).<sup>6</sup>

Currently, unions are associated with defending the "vested interests" (*ibid.*) of stable workers and easy-to-organize sectors. "This unionism model is outdated. I've been working for many years and I've never had a type of contract that allows me to vote in union elections" (Activist 2). Pointing to union institutionalization, another added: "The substantive issue is to understand why unions participated in the institutions, why they participated in something that is now seen as so negative" (Activist 3). Proponents of NSMs are very critical about the Spanish union model and place its origin in the consensus norms of the transition to the democracy period. "The fighting capacity from the base was lost since the Organic Law of Union Freedom (1985).<sup>7</sup> Since then, unions have been only concerned with the results of union elections" (Activist 2). The representativeness obtained determines access to public resources whereas grievances over the lack of representation among many groups of workers (temporary, part-time, young, immigrant, small companies, precarious) are very common. "Those who do not fit into the types of workers that the union represents... Who represents us?" (Activist 4). Representation and functions conducted by unions are questioned and the abandonment of the unemployed is criticized.

A generational problem affects the present and the future of the unions. Unions are seen as being for older people. "They are like a kind of gerontocracy (...). Taking into account the current level of youth unemployment, they are not seen as something that can help you" (Activist 5). The image of union elites does

not help to change this social perception. "It is striking that a union like CCOO has people who still come from the democratic transition in their main positions. This demonstrates the extent of disconnection with young people. They are from another reality, from another planet" (Activist 2). The union discourse is also viewed as outdated and needing renewal. "I think that the language of the traditional unions is not fresh and is often guided by the defense of particular interests... our movement tries to be more cross-sectorial and defends the general interests" (Activist 5).

In defending themselves from these accusations, unions refer to their main source of power: their institutional participation. "What is this about us only caring about employed people? ...are we not taking care of precarious or unemployed people? Who made the proposal for subsidy for people without income? UGT and CCOO signed it with the government" (Unionist 1). The electoral success is used as reinforcement: "There must be something we are doing right as we are in all the bargaining tables because we systematically win the elections" (Unionist 2). Regarding representativeness and participation, a union argues: "We have a youth section within the organization and each union has more than a million members, many more than any political party" (Unionist 2).

Union officials are worried about the poor image of their organizations, blaming right-wing media. "Radical left-wing critics are using the same arguments to discredit unions than the right-wing spokesmen" (Unionist 3). However, continued corruption scandals involving UGT and CCOO officials do nothing but confirm the critics. "People who insult them know of what they are talking about. It can't be corruption scandals in the unions; they should fear their own mates more than the judges" (Activist 6).

## Coalition-building

SMU strategy implies expanding union objectives. The traditional way of doing this is building coalitions with other organizations and social movements. This secondary union method used to complement the primary methods defined by the Webbs (1897) requires pursuing common goals through ad-hoc, intermittent or continuous activity. Unions are often opportunistic in their search for coalitions because they want to have access to some coalition partner resources: access to physical and financial resources and to new groups, expertise, legitimacy and mobilization (Frege et al., 2004: 138-140).

Coalition-building can be a powerful tool to counteract the vision of pursuing narrow objectives, but collaboration is a difficult task and normally starts with mutual mistrust (Kloosterboer, 2007: 56). That shared feeling was very apparent in the first stages of the *Indignados* movement: "We have noted that unions

are exploiting the situation to regain credibility (...), but the movement wants to claim a purity that unions lack... What are you doing here?...you have done nothing until now" (Activist 5). The development of the *Indignados* movement does not mean the end of initial mistrust. The post-*Indignados* movement wants to remain in an outsider role as they are not looking for either recognition or institutional participation. Meanwhile, UGT and CCOO want to follow the institutional rules to which they are accustomed. Coalitions arise normally among partners in similar positions, giving rise to coalitions of protest (outsiders) or coalitions of influence (insiders) (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2013: 146).

The weakening of the unions' institutional position generates an ambiguity and leads them to an eclectic form of coalitions of protest, participating in some social protest movements, but preferring institutional representation channels in other situations. This ambiguity is not new, and Spanish unions have been using mobilization and protest to complement their institutional role on a regular basis. "Remaining in a unionism of protest might look very good, but it does nothing useful" (Unionist 2). However, the social movements do not accept this ambiguity and identify unions clearly with an insider role. "What do they want unity for? To facilitate their bargaining?" (Activist 2).

Tattersal (2005: 97) classifies types of coalition between unions and other organizations: ad-hoc, support, mutual support and deep coalition. The last one corresponds to an SMU strategy. Unions do not want to lose the potential for a coalition strategy. In this regard, in July 2012, the *Cumbre Social* (Social Summit) was established by the major unions and more than 150 civil organizations to develop actions of resistance against government policies. Over the following years, several actions against the cutbacks were conducted by the Social Summit with the major unions playing a leading role. In connection with the latter, we can categorize the *Cumbre Social* as a support coalition. "The *Cumbre Social* are unions and its supporters (...); a more combative unionism is needed, a unionism in which everyone feels integrated, especially the more disadvantaged" (Activist 1).

A combative trade unionism is praised by this social movement. Paradoxically, the conflict in the mining sector in 2012 received huge support from the *Indignados* movement, although the miners' unions are part of CCOO and UGT. "There is no problem there, they are seen as part of us because they are doing what is needed to be done... go to the streets and fight" (Activist 5). In this particular case, as Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman argue, radical forms of action do not mean that the objectives are also radical; rather, it may mean desperation (2013: 125).

Not without tensions, the *Mareas Ciudadanas* (Civic Tides) movement, started in 2012, has been a space shared by unions and movements. The Civic Tides are a horizontal, inclusive and open movement to defend public services and they are against the cutbacks in social expenditure. In this case, we identify a coalition

with aspects of a deep coalition but which lacks some elements of organizational change. Unions have an important membership base among public employees, and the defense of the quality of public services is shared with social movements. In their innovative forms of protest (flashmob, theatre, human chains surrounding public equipment, etc.) and demonstrations, common identity is not expressed by organizations but by the color of the Tide. "Political organizations and unions have been unable to provide quick solutions, and many of their members are taking part in the Mareas Ciudadanas (...). Differences lie in the way action is conceived. The pyramidal structure is rejected (...) and priority is given to participation with the additional aim to address problems swiftly and powerfully" (Activist 7).

## Strategic

Converting threats into opportunities requires thinking and strategic skills. A more effective and efficient use of old and new forms of collective action within the framework of strategically developed goals is required. The main Spanish unions have called for a total of 10 general strikes in the democratic period. Since the onset of the crisis and the neoliberal reforms, three general strikes were organized without any influence on the government's position. "What are the effects of a strike now? ... historically, they were useful but maybe now they are less" (Unionist 1).

Low membership and labour fragmentation create discordance between the union as an organization (low) and their institutional power (medium and declining). A major part of the population does not feel that unions are representative. "The motto of 'they don't represent us' is not only directed at political parties but also at unions" (Activist 5). Incorporating underrepresented groups of workers into union membership should be a priority. The *Organizing* experiences, adapted to the Spanish context, could do well in some situations.

Rejuvenating the union is very important, as well as incorporating union members who participate in social movements. This would increase the possibilities of making coalitions (Frege *et al.*, 2004: 145): "The rejuvenation of the union will not be achieved by creating a youth section, it will be achieved by having young union officials (...) this will improve the union because young people experience other labour realities" (Activist 8).

There is an ongoing internal debate among Spanish unions between the (normally young) advocates of strategic reorientation and the (normally old) union elites who generally aim at regaining institutional power. As the institutional role is changing, unions are increasingly perceived, both by employers and governments, as obstacles to reforms to improve competitiveness (Hassel, 2012: 4). This includes greater weakness in the government's regulation function and, as a consequence, the institutional role is eroding. Thus, competition over union

election results is losing its significance, thereby freeing up time and energy for other useful strategies and actions. However, this requires important discussions, transformations and also conflicts (internal and external). “The balance might be to bring people together who have the feeling that change is possible but who do not have the tools to accomplish it and people who have those tools but have lost the feeling that change is possible. This can be achieved, but its hard work, very hard work” (Activist 8).

## Conclusion

Spanish unions are losing influence as they suffer from a deterioration of their institutional and social legitimacy. With other sources of power neglected over the last two decades, the social and political effects of the economic crisis are becoming a major challenge for their future role. The outbreak of NSMs expressing popular indignation about the causes and consequences of the crisis has acquired great social and political importance. This situation provides an opportunity for and a serious threat to Spanish unions. The opportunity comes from the possibility of developing revitalization strategies such as the SMU approach, whereas the threat is related to the possibility that these NSMs may displace or marginalize unions, thus contributing to their decline (Köhler *et al.*, 2013).

The facilitating and inhibiting factors that have been identified in this study are summarized below.

In light of the factors identified, the adoption of an SMU strategy by Spanish trade unions and NSMs seems to be a very difficult task. Without any doubt, the rejection of public expenditure cuts and other neoconservative reforms has

**TABLE 2**

### **Facilitators of a SMU Strategy in Spain**

#### **Facilitators**

- Existence of a common set of grievances and demands.
- Social support of NSMs and growing political influence.
- Social climate against the cuts and defense of public services.
- Strategic position of trade unions in the labour world.
- Existing platforms and some successful coalition experiences (the civic tides).
- Versatility and innovation in the NSMs.
- Organizations and people working within both actors that can create bridges of trust.
- Government actions to erode union power and to discredit NSMs.
- Growing social feelings about the importance of workers' resistance due to massive unemployment and precarization.
- Existing debates in trade unions about their challenges and future.
- More moderate positions in the NSMs and development of recognizable organizational structures.



**TABLE 3**

**Inhibitors of a SMU Strategy in Spain**

**Inhibitors**

- Rejection of the institutionalization of unions by the NSMs.
- Leadership attitude and organizational inertia by union elites.
- Different organizational, communication and decision-making styles.
- Minority unions estranged with majority unions working closely with NSMs.
- Hidden competition between UGT and CCOO.
- Different sociological profiles between union officials/members and working class.
- Heterogeneity and lack of coordination among NSMs.
- Unions are large and pyramidal organizations that depend on public funding, whereas NSMs are autonomous and horizontal.
- Different collective action styles (classic vs. innovative)
- Different coalition-building objectives: coalitions of protest (NSMs) vs. coalitions of influence (unions)
- Tensions and power imbalance within the unions caused by its dual structure (political and sectoral)
- Poor social image in connection with recent union activity and aggravated by several corruption scandals.
- Fear of manipulation and instrumentalization (NSMs) vs. the idea that NSMs are not reliable partners (unions)
- NSMs' actions against unions (call for general strike, new union, etc.)
- Growth of the self-management of labour disputes

brought both actors closer, but an alliance is complicated due to the existence of important differential factors. To move forward and make an alliance possible, more substantial changes are required. In the case of NSMs, at least some degree of coordination and stability is needed to allow for long-term cooperation. Trade unions will have to carry out in-depth transformation, including organizational, communicative, cultural and strategic changes. Their commitment to institutional participation should be revised due to the government's neoliberal shift and the social rejection that collaboration currently causes. The recent involvement of the two major unions in several corruption affairs is an urgent problem, and one of the main reasons for the emergence of NSMs was indignation against corruption. Incorporating new personal and labour profiles and more internal democracy is also required. Inter-union competition among majority and minority organizations and between the two main unions is a further obstacle to their revitalization towards SMU. This competition, sometimes enmity, is blocking the development of more efficient strategies in many traditional fields of union action.

Social unrest and the upsurge of new and diverse social and political protest movements during the economic downturn and against the neoliberal crisis management have opened new spaces and possibilities for civil society organizations in Spain. Trade unions are called upon to use these new possibilities for an effective revitalization strategy and to overcome their accumulated organizational diseases.

## Notes

- 1 CCOO and UGT are acronyms of *Comisiones Obreras* (Workers' Commissions) and *Unión General de Trabajadores* (General Workers' Union).
- 2 Quality of Working Life Survey - *Encuesta de Calidad de Vida en el Trabajo* (ECVT). It is considered to be the most reliable source of union density in Spain among other labour-related issues. It has not been carried out since 2010 due to budget cuts.
- 3 The surveys carried out by the Sociological Research Centre - *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS) are the primary means to measure Spanish public opinion (2500 interviews, margin of error +/- 1.9 points and confidence level of 95.5%).
- 4 The movement took the name in reference to the book *Indignez-vous!* published by Stéphane Hessel.
- 5 He referred to the financial and organizational support received by the socialist organizations UGT and PSOE during their democratic transition from the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the social democratic party (SPD) and the trade union confederation (DGB).
- 6 In this article, members of NSMs are called "Activists" while union representatives are called "Unionists".
- 7 This law establishes a general "representativeness" criterion based on workplace elections, according to which trade unions that have over 10 per cent of delegates nationwide (UGT and CCOO) or in an "autonomous community" (federal state) over 15 per cent of the delegates (ELA-STV and LAB in the Basque Country, CIG in Galicia) have a general right to enter into collective agreements, have the right to representation in public institutions and have access to certain state subsidies.

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## SUMMARY

### "They don't represent us!" Opportunities for a Social Movement Unionism Strategy in Spain

Our goal is to analyze strategies of union revitalization that have been successful elsewhere and have the potential to become so in Spain. Within these practices, Social Movement Unionism focuses on alliances with other groups to improve unions' social efficiency. In this article, we address the applicability of the principles of Social Movement Unionism in the specific case of Spain. Given the transformations in the Spanish economy and labour laws tending towards further deregulation, Spanish unions have had to react. The emergence of new social movements such as the *Indignados* or *Mareas Ciudadanas* (civic tides) and the declining confidence in unions among the Spanish population, make this approach timely and appropriate.

For this article, we will take certain aspects from the trade union revitalization debate and combine them with the main theories on New Social Movements. We will apply these approaches to a specific case study: The viability of cooperation between the largest Spanish trade unions and the recent social movements arising from the *Indignados* movement. For this purpose, we will primarily use data

from secondary sources and transcripts of interviews conducted with unionists and social movement activists. With all these elements taken into consideration, we will conclude by showing the inhibiting and facilitating conditions for the development of a Social Movement Unionism strategy for the referred actors.

KEYWORDS: trade union revitalization; trade union power sources; new social movements; trade unions in Spain; trade union strategies.

## RÉSUMÉ

### “Ils ne nous représentent pas!” Nouvelles possibilités pour un syndicalisme de mouvement social en Espagne

Notre but est d'analyser les stratégies de renouveau syndical qui ont obtenu du succès ailleurs et qui sont susceptibles d'en avoir en Espagne. Dans le cadre de ces nouvelles pratiques, le « syndicalisme de mouvement social » se centre sur des alliances avec d'autres groupes sociaux afin d'accroître son efficacité. À l'intérieur de cet article, nous étudions la possibilité d'appliquer les principes du « syndicalisme de mouvement social » au contexte particulier de l'Espagne. Étant donné les transformations de l'économie espagnole et de ses lois du travail orientées de plus en plus vers une déréglementation, les syndicats du pays ont dû réagir. L'émergence de nouveaux mouvements sociaux, tels les indignés (*Indignados*) et les *Mareas Ciudadanas* (marées citoyennes visant la démocratie participative) ainsi que la diminution de la confiance dans les unions par la population d'Espagne, ont rendu pertinente cette approche nouvelle.

Dans cet article, nous nous attarderons à certains aspects du débat sur le renouveau du syndicalisme et les comparerons avec les principales théories sur les nouveaux mouvements sociaux. Nous désirons appliquer ces approches à une étude spécifique de cas : la viabilité de la coopération entre les grandes centrales syndicales espagnoles et les récents mouvements sociaux émergent des mouvements d'indignés (*Indignados*).

À cette fin, nous utiliserons des données secondaires sur le mouvement syndical ainsi que des transcriptions d'entrevues effectuées avec des syndicalistes et des activistes des nouveaux mouvements sociaux. En prenant en considération la totalité de ces éléments, nous concluons en soulevant tant les facteurs peu propices, que les conditions favorables au développement d'un « syndicalisme de mouvement social » pour les acteurs concernés.

MOTS-CLÉS : syndicats, Espagne, stratégies, renouveau syndical, nouveaux mouvements sociaux, sources d'influence.

## RESUMEN

### "¡No nos representan!". Oportunidades para una estrategia de Sindicalismo de Movimiento Social en España

Nuestro propósito es analizar aquellas estrategias de revitalización sindical que han sido exitosas en otros lugares y que tienen el potencial de serlo en España. Dentro de estas prácticas, el Sindicalismo de Movimiento Social se caracteriza por establecer alianzas con otros grupos sociales para aumentar la eficiencia del sindicato. En este artículo abordamos la aplicabilidad de los principios del Sindicalismo de Movimiento Social a la especificidad del contexto español. Las transformaciones recientes en la situación económica y en la legislación laboral, encaminadas a una mayor desregulación, deben provocar una reacción de los sindicatos españoles. La eclosión de nuevos movimientos sociales como el de los Indignados o las Mareas Ciudadanas, unida a la creciente desconfianza de la población española en los sindicatos, hacen que nuestro planteamiento sea pertinente y oportuno.

En este artículo tomaremos ciertos aspectos del debate sobre revitalización sindical y los combinaremos con las principales teorías sobre los nuevos movimientos sociales. Queremos aplicar estos enfoques al estudio de un caso específico: La viabilidad de una posible cooperación entre los principales sindicatos españoles y los recientes movimientos sociales surgidos en torno a los Indignados. Con esta finalidad, utilizaremos información de fuentes secundarias y transcripciones de entrevistas con sindicalistas y activistas de movimientos sociales. Una vez tomados en consideración todos los elementos, concluiremos el artículo mostrando las condiciones que dificultan y favorecen el desarrollo de una estrategia de Sindicalismo de Movimiento Social por parte de ambos actores.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** sindicatos, España, estrategias, revitalización sindical, nuevos movimientos sociales, fuentes de influencia.