

*By Daniel María Ripa / Translated by Robert Dyas.*

José Ángel Fernández Villa, the leader of the Mining Workers Union of Asturias since 1979 (Sindicato de los Obreros Mineros de Asturias [SOMA-FITAG-UGT]), having helped set light to barricades over the past few days, comments: “If they want a battle, we’ll give them a battle. **I’ve been 60 years on the front line of this industry and I won’t stand for repression whether it be under a dictator or a democracy.**”

The leader of SOMA, an organisation that has for decades maintained a suffocating clique network in the Asturian mining pits, became one of the most influential individuals in the PSOE [socialdemocratic party] (as a member of their federal executive between 1979-1993, 24 years as a regional member of parliament) and ran the Asturian party according to his whim, appointing and dismissing its General Secretaries as he chose. This relationship is one of the paradoxes of the mining movement that came to a head when the ten miners of the SOMA-UGT (two unions) began their sit-in in the Candín and Santiago pits on the 28th May (a sit-in that is already the longest in the history of Asturias).

To give some recent history to the current struggle: **an indefinite strike exploded at the beginning of the '90s with a force that galvanised the workers movements against the industrial restructuring** that was scorching Asturias (as covered by the Canal+ documentary *El polvorín asturiano* [The Asturian Powder Keg] - 1997). The struggles at Naval, Duro Felguera or Hunosa (Spanish mining and energy companies) with barricades, rockets, sit-ins, occupations, hunger strikes or the burning of cashpoints, have stayed in the collective Asturian memory. Unions such as the Junta de Personal Funcionario del Principado de Asturias (the Public Workers Committee of the Principality of Asturias) emerged from the struggle as did the Corriente Sindical de Izquierdas (the Common Left Union) - today a majority shareholder in companies such as Cajastur (Asturian building society). In addition, **Asturias, along with the Basque Country, now has the highest rate of general strikes in the country.**

**“If we fight like these workers they could be forced to slow up the spending cuts”** explains Rubén Rosón, student activist and native of the mining areas. It is a sentiment shared by nearly all Asturians but in practice it has yet to translate into a youth awakening against the high levels of unemployment. For Rubén Vega, professor of contemporary history in the University of Oviedo and author of a book about the mining strike of '62, it seems that this is “the last battle that will bring to a close 100 years of strike history. A romantic finale in accordance with its tradition while us University professors, for example, go passively to our graves; **it is a salutary lesson to all who want to react and do not know how.**”

## **A restructuring stretched over time**

In the middle of Christmas 1991, the leaders of the mining unions SOMA-UGT and CCOO had begun in a sit-in in the Barredo pit along with 34 workers, for 12 days, at a depth of 400 metres with the aim of pressurising concessions from the government of Felipe González (PSOE). Little by little and in a more subtle way than the miners in the current crisis, those workers also lost. **The restructuring was stretched over time in a dismantling process that has lasted 20 years.** The investment for the re-industrialisation of the region, given as compensation for the loss of the miners traditional livelihood, never became a real source of employment.

For example, **13 companies received up to 30 million euros of miners funds simply to make redundant 844 workers that they employed rather than funding long term solutions.** Of the 70,000 miners that were employed in the '70s in Asturias, less than 5,000 now remain (from 7,000 to just 60 municipalities with active mines in the country) despite a large part of the economy in these areas depending on mining (and connected industries). The corresponding demographic drain has resulted in a 25% reduction in the Asturian population the the last 3 decades, a similar process to that seen in Teruel.

It is not surprising therefore that the words “reconversion” and “restructuring” hold little credibility:

they have been buzzwords in the closure of public companies or occasionally their privatisation, enriching “friends” and making workers unemployed. This is something that Adrián Redondo, member of the regional CCOO executive (union), believes could be hidden after the current miners’ conflict. For him, “in 10 years time coal will still be necessary. There’s still no alternative. Germany has some 270,000 miners and there are companies here buying up all the mines that are closing.” The main difference is that in the private Asturias-Leon mine, headed up by Victorino Alonso, **the contractual terms for new workers are much worse than those given historically and the workers are sometimes used as a means of “blackmail” against the government.**

## **A swing of the sword to “calm the markets”**

President Mariano Rajoy (Popular Party, PP) made the final blow to the mining sector on 30th December 2011. With the objective of “calming the markets” he included the Mining Plan (Plan Miner) amongst the swathing cuts of his now historic first address of parliament, **bringing forward by 6 years the date which the EU and the government had agreed for the end of public assistance for the coal sector.** Investment for mining would reduce from 703 to 253 million euros – to all intents and purposes the closure of the sector. The workers were also made aware of technical modifications that were being demanded in the combustion process for imported coal, changes that would require multimillion euro investments. However, according to them **the dismantling of existing plants is much more costly than their maintenance.** Indeed in Andorra (Teruel), Endesa itself has recently improved its installations to ensure a further 20 years of functionality, explains Marco Negredo, a mining worker for this firm. He reminds us that both the two private mining companies in the region are equally as profitable as the principle electricity providers. He explains furthermore that in any case, in the rural world, “assistance is necessary in order to maintain economic sustainability.” First and foremost, bread on the table.

## **Light and shade in the mine**

CO2 combustion is one of the central causes of global warming. However, importing coal from outside the country, historically more economical (although now, according to the unions, less profitable than using state resources) does not solve this problem. **Sovereign energy, as with the food supply, should be based on local production networks.** Consumption should be reduced to the level of current resources and the nuclear and non-nuclear power stations replaced over the medium term. Oviedo is one of the most contaminated cities in the country due to carbon emissions and the power station at Aboño (Xixón) is one of the most contaminating plants in Europe. In this case a short term solution is obviously necessary.

Although the mining industry is not the only sector that receives state subsidies (the Casa de Alba [Spanish biggest aristocratic family] receives nearly 4 million euros in agricultural subsidies), **the utilisation of the mining subsidies has been subject to particular criticism** in Teruel, León and Asturias. The subsidies were supposed to provide a new industrial scheme in preparation for the closure of the mines. Instead they funded professional development plans, managed by the unions and connected companies, preparing young asturians for types of work that would only ever be found in Madrid. Public works were funded in cities that did not even have a mine, underused motorways were built, sports centres half completed, student halls with no students or hotels with no tourists. All this with the supposed aim of reactivating the economy.

The complicity was shared: political parties, unions (CCOO and UGT, which represent most of the workers in Spain) and businessmen all received money. Asturias benefitted from completed construction works corresponding to just 8% of the funds allocated to the miners and at least 50% of the funds were left unallocated or allocated and unused. The president of Montepío (the miners mutual society managed by the unions and headed by SOMA-UGT) is mired in accusations of corruption and the hotel and property businesses of the society have been at the centre of the scandal. Meanwhile SOMA “still maintains a tremendous influence in the pits which is only reinforced by the lack of dynamism in the territory”, claims Vega (history professor at Oviedo University). However, without the unions and mutual societies the situation could be much worse: “they have helped to avoid a more profound social deterioration in the mining basins – as happened in the US – which **avoided being a focus of social exclusion or criminality in the ’90s to the credit of**

**the miners and the unions**". The problem is that **the subsidies are "not a long term solution, merely an anaesthetic"** continues Vega. With such scandal surrounding the misuse of funds, the 15M movement of the city of Mieres has demanded an audit of the subsidies and responsibilities of the respective PSOE and PP governments.

## **Beyond desperation**

Without the mines, there is no future in the mining areas. The miners know this, as do their political representatives and indeed the whole population. What is certain is that a united and strong workers solidarity movement and union organisation gives greater intensity to the struggle, **a struggle to which the greater population is generally sympathetic**.

The aggravation of the crisis and the certainty that the PP will not give any ground – contrasted with the influence that the mining unions had enjoyed within the PSOE – mean that the labour conflict has been converted into a social conflict. Rajoy knows that to concede in any of the cuts would only give encouragement to other similar struggles. Of the 3,100 amendments that were submitted for the original cuts estimates, only 3 were approved. Redondo explains the process as follows: "the cuts being applied to the mining sector are nothing when compared with the Bankia bailout, but if they give way in this case, they'll have to do the same in other sectors: **the PP knows that there's a class struggle behind all this**". The miners feel the final fight has arrived and for this reason, Vega explains, "there is a strong element of desperation and frustration" that explains their vigor. The historian reminds us that the government's position bears all the hallmarks of "**a strategy of liquidation of the unions to which end they must beat the mining unions**". Thatcher did the same in the '80s during the 9 month mining strike and her broader neo-liberal victory was built on that base.

The resulting situation has caused a rupture in the traditional union strategy (that involves negotiating and mobilising before taking more aggressive measures) with the protest now spilling over organically. Vega explains that there exists a strange combination of "**a great union strength and a dynamic base that is not entirely under their control**: the unions are unable to call for a de-mobilisation, although they might want to, and the more radical mobilisation – barricades, pitched battles with police etc – contain a significant autonomous element". This also explains the involvement of the very young – and inexperienced – in the protests.

## **Convergences with other struggles**

To compare the mining mobilisation with other kinds of struggles, such as the 15M, would be a mistake. Each is a response to the crisis and austerity from its own sector but for precisely this reason mutual learning between the movements is also possible. The miners have demonstrated, says Adrián Redondo, that they remain "**an example in the workers movements that continues to provoke imitation and solidarity**". They have brought the classic workers struggle to the fore and can help other activists in other sectors reinterpret their own forms of resistance using their own experience. In Asturias, this "contagion" is exactly what is happening now. On the 4th June, after 8 days of miners' mobilisations, **8,000 workers from the transport sector began their own indefinite strike** that, after 5 days, achieved that the 2 transport employers reached out in support of a collective agreement. 16 union members from Thyssen, one of the largest companies in Asturias, started a sit-in on 13th June in the factory at Mieres, copying the action of the miners in their pits. After 3 days, the company conceded its previous plan to apply for an ERE (labour agreement that permits redundancies under special terms where the company claims to have insufficient funds) that would have affected 181 employees.

The initial spread of actions culminated in the occupation in front of the government buildings in Oviedo while a minority group of temporary workers began their indefinite general strike. Anonymous have also done their bit by leaking documents from the internal meetings of the coal companies. Eventually the general strike in the mining sector was successful – complete stoppage was achieved. Despite the extensive and positive media coverage of the mobilisation in Asturias, censorship on the part of the state has been the norm. **The various media communication mediums across the world have been covering the story while the state press ignores it,**

trying to avoid any spread of the struggle.

However, in the face of the idealisation of the mining struggle myth, Emilio León (union member of the Corriente Sindical Izquierdas) warns that “violence can also be accepted by a system that has survived years of cash point burnings. The battle is not just against repression but also against depression, in there being no visible means of resolution.” In as much as the demands of the miners are able to mix with other movements with more populist movements, as demonstrated in the 15M of Oviedo, the struggle against the cuts could reach new heights. For Redondo, the objective must be **“to unite all the mobilisations of great Asturian industry because what we are witnessing is a cultural collapse.”** He asks that we remember that “the miners were the meak of the 19th century and, at the base of mobilisation and struggle, are now the key example to follow.” He asks, “will the same fate await other sectors such as the new technologies of the 21st century?”

*[This article was originally published [in Spanish on June 25th 2012](#)]*

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