1931: Barcelona mass rent strike

Tom Wetzel

2006

Contents

The Wage Squeeze 3
Origins of the Rent Strike 3
Onset of the Rent Strike 4
The Authorities Clamp Down 5

Barcelona is the capital of the province of Catalonia in northeastern Spain. In the 1920s Barcelona was the fastest growing city in Europe. Modernisation and industrialisation were proceeding at a rapid pace. Migrants from nearby regions were flooding into the city to take jobs. The population of Barcelona expanded by 62% during that decade. Adjacent blue-collar suburbs like Hospitalet and Santa Coloma doubled and tripled in population. By the 1930s the province of Catalonia, with about 6 million residents, contained about 70% of the manufacturing capacity of Spain. Barcelona had become Spain's largest city, with 1.5 million people.

The rapid expansion of population led to a serious housing shortage, and rapid rent inflation, with rents rising 150% in many areas. The severe shortage of housing also led to serious problems of overcrowding and deterioration in the kind of housing available to the working class. There was some public housing — inexpensive concrete buildings — but only 2,200 units had been built. The city relied overwhelmingly on the private real estate market to provide housing.

Although there were some large-scale private apartment blocks or "estates," much of the housing was provided by a huge class of small property owners. The main landlords' organisation, the Chamber of Urban Property, had over 97,800 members in the province of Catalonia.

Shanty towns began to appear on the outskirts of the city. But these were not shanties built by the residents but by landlords who built substandard dwellings while the authorities looked the other way. By 1927 it was estimated that over 6,000 shanties had been built in Barcelona, housing 30,000 people, with more in surrounding towns. In the older parts of Barcelona many flats or houses were cut up into tiny units. Often the penny-pinching landlords refused to provide water hookups for these new units, even though the city building codes had required running water since at least 1891. By 1933 it was estimated that 20,000 flats or houses in Barcelona lacked running water.

The Wage Squeeze

While rents were rising, workers' wages in Catalonia in the 1920s were stagnant. A repressive atmosphere had made it difficult for the city's unions to press employers for wage increases.

A mass union movement had emerged in Catalonia in the World War I era, punctuated by the city-wide general strike of 1917. The main unions were organised into the Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo (National Confederation of labour — CNT), a revolutionary union movement organised on anarchist lines.

In the early 1920s the employers responded to the rising worker militancy by setting up a "yellow dog" (pro-employer) union, called the Sindicato Libre (Free Union), and hiring pistoleros (gun thugs) to assassinate well-known activists of the CNT. Hundreds of workers were shot during this campaign. Some activists of the CNT retaliated by assassinating employers who hired the pistoleros. In the late '20s the repressive atmosphere was officially sanctioned with the creation of a military dictatorship under Diego Primo de Rivera, which outlawed the CNT.

Origins of the Rent Strike

By 1930 the military dictatorship had collapsed, and the monarchy was replaced with an elected Republic in elections of April, 1931. Political groups and the CNT unions were able to organise legally.

By the early 1930s unemployment was increasing but rents were still high, compounding the crisis. Activists in the CNT had been debating since the late 1920s how to break out of limited struggles with individual employers and make the unions relevant to all social problems affecting the working class. In January of 1931 Solidaridad Obrera (Workers Solidarity — a daily newspaper owned by the CNT of Catalonia) published a series of articles calling for action around the housing crisis.

The building trades were particularly affected by rising unemployment in the early '30s and the CNT construction workers union led the way on the housing issue. On April 12th of 1931 the construction workers union called a meeting to deal with the housing crisis. At that meeting Arturo Parera and Santiago Bilbao proposed the formation of an "Economic Defense Commission of the Construction Union," with an invitation to other unions to join.

Parera justified the demand for a rent reduction on the grounds that rent inflation had led to landlords getting an excessive return on investment of 8 to 16 percent. He argued that tying up capital in unproductive forms of investment like property ownership contributed to the growing economic stagnation of the early '30s. Parera and Bilbao — both well-known members of the Federacion Anarquista Iberica (FAI) (Iberian Anarchist Federation) — would play an prominent role in the rent strike.

The Economic Defense Commission (EDC) first presented its basic demand — for a 40% reduction in rents — at a massive CNT rally held on May 1st (May Day).

The active campaign of the EDC was ramping up with a series of meetings held in the various working class neighborhoods of Barcelona and in surrounding blue-collar suburbs. On July 1 about 1,500 people attended a meeting in Barceloneta, a working class neighborhood near the docks, where many longshoremen lived. At these meetings people spoke out against landlords and merchants who they accused of robbing the people, with the complicity of the government authorities.

This series of meetings culminated in a mass meeting held at the Palace of Fine Arts on July 5th. At this meeting the following demands were accepted as the basis of the movement:

> The rent deposit (typically one month's rent) that the landlords had been taking from tenants when they first occupy a dwelling should be used as the rent for that month of July with no other rent being paid that month.
>
> After July there should be a 40% reduction in rent.
>
> Those who are unemployed should not have to pay any rent.
>
> If landlords refused to accept the rent reduction, the tenants should declare themselves on rent strike and pay no rent, always making clear that this was part of the general social movement for lower rent.

This proposal provoked an immediate reaction from the Chamber of Urban Property who denounced it as simply a violation of their legitimate property rights. To them the only problem was police enforcement of their rights. They refused any idea of a negotiated solution.

Onset of the Rent Strike

The Economic Defense Commission estimated that 45,000 people were taking part in the rent strike in July, and over 100,000 by August. Even if these estimates are a bit exaggerated,

clearly, this was a massive rent strike. There were rent strikes going on in all the working class neighborhoods of Barcelona, and a number of the outlying towns had set up their own Economic Defense Commissions and were pursuing a similar recourse.

In the elections of April 1931, the local provincial government had been captured by the Partit Esquerra Republicana Catalana (Catalan Left Republican Party) — a populist Catalan nationalist party based mainly on the professional and small-business classes and farmers. In the election the liberal leaders of the Esquerra had promised to respect civil liberties and had acknowledged that the housing crisis needed to be addressed. The CNT activists had expected that the liberals would at least give them breathing room for the grassroots organising to unfold.

Meanwhile, the landlords decided to go over the head of the local liberal leaders, appealing for intervention by the national government. The national cabinet were sympathetic to the landlords' concerns — even the Socialist labour Minister, Largo Caballero, decried the rent reduction campaign as "absurd."

The Authorities Clamp Down

On July 22nd the national government found a pretext to intervene. The rent strike in Barcelona happened to coincide with a bitter national strike by the CNT telephone worker unions against the Spanish National Telephone Co. (a subsidiary of the American multinational ITT). On July 22nd a bomb went off in Barcelona. The bombing did serious damage to telephone equipment, but there were no injuries.

Even though the telephone bombing had no connection to the rent strike, the representative of the national government in Barcelona banned a rally of the Economic Defense Commission slated for July 27th. The government also began a prosecution against the leaflets of the EDC as "seditious propaganda." The landlords had argued that since not paying your rent is a "crime," the rent strike movement should be banned.

Nonetheless, local groups were still able to coordinate actions in the various neighborhoods, operating out of CNT union halls or the worker/community centers that had been set up by the anarchist movement for classes, cultural events, and political discussions.

Families being put back into flats from which they had been evicted had begun to occur in early May, even before the rent strike got under way, and these kinds of incidents began to become more numerous. Under the existing laws, evictions were supposed to be carried out by city employees through the Municipal Court. But often the city employees were intimidated by crowds or were sympathetic to the rent strikers. There were so many local groups organised to put evicted people back into their houses that the authorities couldn't keep up. Exasperated, the Chamber of Urban Property organised its own militia to carry out evictions, with trucks to move evictees' belongings.

On August 3rd, the national government appointed a conservative lawyer, Anguera de Sojo, as the civil governor for Barcelona. Anguera de Sojo let it be known he considered the rent strike to be simply illegal and that he wouldn't allow it.

On August 17th Santiago Bilbao was arrested and held in administrative detection, which evaded filing of charges or a trial. He was arrested on the grounds he had "ridiculed authority" by speaking in favor of the rent strike at a meeting of the textile workers union. By the end of August 53 CNT activists involved in the rent strike campaign had been arrested. Administrative

detention had been one of the most hated practices of the military dictatorship of the '20s, but now it was the Republican government that was using it.

At the end of August, the 53 CNT activists in prison declared themselves on a hunger strike, which led to a prison riot on September 2nd. At the same time the CNT called for a city-wide general strike to protest the treatment of the people who had been arrested. This led to violent clashes between strikers and police. Several hundred further arrests of activists took place.

On October 2nd the civil governor demanded the names of the members of the EDC from the CNT Local Federation (central labour council). The local federation refused to cooperate and was heavily fined. From that point forward the EDC could not even publish statements in the press and went underground.

But the rent strike continued in many parts of the city.

In a letter of October 17th to the Interior Minister, the Chamber of Urban Property denounced what they called a "state of anarchy" in the outlying working class neighborhoods of Barcelona. By August the authorities had brought in the guardia — Spain's national paramilitary police force — to intervene in the strike. At one eviction in early October the guardia were unable to carry out an eviction as they faced a large crowd of pregnant women and children, who the officer of the guardia was not willing to attack.

Eventually, however, the strike began to be broken by the practice of police returning to the dwellings of people who had been put back in by their neighbors, and then arresting those tenants. By November the level of strike activity had subsided noticeably. But the rent strike continued to some extent in an underground form, with occasional incidents of conflicts with landlords.

In December the local government, controlled by the Esquerra, responded to the rent strike by passing a law that allowed tenants to make claims for "unfair" rent — a law that proved to be unenforceable and largely useless to working class renters.

In many parts of the city landlords had been forced to come to terms with their tenants, agreeing to reduced rents rather than facing the prospect of having no income for an extended period. Or to settle the conflict the landlord simply agreed to forget the unpaid rents from the period of the rent strike. As a result, many tenants felt they had at least won something from the strike.

For many of the younger activists this was the first time they had been involved in a large-scale direct action campaign, and it provided valuable experience in how a community could organise itself to challenge people with economic power and craft a solution to its problems through its own activity. In this sense it set the stage for the even more dramatic events that would transform Barcelona in the summer of 1936, with the onset of the revolution and civil war in Spain.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright

Tom Wetzel
1931: Barcelona mass rent strike
2006

Retrieved on 12th October 2020 from libcom.org.
By Tom Wetzel, edited slightly by libcom. Most of the information below is from "The Practice of Direct Action: The Barcelona Rent Strike of 1931" by Nick Rider, in the anthology *For Anarchism*, edited by D. Goodway, 1989.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net