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ELA newsletter

Solidarity of Basque Workers



On 23 and 24 January 2013, ELA will hold its XIII Congress in Bilbao under the slogan Lankidetu!

PEOPLE AND THEIR PROBLEMS ARE OUR REASON FOR EXISTING

The XIII ELA Congress will be held in a particularly complicated climate given the slashing of labour and social rights and with the collective bargaining process destroyed by the reforms of Zapatero and Rajoy. Laura Gonzalez de Txabbarri, the International Officer, reveals the last details of the key internal debate in the trade union, at the same time as he stressed that only a sustained, collective and overwhelming single response

will manage to put a stop to the current neo-liberal policies.

-Why did you choose the slogan *Lankidetu!* (Join us, come onboard)?

-We want to stress the fact that the trade union is the only and necessary way that we have to respond to the attacks on us as workers and as citizens. Another aspect of the slogan is that it stresses the need for the trade union to be close to

and with the people and that there is no more genuine trade union work than organising it. And that lets us affirm that we the workers are the driving force of the trade union.

On the other hand, the class concept is also making itself felt and consolidates the need for the organisation and collective work to advance in defending our rights.

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Laura Gonzalez de Txabarri

-This Congress is being held in a very difficult climate

-If we add the mass redundancies, the job insecurity, increasing poverty, in short, of the working class as a whole to the social cuts and the dismantling of the existing collective bargaining model so far, the situation can be defined as a real social emergency.

40% of workers in Spain are calculated to earn around one thousand euros a month and we could be talking of 20% in the Basque Country... In other words, people who work and who are poor.

However, our message is neither of resignation or of throwing in the towel: there have been hard and complicated moments, but we have been able to get through them. I am sure that we will do so again.

-What is the profile of the 736 Congress delegates who will decide on the strategic lines of the trade union over the coming years?

-66.58% are men and 33.4% women, 3.39% more than in the previous congress. The average age is 42.4 years old and approximately half the delegates are taking part in a confederal congress for the first time, which reflects the ongoing renewal of the trade union.

-What will be the high points of the Congress?

-First of all, justifying how the union has been run over the last four years, which the congress delegates will then assess; the presentation of the main report and the ensuing discussion, which will set out the strate-

gic lines of the confederation; the election of the executive committee, and the adopting of resolutions on issues that we consider important and which will set the trade union's strategy and position.

-An unchanged Executive Committee has been put forward. Could this be called a transition congress?

-There is nothing new regarding the current Executive members. With respect to the posts, Leire Txakartegi has been proposed to take over the Immigration Dossier (which has been under Mixel Lakuntza to date), along with the recently created Unemployment Dossier.

We believe that it is an experienced and cohesive team, ready to run the trade union in the current difficult times and the ones that are on the horizon. And we are keen and excited about taking up this challenge and responsibility.

Having explained that, I would not call it a Transition Congress as the times that we are living are not, and the trade union is something living that is constantly adapting to the situation that we live in. ELA is not about great revolutions but rather about well thought-out and widely shared evolutions, in order to move forwards.

-How is the reception of amendments to the main report going?

-We are in the phase of collecting amendments, which will enrich the original text, and which will be discussed in the Congress, and we are also in the training stage. Between October and December, around 2000 trade union officials have taken part in the many training courses organised around the main report.

A lecture, it must be said, that reflects our current work and which will guide the work for the coming period. I think that we must give great value to the fact that ELA has shown itself to be capable of assuming a non-subordination position towards the economic and political authorities, has been capable of providing its critical vision of the situation and making proposals. This Congress will ratify that that is our path, that of trade union autonomy and of the struggle. I believe that few people now doubt that the institutional participation entities lacking

content, the so-called social dialogue, as it is taken to mean in this country, only serve to legitimise some policies that are contrary to the interests of the working class and the citizens, in general. ELA has not signed up and will never sign up to that farce.

-For the first time in history, ELA has registered a negative trend in terms of membership over this four year period.

-If there is something that characterises our organisation, it is transparency. The current prevailing trend, basically due to the recession and the economic situation, is that trade unions around the world are losing members. What is true is that we have seen many new members during this four-year period but, at the same time, thousands and thousands workers have been expelled from the work market, and that has also been reflected in our membership figures. There is therefore the apparent paradox that we have achieved the highest penetration rate in our history in a period when membership is down.

The membership is vital in the ELA trade union project. It gives us strength and autonomy. We have therefore to continue improving our organisation, with systematised work plans to optimise everything that depends on us. And being close to the people, to its problems, brining the greatest number of workers onboard to our project so that they also embrace it also depend on us.



The dossier to be discussed at the XIII ELA Congress, which will define the trade union's strategic line over the coming four years, is divided into four main parts, but which all follow the same message: financial, economic and political authorities are openly jointly applying Neoliberal policies. The trade union therefore only has one option to get organised and take action. The following interviews highlight the main points of the dossier.



Joseba Villarreal analyses the current situation of collective bargaining and forecasts the challenges facing us in the coming years

TRADE UNIONISM AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR OUR DEFENCE



-It is not exactly breaking news to say that Collective Bargaining is in crisis.

-No, it is not. Nor is it true that Collective Bargaining became critical in 2008. We had been losing ground for a long time (regarding the distribution of wealth, workers' rights, etc.) and had been under attack from Neoliberal management and governments at that service that, hand in hand, had jeopardised the working conditions of the working class.

The recent Collective Negotiation reforms have only gone further down that Neoliberal path, whose aim is, in short, to lower wages and mean that the ones that come out the winners from the recession are those that were the winners in the period of economic growth, in other words, capital.

-The latest legislative reforms mark a turning point in labour relations

-On the one hand, Zapatero took a step towards centralisation (by allowing the state agreements to decide

what is negotiated and where); and, on the other hand, Rajoy rendered null and void the minimum requirements, mandatory wage, sectoral provincial agreements in favour of company agreements.

And if that were not enough, Rajoy's government brutally overturned the balance in labour relations by giving employers numerous opportunities to slash costs (as that is how employers see us), which can take the form of different funds: non-application, substantial modification of the working conditions, end to the extended validity of the expired collective agreements, etc.

Clearly management is delighted and keen to apply all the "bounties" offered by the latest reforms. They have made this clear directly and indirectly: they are not willing to negotiate anything, not even issues that the legislation states can be negotiated and are even less willing to give up one single one of the opportunities offered. And here, here again, there is no difference between different employees, whether here or there.

-And if that is the case, what is our main challenge regarding collective bargaining?

-Our challenge is to increasingly reach more places and in a better way, giving impetus to negotiation in all the places where we can, working to manage to convert SMEs and to large and medium-size companies into negotiation spaces.

As regards industry, our challenge is to ensure negotiation is widespread in the company. Unlike some trade unions, we are not giving up on collective negotiation in SMEs.

In any event, if these reforms have made one thing clear, it is that there is not a single formula for all sectors. We have to offer each sector –also in the public sector– room to fight; achieving a negotiating sphere with results that are mandatory, binding

and that are not really merely a "recommendation".

-Collective negotiation and organisation go hand in hand.

-To go further along this path and in order to achieve the goals set, it is essential to work in an organised and permanent way and not leave any room for improvisation: by informing and reaching out to the people, sharing diagnostics, company by company and sector by sector.

The trade union militants and members are going to be decisive. It is impossible to face up to the challenges without militants and without members. Trade unionism is the only way possible.

This must be our main objective: to organise people to fight company by company, work centre by work centre.

-Fighting, therefore, is going to be essential to achieve good agreements...

-Nowadays, apart from fighting for employment (absolute priority), wages (essential to create jobs), reducing the working week (it can be decisive for creating jobs), reducing job insecurity, occupational health, conciliation measures, etc, we must demand and agree on clauses that challenge the reforms: extended validity of the expired collective agreements, non-application, flexibility, etc.

It is going to be hard –really hard–, but it is going to be worthwhile. Whatever they say, there is no other way.

-What are we going to commit to in Congress, if the delegates so decide?

-At ELA, we are committed to this challenge and we call upon all those willing to share demands and take up the fight.

At ELA, we have always been open to alliances and we are now as well.

Mikel Noval, Social Policy Official

THE CURRENT PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION MODEL HAS TO CHANGE



-Europe is not longer the panacea and has become the Neoliberal spearhead.

-In 2005, ELA called on people to vote against the European Union Treaty, arguing that it gave the official seal of approval to a European project that ignored social aspects and give priority to the interests of capital, and did not respect the self-determination right of the peoples. What has happened since then has only confirmed that diagnosis. The European process is now trying to go further into the most reactionary politics based on slashing labour and social rights. And this is taking place in an increasingly more anti-democratic way, which can be seen with the involvement of the so-called Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), which is a tool for domination that seeks to impose a policy on the people that is causing unemployment and poverty to spread throughout Europe.

-The austerity policies, that prioritise reducing public spending, and in particular welfare spending, has

brought us to a very serious situation.

-During the period between Congress, unemployment has doubled in the Basque Country. Over 220,000 people have no jobs. The unemployment rate is over 16%, while the European average, which is already very high, is under 11%. Furthermore, nearly half the unemployed do not receive any unemployment benefit (neither based on contributions or welfare).

-Employers are dictating to the institutions.

-It is a haemorrhage. The labour and collective bargaining reform have facilitated and made dismissals even cheaper. Social protection has been slashed, by means of cutting unemployment benefits, other social benefits and by the slashing of pensions agreed by Zapatero with the CEOE and CCOO and UGT unions.

-One of the most repeated criticisms irrespective of which party is in power, they apply the same policies

-The governments of the Basque Country have joined in the austerity policy. They have cut the funding earmarked for health, education, housing policy, social services, etc. The quality of the public services has been eroded and they have opted to give precedence to the private ones. Private healthcare has gained in market share and the people who are making money from social needs are rubbing their hands with glee.

-They say that there is no money, they make

cuts, but practically nobody talks about income: there continues to be no far-reaching debate about the tax system in this country.

-The tax policy implemented by the different administrations of the Basque Country favours the interests of employers. There has been no progress in social participation in any territory and the few changes approved in recent years have even been undercut by the decisions that Rajoy's Government has taken in terms of income tax or corporation tax. The current fiscal policy is also responsible for the welfare austerity policy that is being applied. It is also responsible for the widespread impoverishment policy of the population of the Basque Country.

-What is ELA demanding?

-ELA is demanding a radical change to public policies. During this time, we have focused on submitting proposals in the institutions. For example, we have prepared proposals regarding the policies of the different administrations of the Basque Country. We have also demanded specific commitments to the candidates at the top of the lists of the parties that stood at the elections to the Basque Parliament on 21 October 2012.

-Democracy is a caricature in this country. The institutions are turning a deaf ear to our demands and to the public outcry.

-We know that it is not enough just to be right. It

is not enough to have good proposals. We need to improve our balance of power. We are only going to get them to change policies if there is a strong grassroots movements that takes to the street to demand a change in course by the politicians.

-What is ELA asking from its companions in the fight?

-ELA has been taking part in a broad alliance of social and trade union organisations that has convened different mobilisations (including the general strikes on 29 March and 26 September). It is essential to join forces with all the organisations willing to work towards a build-up of forces that share two objectives: the need for a radical change in policies (that has to go beyond just patching things up) and not being subject to partisan and governmental strategies.

-What short-term social challenges has the trade union set?

-Apart from continuing along the path that we have come so far, the main report ends with a reflection on the need for ELA to get more involved given an obvious fact: the current growth logics is unmanageable. The current production, distribution and consumption model must be changed.

The decrease in the material sphere is going to happen, and the question is whether that will be based on fairness or will just worsen the current inequalities and problems. If anyone thinks that a trade union has nothing to say about this, they are making a serious mistake.

Xabi Anza, Trade Union Training Official

THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR SOVEREIGNTY



'New opportunities for constructing the Basque nation'. That is the title for one of the sections of ELA's main report on the current political situation. As Xabi Anza, head of training, put it, the objective for the coming four years will be to ratify our commitment to constructing the Basque nation, democracy and workers.

-What does the main report have to say about the economic climate?

-Even though there are several difficulties, difficulties that they cite, the speech stresses the following: the current economic crisis is an opportunity for sovereignty. We believe that there are opportunities here for our people to say no to mirroring the application of the structural austerity policies being implemented in Spain. And we believe that what the institutions must do is to disobey and set their own benchmarks in the defence of ordinary people. The policy must seek alliances and responses at trade union and grassroots level to be able to successfully tackle this challenge.

-You have pointed out that the crisis could be an opportunity for sovereignty. How will that come about?

-An old ELA member used to say that the Sovereignists - Pro-Spanish balance had not changed since the time of the Republic. We believe that that is the key to the commitment to sovereignty: that the community is capable of taking the lead and of decision making regarding the issues directly related to them as a community. And in crisis situations, the issues related to the society model are very important.

We believe that disobedience and social participation can become specific ways for politicization in response to the austerity measures affecting the majority of society. In short, we are talking of awareness-raising regarding how a specific nation must take control of its own challenges. And that has to be mainstreamed, as the cuts affect all of us, regardless of our cultural, political or national identity. Sovereignty has a

future if it follows the social path and the path set by the social majority.

-You also mentioned the recentralisation process of recent years. Why does it seem to be so difficult to reach an agreement to defend certain minimums?

-The main report refers to two areas that slow down that collaboration. On the one hand, there is the fight for supremacy of the two main parties that make up political Basque sovereignty. It is a struggle with a goal that is polarised and it has one purpose: to swing everything to be found on the social and political scenario, including trade unionism, towards one pole or another.

The second is as follows: the priority that all the political parties with the likelihood of government in any institutions give to what we could call institutional uniformity. In other words, coming across to public opinion as being perfectly ready to govern. In short, that they are competent to carry out what they so handily call "managing". I believe that the supremacy-management binomial has many and serious consequences. These include playing down class aspects and not looking for areas for collaboration.

-This is our first congress since ETA decided to call an end to its armed struggle.

-Yes, that is correct, and just like society as a whole, we are very happy to see

an end –and, also, unilaterally– to that tragic part of our history. Having said that, what we would have never thought, given the era we find ourselves in, is the following: that the Spanish government would declare that it has no intention of even starting up the least conversation process. Any other government in the world, or nearly any, would have had another attitude or way of proceeding in such a situation. They would have endeavoured to organise a final transition, in a better or worse way, by overseeing the handing in of weapons or the prison policy.

Continuing with search for revenge, with the attitude developed and drive throughout the decade of the so-called anti-terrorist agreement, make the attitude of the State crystal clear. This summer, for example, that attitude was made very clear with the Uribetxeberria case (a prisoner with a terminal disease).

Spain has repeatedly shown that there is no single group, institution, church or political power capable of driving forward a minimum political pedagogy related to conflict solving, and that is very harmful. Given the attitude and way of proceeding of the State, we have reached the following conclusions: they continue pressurising and applying their repressive logic to negatively condition the "corporate transition" of the so-called Basque national Liberation Movement. That is very serious and we must denounce it.

Eustakio Uranga, Organisation Official

THE MILITANTS MUST BE BROUGHT ONBOARD SO WE CAN REACT TO THE CHALLENGES THAT WE ARE FACING AS A TRADE UNION



Eustakio Uranga, the organisation official, stresses the difficult challenges that we will be facing as a trade union over the coming years. Aware of this, he pointed out that the militants must be brought onboard, as that will be the best guarantee to achieve a strong and robust organisation. "The brutal attack that the working class is suffering makes the need to strengthen the organisation even more essential".

-It has been four years since the last Congress and the working class has been greatly under attack during that period. How are we faring in the current climate?

-ELA's priority has always been to organise the defence of the workers. Now, if it is possible, we must make an extra effort to delve even further in that area. We therefore need to have a strong structure in the companies and in the regions to be able to respond to the challenges facing us.

It is not something that we have chosen, they have left us no other choice, as the Collective Bargaining reform has totally changed the playing field. They have destroyed the

delicate balance and it has swung in favour of management. For example, they have invalidated the sectoral provincial agreements that focused on that balance, and, in their place, priority has been given to the state or company level.

This is a real challenge for ELA, also at the organisation level. We will doubtless have to adapt our organisation model, the operating rules and the structures in order to be able to continue to be a robust institution that works for the workers.

Therefore, in this context, we will henceforth need better organisation, and strong and committed militants to be able to organise the workers in the factory and, thus, be able to fight for our rights.

-So, they have been four hard years...

-Hard no, very hard. Our officials and militants have worked very hard over these four years. Before moving on, on behalf of ELA, I would like to thank and congratulate them for that effort. Our people has had to manage redundancy agreements, bankruptcies, company closures, workers being laid off, strikes, negotiations, and everything that that involves. And if that were not enough, we have had to respond to this situation in the appropriate way, by means of fighting and mobilisation. It is essential to highlight what we are doing.

-In this economic climate, how can we organise the trade union to be more effective?

-The period between Congress has tested the organisation. We have seen our strengths, the areas for improvements and the weaknesses. For a class trade union such as ours, it is very hard to see that the workers are in much weaker situation in this difficult context. The balance of power is not just up to us. What we can do is analyse the opportunities for improvement in the framework of the organisation and take them up.

ELA is over 100 years old and we have constantly had to adapt to the situation at different times during our history. This ongoing adaptation work has injected a great deal of energy into our organisation and, thanks to that, we are now able to manage the current crisis situation, for example.

-A project such as ELA's cannot be fully understood without taking into account the membership and representation...

-Of course, those are the main foundations underpinning ELA. As regard the members, it is true that we have not achieved a positive balance in the period in the Congress, but our membership rate among the working population has increased, given the huge hike in unemployment. Since the last congress, thousands of jobs have been lost, but we have to point out that thousands of workers have also signed up to our project during the current economic crisis. We have worked hard on drumming up membership and, luckily, we have been able to attract thousands of workers. We are aware of the serious economic situation in which we find ourselves, but it is essential to return to positive figures soon. Thanks to the membership, our project can continue to be independent both in political and financial terms.

Trade union elections are closely related to membership. Apart from maintaining the results achieved so far, we must continue to gain space in this aspect, as far as possible. We have again achieved great representation, with a great difference to the other trade unions. The only condition to be able to maintain and improve our working conditions is to increase our representation in the trade union elections and our membership.

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