

“IN MOVEMENT. NEW PLAYERS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEMOCRACY IN SPAIN, 1962 – 1977”¹.

**Damián González
Óscar Martín García.**

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE POLITICAL CHANGE TOWARDS DEMOCRACY²

The democratisation processes which took place at the end of the last century, first and foremost in Southern Europe and Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently in Eastern Europe, have been the object of numerous conceptualisations and generalisations in social science studies. Although for obvious reasons we cannot dwell on the rich theoretical debate regarding the processes involved in the transitions to democracy, it is important to highlight that in addition to the neo-institutionalist approach, in which the rationalisation of authority and structural differentiation formed the basis of democracy, some specialised literature has viewed the spread of civic culture and moderate political participation as a condition which favoured the establishment of democratic systems (Eisendstadt 1965). Along similar lines, other authors inspired by the works of Lipset (1960) have deemed democracy to be the inevitable result of economic development processes and social modernisation. Such theories have, however, been criticised as mechanistic and ahistorical by certain analyses which claim that “transitions are produced by actors who choose strategies that lead to change from one kind of regimen to another” (Karl and Schmitter 1991: 273)

For such approaches, the Spanish case has been presented as the “very model of the modern elite settlement” (Gunther 1992: 134). According to this theory, it was the elites, in particular those belonging to the more liberal sectors of the Franco regime, which – within the sphere of high politics and guided by their predisposition to form pacts and reach consensus – managed almost virtuously to adapt the political structures to the country’s level of social and economic development. This analytical pillar forms the basis of the most widespread interpretation of the transition to democracy as a

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“work of political engineering or craftsmanship”. Yet although this version examines some of the most important factors required to understand the process of political change, it does not, however, pay too much attention, as Threlfall (2008: 937) points out, to the “capacity for agency from civil society organizations”.³ In fact, although there is no doubt that democracy arrived in Spain by means of a negotiated transition initiated and controlled by reformists within the Franco regime, it must not be forgotten that the negotiations and pacts among elites which made up the new democratic institutional framework in Spain were preceded and influenced, as we will attempt to demonstrate here, by relentless social pressure. This took the form of working-class unrest and disputes organised by certain social movements which managed to introduce their main claims and demands, in addition to influencing the preparation of the political agenda of the transition (Balfour 1994). In broad terms, this is the argument put forward in important works by authors such as Fishman (1990, 2004), Balfour (1989) and Foweraker (1989). These have served as theoretical and methodological works of reference for new approaches which question the leading interpretations, which focus on the role of the elites, on the political transition towards democracy in Spain.⁴

Along these lines, in recent times studies in the field of social history have acquired greater importance in the history of the transition. However, protests led by different collectives from the less industrialised and less developed provinces of the country have generally “been pushed into the background if not openly ignored by specialised historiographical studies carried out in recent years” (Cobo and Ortega 2003: 113). For that reason, the aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between social unrest and political change through the study of the provinces of Albacete and Ciudad Real which, a priori, were considered to be socially and politically inactive due to important structural factors. As we will attempt to demonstrate below, the analysis of popular mobilisation in provinces in which the effects of socioeconomic development were more limited enables a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of the dynamics from below which were fundamental in Spain’s transition process.

³ In fact, it has almost become a tradition, as Fishman (2007: 2) states, for contemporary analysts of Spanish politics to observe “political protest with much less significance than other themes located squarely within the realm of institutionalized power”.

⁴ See, among others, Gallego (2008); Sartorius and Sabio (2007) and Ortiz Heras (2008).

A study of this kind is also relevant because although changes in the authoritarian structure of Spain fall within what Huntington describes as the *global democratic revolution* experienced by a considerable number of countries during the last three decades of the previous century, international factors – although important – are not enough to explain the Spanish process, in which local and regional dynamics played a very important role. This factor enables us to demonstrate how the wave of protests and discontent was strong enough to allow it to spread from the industrial and urban zones (where the unrest started) to include other less developed, more deprived areas where conditions were less favourable for dissent. Cases of inland provinces such as Albacete and Ciudad Real illustrate the geographical and socio-professional extent of the discontent, and also the correlation between the general struggle for political power and the protests which emerged locally in rural society. In short, the following pages will attempt to explain the mobilisation mechanisms in provinces which illustrate the social and territorial spread of a conflict which made it impossible for the dictatorship to survive.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the social unrest which took place in Albacete and Ciudad Real between 1962 and 1977 was led mainly by the Spanish Communist Party (PCE in its Spanish initials), just as it was in the rest of the country. In both these provinces, communist activists participated in and indeed led workers' protests against the official trade union system. During the 1960s, the occupation of public space by the "old" working class movement gradually opened up new opportunities and decreased the repression. This favoured the appearance of new social players for whom the recovery of democratic freedom was a fundamental aspect of their demands. Such movements were also promoted by communist militants in these provinces who – in collaboration with Catholics, independent activists and extreme left-wing militants – helped to act as a driving force behind the cultural scene through their presence in non-conformist student and youth groups. They also encouraged the formation of neighbourhood associations which opposed the local authorities of the Franco regime and became involved in professional associations (of health workers, teachers, lawyers, civil servants etc.). Lastly, they introduced the cooperative movement to the farming community and organised Farmers' Commissions (*Comisiones Campesinas*) opposed to the agricultural structures imposed by the dictatorship. Thus, in

addition to the PCE's determination to take advantage of any social front to express their democratic social and political claims, the majority of social players acknowledged the need for a "workers' vanguard" which, led by the communists, would become the fundamental reference point for protest against Franco's regime. However, it is a well-known fact that by the 1960s, the PCE's strategy no longer involved a proletarian revolution, but instead subordinated this to the democratisation of the State through the alliance of workers and the reformist middle classes. The result, as Álvarez Junco (2001) points out, was the emergence during this period of a social movement subject to the political needs of the struggle against Franco, while the traditional demands of the working class movement were marked by the democratic culture promoted by the new social movements. This political burden which, due to the survival of the authoritarian regime, characterised collective action during the last years of the Franco regime, linked social mobilisation directly with democratic change in a dialectical process which was not only noticeable in urban and industrial areas, but also, as explained below, in rural provinces and less developed areas of Spain.

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL. PUERTOLLANO AND THE STRIKES OF 1962.

The wave of strikes which took place during 1962 marked the start of a long period of protest which continued over the next two decades and which changed the physiognomy, geography, organisation and range of the protests. From that moment onwards a social struggle began in Spain which centred on particular sectors, industries and local areas. It also marked the start of a conflict which, although not in general the expression of a clash of ideologies, was based on the defence of specific, intimate, everyday interests of certain groups. Thus, the unrest which existed during the final part of the dictatorship was deeply rooted in the desperate needs of ordinary people who suffered the most destructive effects of the economic miracle on a daily basis, in addition to the contradictions of social change and the repressive forces of Franco's dictatorship. However, although the social opposition which developed in the 1960s was not inherently revolutionary, it did spread a growing "oil slick" of conflicts and unrest which, despite not overthrowing the Franco regime, did manage to severely wear it down.

The strikes of 1962 began in the coalfields of Asturias, from where they spread to other mining areas of the country such as the city of Puertollano, located in the backward, rural, agricultural province of Ciudad Real. The strike reached the mineshafts of Puertollano on Wednesday 9th May, when work came to a halt in two companies, *ENCASO* and *SMMP*. Over a ten-day period the strike managed to mobilise twelve thousand workers. Civil government reports from 1962 described what happened “as practically a general strike” which spread across the whole region and paralysed businesses, transport services, municipal services, etc. (Ortiz Heras 2002). The unrest witnessed during that turbulent month of May paralysed the mines and brought to light new organisational structures and forms which originated in the informal networks of sociability and solidarity forged during the day-to-day work at the mine. That is how the socio-political movement of the Workers’ Commissions (*Comisiones Obreras*) came about in Puertollano. It was a movement which, through the mobilisation of workers, proved to be an effective means of defending the working class and fighting against the authoritarian structure of the Franco regime. In the years that followed, the Workers’ Commissions efficiently carried out the work of a trade union thanks to their plurality, flexibility and skill at incorporating illegal activities into the open, public work carried out legally by means of Franco’s official trade union platform.

The major social unrest, unheard of since the civil war, which took place in the coal-mining area of Puertollano after the strike of 1962 also led to the growth of local political organisations opposed to the dictatorship. This in turn led to new protests by more politically active vanguards mainly related to the PCE. Activists from the party represented a minority of clandestine activists intent on mobilising society and causing political unrest, responsible for what the authorities condemned as the “underhand, subversive preparation” of the majority of labour disputes. Through their daily commitment to the problems of the mine, these activists managed to set up networks and create flows of solidarity with a membership which, despite its informal nature, was nevertheless increasingly prepared to mobilise in order to defend its interests. According to the official trade union, the members were the victims of “outside influences”.⁵

⁵ Provincial Deputy Secretariat of Social Organisation (VPOS), “Antecedentes sobre el parte reservado correspondiente al mes de enero de 1964”, Provincial Historical Archive of Ciudad Real (AHPCR), Institutional Administration of Socio-Professional Services (AISS), Folder 55.

Thus, by means of an upward process which began at the foundations of the social movement and rose to the organisational structures of the party, the development of the Workers' Commissions, which in Puertollano were mainly made up of communist activists, as a means of expressing social demands hastened the configuration of the organs of the PCE in the city and nearby villages. On 25th July 1962, the Regional Committee of the PCE was formed, mainly made up of miners from *SMMP* and workers from *ENCASO*, and 15th September saw the creation of the regional division of the Union of Young Communists of Spain (González Madrid 2008). By the mid 1960s, the PCE of Puertollano had around fifty activists. It was then habitual for activists to be involved in both organisations, therefore providing the party with the human, strategic and ideological resources necessary for the development and consolidation of the Workers' Commissions.

During the strikes of 1962, the spread of solidarity played an essential role in extending the protest from the mines of Asturias to many other parts of the country. What the local authorities referred to as a "rare harmony" among workers from different places was a sign of solidarity based on a collective identity. This led the miners of Puertollano to recognise the problems of their fellow Asturians as their own. One example was the message "LONG LIVE THE STRIKE IN ASTURIAS" which was painted on one wall of the city. Thus, public displays of working-class identity through solidarity reflected the politicisation of the conflict, as the repressive attitude of the governors gave political importance to the class position. Hence, despite the fact that after the strike of 1962 a rising working-class movement appeared in Puertollano which was made up of an emergent generation of young activists and based on new mobilisation structures, the source of the spread of solidarity mentioned above continued to lie in the working-class mining culture. This tradition survived in the everyday life of the workplace and neighbourhoods despite the repression that this mining town suffered after the civil war. Although historical studies have tended to portray tradition and innovation as antithetical terms when used to refer to the formation of working-class identity during the last part of Franco's regime, it is important not to lose sight of links with past traditions and cultures from previous periods of mobilisation. It is therefore debatable whether the working-class movement and its struggle during the final stages of Franco's dictatorship should be portrayed, as it usually is, merely as social turmoil, as

the reflection of deep socioeconomic changes which had no past, no roots and no socio-cultural references.

The identity of the working class of this period was not built upon a vacuum. Spanish workers did not create their own experiences without previous reference guidelines. Neither the deep socioeconomic changes of the 1960s, nor the restructuring plans, nor post-war repression managed to fully erase the cognitive traditions of social, economic and political struggle which took root over more than a third of a century among the miners of Puertollano. Little attention has perhaps been paid to the fact that “conceptual and discursive transformations”, beyond isolated ideological statements, were less vulnerable to repression than class-based organisational structures, as they were preserved through contacts with former activists in the working-class neighbourhoods of the city, in the heart of clandestine organisations, in family stories, in classes on the history of the working-class movement in the halls of Catholic movements, etc. Just like the everyday practices of resistance and the reproduction of dissident subcultures described by Scott (1990) in some of his works, these confined spaces and everyday, informal networks kept alive “the cognitive traditions required to rekindle activism following a period of inactivity within the movement” (Sewell 1994: 96). Such traditions acted as “reserves of cultural components which successive generations of activists can use to form movements with similar ideologies despite being separated by time” (McAdam 2001: 52). It can therefore be suggested that through this continuity a certain “amount of past experience” was present in the speeches and images on which collective identity and solidarity was based and which gave meaning and legitimacy to the strike of May 1962 and the subsequent protests which continued until the end of the dictatorship (Laraña 1999).

The strikes of 1962 were followed by months of appeasement and a decline in social unrest. However, in 1964 mobilisations of considerable importance again took place in Puertollano which led to the break out of some highly politicised strikes both in *SMMP* and in *ENCASO* which lasted several weeks. During these strikes, along with lockouts and dozens of miners being sacked, the workers expressed their “complete lack of faith” in the official trade union representatives and their support for the “Workers’

Commissions because people think they would be more effective”.⁶ Moreover, in the mid 1960s the workers of Puertollano showed that they were willing to take to the streets and take control of public spaces by means of demonstrations and gatherings, such as those which in 1964 ended with shouts of “FREEDOM” and “NO TO THE DEATH PENALTY”. Likewise, as from 1962, the First of May was celebrated with gatherings in Rincona Park in which workers, as occurred in 1968, demanded “our rights, work for the unemployed and freedom for all”.⁷ These years also witnessed an increase in the number of mass meetings of the working class organised in the countryside and in places outside the city, such as San Agustín’s hill, to avoid being seen by the police. This therefore highlighted the flexibility and variety of collective action which was not limited to traditional strikes or “silent” individual conflict.

This range of collective action also included activities within the scope of the law, although in this case it had other objectives in mind. In fact, working-class activists did not miss the opportunity to take part in and influence the trade unions of the Franco regime through the union elections. From the early 1960s, in an attempt to revitalise official trade unionism, Franco’s dictatorship promoted greater levels of representation and allowed the direct, yet closely controlled, election of certain workers’ representatives. This represented a “change in the framework of opportunities and expectations” in the mobilisation of the working class (Gómez Roda 2004). Thus, the “entry” strategy begun by communist and Christian activists of the Workers’ Commissions was given a tremendous boost by the union elections of 1966. In Puertollano, just like in the more industrialised areas of the country, the Workers’ Commissions set out to take over the core trade union structures. They gained control of the workers’ councils of *ENCASO* and *SMMP* and the Chairmanship and Deputy Chairmanship of the Social Section of the Fuel Union, positions from which they organised and mobilised workers in defence of their interests and, as a result of the rigidity of the social and labour regulations of Franco’s regime, in the struggle to achieve greater trade union and political rights.

⁶ VPOS, “Antecedentes sobre el parte reservado correspondiente al mes de noviembre 1964” and “Acta de presidentes de las secciones sociales del sindicato provincial y de la COSA”, May 1964, AHPCR, AISS, Folders 55 and 715.

⁷ Workers’ Commission of Puertollano, “A los trabajadores y al pueblo de Puertollano”, 27th April, 1968, in AHPCR, Civil Government (GC), Folder 1058. Ortiz and Sánchez (1993).

VILLAMALEA, THE RED VILLAGE.

The tendency of Spanish social history to regard the collective players of the last part of the dictatorship as a by-product of an urban and industrial modernisation process which spread of its own accord and at its own rhythm has led to a certain degree of historiographical marginalisation when it comes to evaluating the contribution of agricultural and rural collectives to the democratic construction process. However, in the province of Albacete, as in many other places in less industrialised, poor, rural, agrarian areas of Spain, there is one village, namely Villamalea, which is exemplary because of its determined resistance to Franco's dictatorship. The example of this village was probably an exception, but the same cannot be said of the latent discontent among rural sectors and groups of farmers in the provinces of Albacete and Ciudad Real in light of the ineffectiveness of the Farmers' Associations (*Hermandades de Labradores*), the official trade union organisations for farm workers. On occasions, this latent discontent rose to the surface in the form of open conflict, as was the case in some small villages in La Mancha such as Cenizate, Bonete, Montealegre and El Bonillo due to land reparcelling or in Higuera and Pozohondo due to a dispute with the authorities regarding the use of common, public woodland.

In the village of Villamalea, in the mid 1950s a faction of young communists who had not lived through the civil war and who had been less affected than their ancestors by post-war repression, sought to "rise above the surface in any way possible, since working in secret prevented us from exerting any influence". Encouraged by the new strategies adopted by the leadership of the PCE, they began to infiltrate the local political, economic and trade union institutions of the Franco regime in order to "defend the economic interests of agricultural workers and create a mass movement" (Sanz 2003: 280). Thus in 1961, they took over the leadership of the San Antonio Abad Wine-Producing Cooperative, which from then on became a "scouting party for the struggle" and "a mobilisation platform for the Party through which it channelled its protests".⁸ In time, this cooperative became the "symbol of the agricultural workers' struggle and their political, economic and social confrontation with institutions and the Franco regime". According to an informant of the PCE who travelled through the area in 1970,

⁸ According to the testimony of Julián Gómez, who lived in Villamalea and was an activist in the PCE (2007), Seminary of Studies on Francoism and the Transition (SEFT), University of Castile-La Mancha (UCLM).

in Villamalea the “centre of all economic, social and political life is the cooperative, which began some years ago with a few dozen members but which now groups together a thousand farming families”.⁹

The fact that the cooperative was controlled by members of the opposition enabled them to infiltrate and “colonise” other local institutions. The social and political influence that the opposition acquired through the cooperative meant that in consecutive elections in 1966, 1971 and 1975, the candidacies headed by communists and other local people committed to the farmers’ movement managed to win the chairmanship, with the exception of 1975, of the Farmers’ Association and take control of the association’s social section. The only local institution which managed to resist the “entry” strategy led by the communists was the Town Hall. Only the varied and numerous obstacles imposed by the Civil Governor managed to keep activists from the farmers’ movement out of municipal power in the elections which took place in 1971 and 1976. However, so strong and prolonged was the tempest that the opposition unleashed on the Town Hall that it was continually discredited and lost its influence on the social, economic and political life of the community.

The extent to which groups have access to power determines the type and level of collective action that they undertake, as well as the authorities’ willingness to repress their activities (Tilly 1998). The fact that the communists of Villamalea controlled various local institutions meant that they used mainly legal means. They were represented, in the words of a PCE report, by “the driving force behind all this work”, namely the farmer Enrique López Carrasco, who was Chairman of the Cooperative, the Farmers’ Association, the Rural Savings Bank (*Caja Rural*) and a member of various different provincial committees and organisations. He was a farmer who, according to the report “knows how to combine legal and illicit work, although he mainly uses legal means.” Through the legal struggle carried out by communists and other sectors of the village, social and political control was taken of the official organisations, not in order to channel or spread discontent, but instead for the exact opposite, as platforms to defend the interests of farm workers and to encourage demonstrations. Thus, the pragmatic use of resources provided by official organisations represented a “mechanism

⁹ “Villamalea. Ref. OA/17. C-20-4-70. Informe de Carlos”, 20th April. Historical Archive of the PCE (AHPCE), Nationalities and Regions, Provincial Committee of Albacete, file 67, 5/3.

which sometimes makes it possible for villages which are oppressed or lacking resources to overcome their organisational shortcomings” (McAdam 2005: 48).

This open, legal public struggle was supplemented by clandestine activism involving activities which were not allowed under Franco’s legal system such as meetings, the distribution of propaganda, strikes, demonstrations, etc. As a result of this activism within the opposition movement, the early 1970s witnessed the birth of the Farmers’ Commissions, which represented the transfer of the Workers’ Commission movement of the factories to rural, farm working areas. According to the police, these groups or committees of farmers and small landowners worked together with the PCE, sometimes “supporting national campaigns to provoke unrest and at other times taking advantage of everyday friction between the administration and its subjects”.¹⁰ In turn, anti-Franco activism and political unrest increased as a result of the resources provided by the open, legal struggle carried out within the framework of the cooperative and other institutions. Thus, if from the late 1950s onwards the local committee of the PCE in Villamalea was never dismantled, nor was its composition ever revealed, that was because the clandestine nature of this village was tightly interwoven with the legal activities carried out.

Control of the Cooperative and the Rural Savings Bank, together with participation in the official trade union structures of the Farmers’ Association, provided the opposition activists in Villamalea with legal cover and, more importantly, the possibility of offering a considerable number of farmers access to agricultural subsidies, low-interest loans, the possibility of negotiating prices and labour conditions, all of which had a decisive impact on their living conditions. Thus, the main protests were associated with the real needs of the residents and instead of following any particular ideological model, instead basically defended the interests of the majority of small landowners and farmers who lived within an authoritarian framework and did not have any true union rights. In this respect, the PCE activists in Villamalea managed, on a day-to-day basis, to combine social and political aspects through work in the cooperative and the trade union at grass-roots level, thus consolidating the political strategy of the party and increasing active politicisation against the dictatorship.¹¹

¹⁰ Civil Government of Albacete, “Memoria del Gobierno Civil”, 1972, Historical Archive of the Province of Albacete (AHPA), Civil Government (GC), book, no reference number.

¹¹ “Villamalea. Ref. OA/17. -C- 20-4-70. Informe de Carlos”, 20th April 1970.

The leaders of the farmers' movement took advantage of "everything that could be done by the institutions of the regime to help the people".¹² Thus, through work carried out openly within the framework of these institutions, the PCE established a network of social services which affected areas outside the reach of the Town Hall, for instance the library, the Rural Savings Bank, the Robert Owen company store, the theatre club, a bar, the Friends of UNESCO Club, etc. As a result, over almost two decades the PCE set up and consolidated tightly-knit local solidarity networks which, at the same time as the good social results strengthened the party, created a sense of community identity based on collective action. That is why Villamalea was soon known as "the red village".

This collective identity found a public outlet in a leisure context at the hugely popular Grape Harvest Festivals. Organised by the cooperative, the festivals represented "nothing more or less than another pretext to continue making demands", to continue distancing people from the official institutions and to protest. Ever since they began in the 1960s they were always very well attended and enjoyed popular support. Despite being modest celebrations, they were characterised by "comradeship, camaraderie and joy: everyone in the village looked forward to the first days of September so we could celebrate the festival".¹³ Many people from the village took part in the popular festivities and decorated floats with signs such as "DOWN WITH FRAUD, LONG LIVE AGRICULTURE!", "NO TO MONOPOLIES, YES TO COOPERATIVES" and "WHAT WITH THE WEATHER AND THE GOVERNMENT, FARMERS ARE DYING." During the festivities in 1976, the tractors which were used as floats displayed slogans which were closely linked to the current political affairs of the country, such as one which demanded a "UNITARY TRADE UNION" or another which proposed the following: "SOLUTION: THE BREAK OUT OF DEMOCRACY".¹⁴

Based around the Cooperative and the other institutions, the mobilisation structures provided by the organisation of the local PCE took preference over the informal structures of the community itself, which developed their considerable protest capacity based on experiences of reciprocal action in the areas of neighbourhood and

¹² According to the testimony of Joaquín Fernández and José García, both of whom lived in Villamalea and were Communist Party members (2007), SEFT, UCLM.

¹³ According to the testimony of Julián Gómez (2007), SEFT, UCLM.

¹⁴ According to the testimony of Joaquín Fernández (2007), SEFT, UCLM.

labour relations. In this respect, the Grape Harvest Festival represented an opportunity to ritualise expressions of social unease and political criticism, in addition to strengthening feelings of solidarity and highlighting the identity of a community strongly attached to its cooperative and to the defence of the general interests of the village. For that reason it is no surprise that the authorities of Franco's regime either tried to put an end to the festivities, water them down within the framework of other religious festivities or impose sanctions on the organisers. That was precisely what happened when the civil governor fined the chairman of the cooperative for having "programmed and held the aforementioned festivities and infringed the regulations leading to a serious breach of the peace and social order by holding meetings, demonstrations and parades without prior permission (...) in order to create unease in the community and express your disagreement with the current political situation" (Sanz 2003: 280).

The strength of the solidarity networks and community identity forged in Villamalea in the 1960s and 1970s was highlighted during the long confrontation (1972–1975) between the Cooperative and the Ministry of Agriculture over the Obligatory Wine Delivery (*Entrega Vínica Obligatoria*). The authorities responded to the cooperative's refusal to give part of the grape harvest to the government by imposing sanctions which provoked a long, bitter conflict. During this conflict the mass meetings held by farmers took on a leading role, to such an extent that they became the main means of mobilising and organising workers during those years. These mass meetings acted as a dynamic link between the cooperative and the residents, in addition to being a means of democratically ratifying all the decisions taken, which helped to legitimise the struggle among the people of the village and strengthen the signs of solidarity. The meetings, which were attended by more and more people and became increasingly radical in 1975, were "a democratic training ground for the village", but they also managed to energise and politicise informal interaction and everyday social relationships in the various different social circles of the village. As one report said, the "atmosphere in the village is highly politicised and in everyday conversations instead of talking about football, it is quite common to hear people discussing local, national and international problems with the same passion".¹⁵ Finally, faced with the farmers' and

¹⁵ "Villamalea. Ref. OA/17. -C- 20-4-70. Informe de Carlos", 20th April 1970.

the cooperative's determination not to pay, the government was forced to give in. Thus, not even a long-running dispute managed to break the solidarity networks that existed in the community. If anything, it deepened their resistance and increased their democratic awareness.

The open militancy and constant, tangible commitment to the problems of the village and its farmers enabled the leaders of the movement to enjoy the warmth, recognition and trust of the residents.¹⁶ These types of links created as a result of the conflict and of living together on a daily basis enabled an important change to take place in the way society viewed the repression. If in previous decades the government's violence had affected unknown factions of clandestine activists, during the 1960s and 1970s the threat of such violence affected workers who, with realistic and responsible determination, openly defended farmers' interests by perfectly legal means such as the Cooperative, the Rural Savings Bank and the Farmers' Association. It was possible that any attempt to silence those who had won the trust and support of the majority of residents would eventually degenerate into a politicised and even radicalised conflict. In this respect it is worth mentioning some public disturbances which took place in 1976 which were reminiscent of traditional riots and for which some of the movement's leaders were arrested for taking part in mass meetings, strikes, etc. For example, after the arrest of some people attending a speech during the Grape Harvest Festival in 1976, almost two hundred people shouting "FREE THE PRISONERS" surrounded the police station until those arrested were set free some hours later. Two months later, in November 1976, the police arrested various demonstrators who were taken to the police station in Villamalea, but "in light of the somewhat agitated behaviour of the people", they had to be "transferred to the headquarters of the Civil Guard in Albacete" where they were put in solitary confinement.¹⁷ In short, the situation reached a point in Villamalea in which, as a result of open conflict, it was impossible to repress the opposition without causing mobilisations which strengthened the movement. A good example of this is the proactive nature of the collective players and their ability, over

¹⁶ In the words of one communist activist of the time "we were normal, politically committed people who had nothing to do with the image that the regime had created in people's minds of thieving, murderous communists. In Villamalea that was all thrown overboard because we were normal people who worked like everybody else. We drank our beers and took part in everything...in the dances, parties and football matches...and what's more, we cared about the problems of the village".

According to the testimony of Joaquín Fernández (2007), SEFT, UCLM.

¹⁷ *El País*, 14th November, 1976, p. 11.

and beyond functional perceptions, not only to avoid and stand up to repression, but also to take advantage of it and generate waves of solidarity and politicisation.

PROTESTS FOR A NEW DECADE

The ever-widening gap between a regime anchored to resistance to political change and a rapidly changing society gave rise to the profound, irreversible crisis of a dictatorship which, in the words of the British Ambassador in Madrid, was clearly unable to satisfy the aspirations of the people and at the same time keep control of workers, students, intellectuals and minority groups. For a regime whose legitimacy intrinsically depended on maintaining public order and which was radically incompatible with social conflict and dissent, the situation seriously threatened its survival, especially since strikes became a constant and habitual feature of the Spanish scene in the 1970s. In fact, the protests which had started in the early 1960s became more intense and more generalised in the early 1970s, which formed a virtuous circle between the growing socio-political unrest, the spread of activism and the strengthening of organisational structures which, in turn, led to greater mobilisation. In general terms, from 1970 onwards the number of disputes, with the exception of the brief parenthesis between 1971 and 1972, was constantly on the increase (Molinero and Ysàs 1992).

The dictatorship responded to this means of challenging the legality and *peace* of the Franco regime in the usual way by using greater repression, above all after the Workers' Commissions were made illegal in 1967. The best example of such tougher controls on public order in these provinces was in the city of Puertollano. In the midst of redundancies, sanctions and arrests, October 1967 saw the dismantling of the Workers' Commissions in mining areas. The following year, to mark the First of May celebrations, 35 demonstrators were arrested on 28th April and at the same time, a series of warnings were published in the provincial newspaper threatening to "forcefully and energetically repress any type of disruptive behaviour which may be attempted".¹⁸

In view of such warnings, it is no surprise that in the summer of 1970, the local committee of the PCE was dismantled and almost fifty people arrested. Although the party quickly reorganised, it was not long before there were new setbacks and from April to June 1971, at least 23 activists from Puertollano were sent to the provincial

¹⁸ Lanza, 30th April 1968, p. 1.

prison. That year the Civil Governor considered that the organisation “of the clandestine communist party active in the city” had been fully dismantled, thus putting an end to the “constant disturbances to the work and social order and also to public order which existed among the workers of the Puertollano mines and likewise in the *ENCASO* Industrial Complex”. These disturbances “also affected nearby work centres and other towns and villages in the province”. Likewise, part of the local committee from Albacete fell in December 1973, amidst accusations made by a group of priests who complained of the humiliation and mistreatment that some of those arrested had suffered.¹⁹

The period between 1967 and 1973 witnessed what was possibly the greatest wave of repression unleashed on the opposition since the early years of the dictatorship (Foweraker 1989). But far from acting as a deterrent or preventing people from mobilising, this increased political activities against the Franco regime, led to the spread of solidarity movements at home and significantly damaged the regime’s image abroad. This was true to such an extent that in the early 1970s, not only was the dictatorship unable to guarantee internal stability, but it was also singled out in Strasbourg and Brussels as an insurmountable obstacle to Spain’s integration into some of the West’s main international institutions (EEC and NATO). This factor was of paramount importance given that sectors traditionally allied to the Franco regime (bankers, industrialists, etc.) began to realise that their interests would perhaps be better defended in a more progressive socio-political system. This situation was clearly revealed during the international crisis of 1973 which, in addition to eroding the legitimacy of the regime as a force for economic development, led big business and the world of finance to look towards Europe and meant that they were willing to pay the political price of democratisation in exchange for social stability and entry into the European Common Market.

As some authors have pointed out, rounds of protests mobilise people who are organised but they also organise those who are not mobilised (Tarrow 1991). The protests that were started in the 1960s by “forward-looking” groups in the large urban and industrial centres of the country gradually opened up new opportunities for the appearance, through imitation and diffusion, of new players. Thus, protests slowly

¹⁹ *La Verdad*, 23rd January, 1974, p. 4.

reached, albeit with varying frequency and intensity, new towns and villages in the provinces of Albacete and Ciudad Real and new areas of the labour market, such as technical and professional sectors. The first mobilisations among these white-collar workers involved bank employees from the province of Albacete. In this sector there was a group of Christian activists who criticised the incompetence of the trade unions of Franco's regime and the lack of legal means to effectively defend workers' interests. Consequently, in 1972 they participated in "pacific protests carried out by bank employees from all around Spain", and shortly afterwards demanded "rights of assembly, association and expression".²⁰ In December 1974, some six hundred bank employees from the province of Albacete joined one of the biggest national strikes that the sector experienced during the dictatorship. Previously, in 1970, these workers had already publicly demanded the creation of a trade union which was "independent from the State, from political groups and from any other organisation" as a "basic principle" to "meet the need to defend our interests". They demanded that the union be "made up only of workers" and that "the businessmen should set up their own," in addition to requesting that "all the leaders, right up to the highest level, be elected by the workers" and that there should be "full guarantees for those who occupy positions of responsibility".²¹ It is therefore no surprise that as from the late 1960s, the provincial authorities showed great concern about the situation of the Banking Union "given the level of politicisation of this union and the problems the union is experiencing nationally".²²

The early 1970s also witnessed the first signs of ecclesiastic dissent in two dioceses – Albacete and Ciudad Real – which were closely linked to the political power of the dictatorship. It is worth highlighting here that after the Second Vatican Council, certain sectors of the Church moved from a position of consubstantiality with the dictatorship to become a source of conflict and constant criticism. This was the result, among other factors, of the fact that younger members of the clergy identified with the social problems facing workers and therefore with many of the demands made by the movements opposing the Franco regime. From 1970 onwards, authorities from the

²⁰ *La Verdad*, 9th July 1974, p. 5.

²¹ Banking Union, "Libro de Actas", 20th January 1970, AHPA, Libros de la OS, Book 443.

²² Secretariat of Economic Affairs, "Memorias", 1968, AHPA, Trade Union Organisation (OS), Folder 2133.

province of Albacete detected priests who “declare themselves to be liberals and in certain respects hostile to the regime”, some of whom had “on several occasions expressed their disagreement with decisions taken by the government and also by their own superiors in the church”, and given “sermons of a liberal nature”.²³ In 1973, the Civil Governor of Ciudad Real reported the existence of “certain individual, although mainly isolated, cases of priests expressing criticism or hostility towards the central government during their sermons, mainly when referring to issues concerning the social order”. Shortly afterwards, the “liberal tendencies of the sermons given by a young priest” were also condemned.²⁴ What is more, to the greater puzzlement of the dictatorship this distancing of the Catholic Church spread to a certain sector of the regime’s political elite. These men, who were concerned about preserving their influence and prestige in the face of increasing protests and the growing disrepute of the dictatorship, perceived that their future political careers depended on the creation of a more open system. The fact that one sector of the ruling class was tempted to change and develop the system increased the growing tension in the regime between those who opposed any change whatsoever and those who were in favour of gradual liberalisation. Such internal divisions and break-ups weakened the dictatorship, a situation which became increasingly noticeable as the regime proved unable to promote reforms which would be acceptable to the majority of Spaniards.

What is more, from the late 1960s onwards, other productive sectors of the province of Albacete such as the metal, transport, construction and chemical industries, in addition to the hotel and catering trade and even agriculture, also began to witness an increase in the “general discontent”. This soon turned into “conflictive tensions”, particularly those involving “trade union opposition groups” active in the shoe factories of Almansa and the Workers’ Commissions in the farming sector of Villarrobledo. That same year, the Civil Governor of Ciudad Real warned of the existence of a clandestine group belonging to the PCE in Puertollano which “wastes no opportunity to provoke

²³ Civil Government of Albacete, “Memoria del Gobierno Civil”, 1969 and 1970, AHPA, GC, book, no reference number.

²⁴ Civil Government of Ciudad Real, “Memoria de gestión anual correspondiente a 1972”, AGA, Interior, Folder 474. Provincial Police Superintendent, “Informe sobre orden público y criminalidad en esta capital desde enero a abril del corriente año 1975”, AHPCR, GC, Folder 409.

restlessness and unease among the workers of this important industrial complex”.²⁵ Under this influence, in 1970 there was “marked tension in the social atmosphere due to the situation of the company” *Hullera del Centro (HUCESA)* in Puertollano. The crisis procedures initiated by the company led to a considerable reduction in staff numbers, although “not before there were various different conflicts and incidents for precisely that reason, in particular two demonstrations in March 1970 which had to be broken up by the police”. Likewise, the same sources reported the existence of “months of more or less organised protests” among workers in the mercury mines in Almadén, which were owned and run by the state. Shortly afterwards, in 1971, there were labour disputes in *HUCESA*, *Tamoin* and *Peñarrova* in Puertollano which were repeated the following year together with disputes in *Montajes Nervión*. In 1971, the police in Albacete showed concern that the “general atmosphere in the province has been one of unrest” and “occasionally alarm,” a “reflection of what is happening nationally”.²⁶

In 1973 the authorities in Albacete acknowledged that “there has been increased activity in what could be referred to as the opposition movement”.²⁷ That year, Ciudad Real also experienced strikes in *Montajes Basauri* in January and collective action taken by the workers of *Sevillana de Electricidad* between April and June. Thus, despite the “defeats” of the early 1970s, Puertollano demonstrated that the atmosphere was conducive to “hostile activities.” But at that stage Puertollano, which had been the bastion of anti-Franco resistance since 1962 and suffered considerable repression for that very reason, was no longer alone. In 1973 the Civil Governor acknowledged the existence of “Marxist and communist organisations, as well as workers’ commissions” in Almadén and Alcázar de San Juan. The “oil slick” was spreading irremissibly.

OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SPREAD OF THE CONFLICT.

During the two years between President Carrero Blanco’s assassination (December 1973) and the death of Franco (November 1975), the instability of the dictatorship grew at the same rate as the disputes. The escalation of social unrest was

²⁵ Civil Government of Ciudad Real, “Memoria de gestión correspondiente a 1969”, AGA, Interior, Folder 492.

²⁶ Civil Government of Ciudad Real, “Memoria de gestión del Gobierno Civil del año 1970”, AGA, Interior, Folder 498. Civil Government of Albacete, “Memoria del Gobierno Civil”, 1971, AHPA, GC, book, no reference number.

²⁷ Civil Government of Albacete, “Memoria del Gobierno Civil”, 1973, AHPA, GC, book, no reference number.

due to the convergence of different factors which gave rise to an objectively more favourable climate for the mobilisation of working-class movements opposed to the dictatorship. The confused liberalisation process initiated by Arias Navarro's government, together with the internal break-up of the heart of the regime, the irruption of a major economic crisis which, according to the Governor of Ciudad Real, led to the "toughening of labour relationships and an increase in collective tensions", and the emergence of an international scene marked by the revolution in Portugal, led to the appearance of political opportunities which made it easier for less docile collectives to act (Tarrow 2004).

In this context of uncertainty, the opposition movement was strengthened and increased its activities against the Franco regime, which led to greater social mobilisation and political unrest. In both provinces, but especially in Albacete, from 1973 onwards the PCE reorganised its provincial committee and began to penetrate the working-class movement, energised the cultural and associative scene through its presence in student and youth circles, promoted neighbourhood groups which gave rise to resident associations, took part in professional collectives (of health workers, teachers, lawyers, civil servants, etc) and finally, introduced the cooperative movement to the farming world and organised the Farmers' Commissions. Albacete also witnessed the appearance of small groups of extreme left-wing activists who were closely linked to student uprisings, such as the Young Red Guard, the (Marxist-Leninist) Communist Party and factions close to the Revolutionary Workers Organisation. Despite all the limitations and weaknesses resulting from the limited number of people involved and the context, the clandestine activists of these organisations acted in collaboration with Christians, working-class priests and workers to set up incipient social movements (working-class, student, neighbourhood and agricultural movements) which helped to erode the political structures of the dictatorship and also contributed to the pressure which undermined every effort from above to maintain power or reform the system which did not represent a true move towards democracy.

In the urban areas of La Mancha, an ever-increasing number of workers were opposed to the official Francoist vertical trade union, to which membership was mandatory. In 1974, the Provincial Trade Union Delegate from Albacete expressed his concern for what he perceived as "clearly politically motivated plans to complicate the

labour situation”. Franco’s governors in Albacete warned of the existence of workers who were being “drawn in by the anti-union stance of some working-class priests working in the city”, who were also accused of straining labour relations. The union leaders in Albacete were even relieved when summer arrived, pleased that “the majority of workers begin their holidays and certain sources of clearly anti-union feeling disappear”.²⁸ The two most important protests took place during the second half of the year. The first involved the conflict in the textile company *López Vera*, which mobilised a great many workers in the whole sector between September and November and required the intervention of the Governor himself to put an end to a protest which was becoming increasingly politicised and radicalised. The second, which took place during the month of December, involved, as mentioned previously, over five hundred bank employees from Albacete (Martín García 2008). In Ciudad Real, almost two hundred workers went on strike in Puertollano, while at the same time in some villages of the province farmers began to express the discontent that they had kept to themselves for many years in a context of “rising unrest”.

In 1975, the Civil Governor of Ciudad Real had a clear notion of the political and social situation in the province he controlled: “it can be said that the level of unrest has increased throughout the whole province in 1975”.²⁹ This undoubtedly had something to do with the reappearance of the Working Commissions in Puertollano and the Democratic Committee which was set up by residents of the provincial capital. In Albacete, the situation of general unrest and the effects of the economic crisis could also be felt through increased unrest, which in this case was “even more strained” because of active competition between “groups which could be considered part of the opposition movement”. One such example involved working-class Catholic groups which were accused of using the structures of the Church to incite prejudice “against the established order among the working classes”.³⁰

An important factor in this increased tension and unrest was the appearance of sources of student protests in higher education institutions and secondary schools in provincial capitals like Albacete and Ciudad Real. For instance, in Ciudad Real cells of

²⁸ Secretariat of Social Affairs, “Partes a Madrid”, 15th June 1974, AHPA, OS, Folder 2145.

²⁹ Civil Government of Ciudad Real, “Memoria de gestión anual correspondiente a 1975”, AGA, Interior, Folder 11448.

³⁰ Secretariat of Social Affairs, “Partes a Madrid”, 15th June 1975, AHPA, OS, File 2146. Secretariat of Economic Affairs, “Memorias”, 1975, AHPA, OS, File 2133.

the PCE appeared in the School of Nursing, the School of Technical Agricultural Engineering, the School of Education and the Juan de Ávila Secondary School. In Albacete, in 1972 and 1973 the Socio-Political Brigade reported “a series of academic strikes and protests involving members of the teaching staff” in secondary schools in the capital, which in 1974 and 1975 led to incidents and various strikes in the School of Education.³¹

Although the effects of social change, economic development and increased income were always extremely modest in these parts of the country, during the 1960s more and more middle-class pupils were able to gain access to the increasingly overcrowded university system which was also more socially diverse and permanently disrupted by the student movement (Hernández Sandoica 2007). When the students who, while attending university in Albacete or Ciudad Real, began to get involved in the opposition movement returned home “to their villages” at weekends or during the holidays, they took with them their models for collective action, frames of reference and mobilisation structures which opened up new opportunities for young people who were part of the social networks then developing in the universities, secondary schools and youth clubs mentioned previously.³² Thus, university students helped to develop processes to spread the protest by means of which it was possible for players from different enclaves to see themselves as sufficiently similar to each other to justify joint action. Thanks to them, and also to working-class priests, other exiled anti-Franco activists, the media, gatherings and meetings with activists from other places, etc, information about the “initial action reaches geographically or institutionally distant groups which, on the basis of this information, consider themselves to be sufficiently similar to the initial insurgents” and decide to emulate them. Organisational resources, information and speeches were gradually channelled into these mechanisms which managed to build bridges between the demands and identities of collectives from different parts of the country. This resulted in changes in the quantity and level of

³¹ State Interior Policy Office “Acuses de recibo”, 3rd, 6th and 21st March 1975, AHPCR, GC, Folder 387.

³² The youngest activists, who were still in the secondary schools of Albacete, drew considerable inspiration “*from what students from Murcia and Valencia brought them.*” However, the students also had “*quite a lot of influence*” on young workers, since “*there was a group of university students who used to bring back ideas from the university*”. According to the testimony of Victoria Delicado (2007) and Fernando Sánchez (2005), SEFT, UCLM.

coordinated disputes which led to more generalised unrest and a larger number of players involved (McAdam 2003).

It was equally important to keep university students politically active once they had left university and entered the labour market. From 1975 onward the city of Albacete witnessed movements in the professional associations of lawyers, draughtsmen and doctors, while the Education Department of the University of Ciudad Real witnessed a surge in hostility after a group of young teachers from Madrid. According to the police, they intended to transfer “the conflicts and labour problems that temporary teachers faced in Madrid and other capitals” to secondary and higher education in the capital of La Mancha. 1975 also saw the appearance of a group of lawyers and university graduates who organised debates, conferences and lunches in the *Juman Club* in order to discuss “the current Spanish political scene and the possibility of creating a political association advocating independent democracy, freedom of assembly and association, membership of the European Common Market, amnesty, etc”.³³ Likewise, in the 1970s the world of professional journalism witnessed the arrival of young graduates who had been taught socialist principles while working in the turbulent student media. At the same time some groups of young people started to make their first contributions to opinion journalism. In this respect, “by providing information about what they do, the movements create opportunities for their followers, third parties, political parties and elites” (Tarrow 2004: 110). In this sense, above all between 1974 and 1975, the newspaper *La Verdad* from Albacete played an extremely important role in the development of the trade union movement in Albacete. By taking advantage of the fact that it belonged to a Catholic press group, it was able to transmit workers’ problems and initiatives to the whole of society. In parallel with these events, newspapers emerged which were published by clandestine organisations. These included the Democratic Information Bulletin (*Boletín Democrático de Información*) published by the PCE in Albacete and The Provincial Truth (*La Verdad Provincial*) published by the communists in Ciudad Real. The aim of the latter, according to the police, was to “promote the clandestine democratic efforts of the communist party among the working class”. The main benefit of these types of clandestine publications, despite their lack of realism on occasions and their limited circulation, was that by

³³ Provincial Police Superintendent, “Informe sobre orden público y criminalidad en esta capital desde enero a abril del corriente año 1975”, AHPCR, GC, Folder 409.

informing people of protests taking place in other parts of the country and providing information on the contents and forms of action happening in other places, they managed to make workers understand that “what initially appeared to be individual ideas and actions” were in fact “shared and carried out by others” (Gusfield 2001: 105). For example, once Franco had died, the leaders of the Catholic Working-Class Youth Association of Albacete valued the bulletin entitled Working-Class Youth (*Juventud Obrera*) because it “offers alternatives for action as it provides information about experiences in other places”.³⁴

The labour conflicts which took place in the health sector in the province of Albacete during 1975 were the direct result of transferring opposition straight from the student movement to the new professional setting. Although joined by nurses and nursing auxiliaries, not for nothing were the disputes mainly organised by housemen, a group whose protests were based on “a political conscience previously acquired at university when part of the student movement” (Lacalle 1976: 35). During the summer of 1975 there were strikes, sit-ins and disputes at the Social Security Hospital and in the Psychiatric Hospital in Albacete. However, health workers were not the only group in the public administration system which showed signs of rebelliousness during Franco’s final months. In 1975 and 1976 they were joined by technicians from the Administration of Justice and from the municipal administration system, teachers, prison warders, veterinary surgeons, etc.

Thus, dissent and discontent erupted in a state administration system which had been purged during the post-war period and which had previously been faithful to the dictatorship. The outbreak of conflicts among these groups helped to change the way working-class protests were viewed by sections of society whose image of such protests had been based on prejudice. At least partly, such fears and distrust began to recede when those who organised the strike and were later arrested were not only factory workers or “uncivilised” farmers, but rather doctors, teachers, lawyers and journalists. This gradually led to greater social acceptance of collective action to which the dictatorship had no answer and little symbolic capacity with which to discredit it.

In both provinces, just like in the rest of the country, the “models of collective behaviour which were essentially proletarian at the start of the cycle became the

³⁴ “A todos los militantes de la Federación JOC. Síntesis de la planificación del trabajo que tiene que realizar el equipo de la Juventud Obrera”, March 1976, Josefina Ruescas’ private archive.

currency of all wage earners when the cycle reached its peak” (Tarrow 1989: 331). But activists from the middle and professional classes did not merely emulate the wage demands of manual workers. As a reflection of the socialist political principles they had previously acquired in the university movement, the most committed hospital and school workers made very similar demands to those made by students, above all those related to improvements in public services and others linked to reforms in the health and education systems which involved changing the political structure of the country. This “tertiarisation” of the conflict, together with the appearance of the neighbourhood association movement, helped to question the social legitimacy of the regime by increasing people’s interest in the workings of public services and taking a deeper look at the moral economy of a working class which, above all when the economic crisis got worse, began to understand the need to obtain small parts of that indirect salary which had been relegated to second place in the light of the emphasis factory workers placed on wage claims. Thus, the problems of increasing sectors of the population converged and encouraged protests not only against the political order, but also against the lifestyle and system of values supported by the political order.

This was the case of the town of Almansa, and subsequently Alcázar de San Juan, where amidst disputes involving various sectors of the health service in the capital and the demands of a growing neighbourhood association movement, an important civil campaign began which demanded the construction of a hospital. In 1974, the Trade Union Organisation itself highlighted that “the problem of medical attention in Almansa was terrible and the target of all kinds of criticism. Since it was a general problem, it went beyond the scope of the trade union because it did not only apply to workers’ health care, but instead affected the whole population because of the lack of doctors and specialists in almost all basic areas”. Furthermore, according to Franco’s authorities, opposition groups were focusing on these deficiencies and there was a risk of “attempts being made to politicise and disrupt the labour situation”. In fact there had already been “attempts to hold demonstrations, carry out technical stoppages and even proposals not to pay Social Security contributions”.³⁵ In this atmosphere of public anger over the lack of medical attention, many parents suddenly began to express their discontent with the dreadful condition of the classrooms in one of the schools in the town. This, together

³⁵ Delegación Comarcal de Almansa, “Correspondencia”, 1975, AHPA, OS, Folder 3874.

with the Mayor's inability to keep the promises he had made, led some seventy families to hold a demonstration in the street and refuse to send their children to school at the start of the academic year in 1975. Thus, in Almansa deficiencies in public services gave rise to a common feeling among citizens that they had been abandoned by the central and local authorities. Apart from helping to strengthen links between residents, workers and members of the opposition, this feeling obliged people to reflect on the fact that the political system was unworkable.

AFTER FRANCO: THE FINAL BATTLE FOR DEMOCRACY

As outlined above, the origins of the transition to democracy are closely linked to the crisis within the Franco regime and both, in turn, are related to the increase in social unrest and mobilisation which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, according to a report at the time of Franco's death in 1975, his regime had been profoundly weakened by the considerable mobilisation of the labour force in recent years, dissent in universities and among professional collectives, the growth of socialist or regionalist clandestine political parties and regional discontent. These all indicated that discontent was rising and that there was a growing demand for representative institutions, elections, free trade unions, etc.

Franco died on 20th November 1975, yet his death did not represent, as is usually claimed, the beginning of the transition. His death was followed by several months of heightened social conflict and police repression more closely related to a fight for democratic freedom against a dictatorship which was weakened but whose instruments of repression remained intact, than a planned process of political transition (Sabio and Sartorius 2007). After the dictator's disappearance, the social and political dynamics of the country, and by extension the provinces under study here, became even more turbulent and difficult at the end of 1975 and during the early months of 1976. If the number of disputes quintupled between 1971 and 1975, in 1976 the number of workers on strike and the number of hours lost because of disputes multiplied the figures for the previous year by four and seven respectively. The number of days lost for every thousand workers due to labour disputes tripled the average figure for countries in the EEC, despite the fact that in these countries – unlike in Franco's Spain – workers had the right to strike. According to diplomatic reports written shortly after Franco's death, not for nothing was the combination of labour unrest, disturbances in the streets and

violence capable of leading to a loss of control of the situation which forced a radical change with unpredictable consequences in Spain. The situation, which the reformist sectors of the dictatorship were fully aware of, required the route towards reform to speed up if the unrest were not to spread and undermine any possibility of peaceful change.

This spectacular growth in the level of social mobilisation was linked to the negotiation of two thirds of the collective agreements in the context of a harsh economic crisis. However, there is no doubt that such outbreaks of protest were mainly due to an increase in the opportunities available and the political expectations resulting from Franco's death. With uncommon force, the dictator's disappearance brought together specific demands made in the workplace with the unrest of society in general. This helped to form strong links between the disputes at local or sectorial level and the national struggle for political power. In the words of the Provincial Work Delegation of Albacete, "tension and disputes were increasing" in the province, especially at the "end of the year" which was a "reflection of the national situation". Along these same lines, the trade union leadership acknowledged that it could not avoid "the series of social and labour demands which have appeared all around the country and which, naturally, can also be heard in our province".³⁶ Thus, in the following months there were strikes and stoppages in numerous sectors of these two provinces such as health, teaching, metal, electricity, mining, textile, banking, shoes making, leather, agriculture, transport, etc. Moreover, these labour conflicts were supplemented and strengthened by additional collective action such as sit-ins, demonstrations and mass meetings.

These social disputes gave rise to an incipient civil society which met in bookshops, cultural associations, cinema clubs, youth clubs, independent theatre groups, neighbourhood associations, etc. In short, the final moments of Franco's regime witnessed the dawn of a booming civil society which opened up new areas of debate and political training beyond the social control of the dictatorship. At the heart of this incipient civil society, increasing numbers of people from these provinces learned about and embraced democratic practices and values.

Moreover, among the increasing number of socio-political demands made once Franco had died, the request for an amnesty played a leading role. This was demanded

³⁶ Civil Government of Albacete, "Memoria del Gobierno Civil", 1975, AHPA, GC, book, no reference number.

in demonstrations and sung during concerts of protest songs and it brought together different sections of society united under the identity of citizens with political rights around demands for freedom and democracy. This happened in the demonstration which took place in the streets of Puertollano on 14th July under a single slogan of “Amnesty”.³⁷ A little earlier in February 1976 in Albacete, calls were made for an “amnesty for different classes, sectors and people”. At the end of January 1976, the Town Hall of Hellín even called for an “amnesty for political prisoners and exiles and for those suffering sanctions because of union and labour activities”.³⁸ It is therefore no surprise that the Civil Governor of Albacete considered the demand for amnesty to be “the most evocative and the most frequently used as a banner for more or less public demonstrations and clandestine events which claim to be cultural acts, scientific conferences, etc”.³⁹

The dictator’s death was a pivotal point which came at a time when those who were “less brave, but more numerous, saw that the system was vulnerable to the protests”. As a result, Franco’s death triggered an intense period of mobilisation which affected almost all parts of Spain and in many places saw the appearance of open labour disputes for the first time. The politicisation and exuberance of the social scene following Franco’s death increased the expectations of a collective response from players who prior to the weakening of the dictatorship had been passive and who sensed greater opportunities to obtain improvements in their living conditions. For that reason, in 1976 collectives such as taxi drivers, bakers, photographers, nurses, etc. joined the conflict. Although the demands of these groups centred mainly on working conditions, the mobilisation of sectors which had few links with collective action embodied, precisely because they had the opportunity to mobilise at a time of social unrest when the dictatorship was breaking up, the inherent political importance of the appearance of any new collective group in conflict. Moreover, when towards the end of 1976 the round of protests reached its peak, the range of tactical innovations and the variety of actions increased. This introduced new forms of organisation and new ways of

³⁷ Provincial Police Superintendent, “Manifestación autorizada el día 14 en Puertollano”, 20th July 1976, AHPCR, GC, File 371; *Lanza*, 15th July, 1976, p. 26.

³⁸ *La Verdad*, 29th January, 1976, p. 12.

³⁹ Civil Government of Albacete, “Memoria del Gobierno Civil”, 1976, AHPA, GC, book, no reference number. *La Verdad*, 8th February, 1976, p. 7.

expressing discontent such as recitals, political dinners, sit-down protests, canteen boycotts, etc.

In conclusion, the Spanish case has often been presented, in line with the arguments of J.J. Linz, as a pragmatic model of political crafting acted out in the upper echelons of politics. The lack of interest in the role of civil society groups has often been attributed to the fact that the process of political change was initiated, and controlled, from within the regime itself by its more progressive sectors. But the fact is that at the time of Franco's death, it was unviable for the dictatorship to continue despite the control that it still had over the armed forces, the police and the judiciary. It is therefore impossible to understand the appearance of pro-change attitudes at the core of the Franco regime without taking into account the fact that during the 1970s it became increasingly clear that the regime was incapable of adapting to the profound changes which had been taking place in Spanish society since the early 1960s. These increasingly met with clear expressions of rejection and dissent among a wide range of sectors of society. Thus, the end of the dictatorship and the recovery of freedom was in part a popular victory, which contrasts and counterbalances conventional interpretations which take the recovery of freedom for granted and refer to the almost natural exhaustion of the regime. Among the factors which made the dictatorship impracticable and the democratic alternative a possibility, it is worth highlighting that there were many different forms of disputes involving an ever increasing number of citizens against a regime which was radically incompatible with any kind of breach of the peace and in the context of a society which was constantly undergoing changes and transformations with new attitudes, expectations and behavioural guidelines. The fever pitch that protests reached during the final period of Franco's regime, not only in the major urban and industrial centres of the country but also in rural and less developed areas, helped to place democratic demands at the top of the political agenda and clear the way for political change.

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