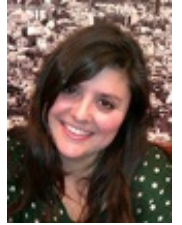


Spanish trade unions must change with the times if they are to offer a coherent voice against austerity policies.

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What role should trade unions play in opposing austerity policies? [Angie Gago](#) writes on the pressures facing Spanish trade unions since the start of the economic crisis. She notes that trade unions were already in a state of decline prior to 2008, and that many of the individuals worst hit by the crisis, such as young people and the unemployed, are not part of a trade union. These pressures necessitate that Spanish trade unions adapt and find new ways of mobilisation if they are to offer an effective voice against austerity.

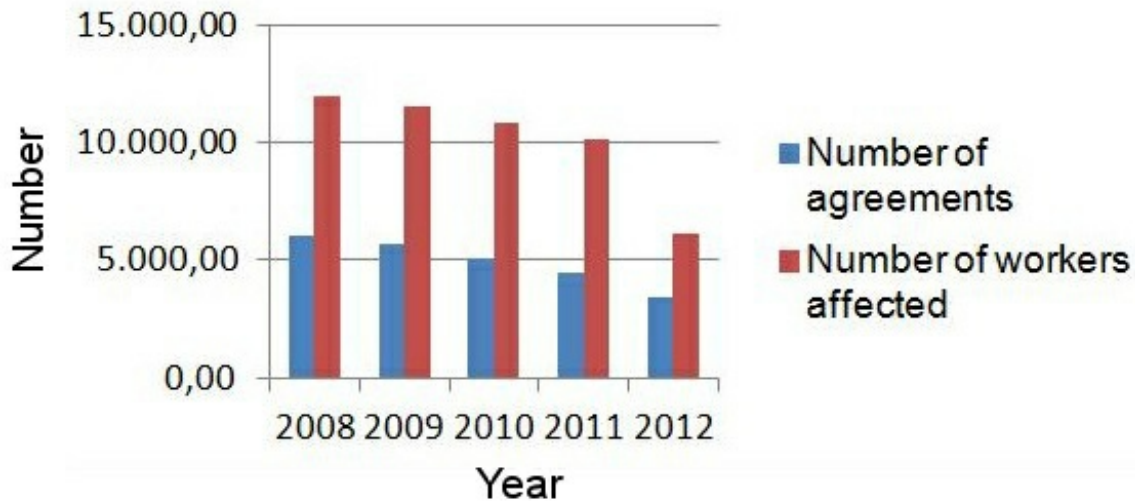


The economic crisis has raised a couple of important questions: what now is the role of trade unions vis-à-vis austerity policies? And what powers of veto do they still possess? In this new austerity environment, with governments liberalising and deregulating not only the labour market, but also the Welfare State, unions are being forced to develop new strategies. Trade unions need to explore new paths if they are to retain their major role defending the economic and social rights of the working class. At the same time, they have to maintain or revitalise their institutional, workplace and organisational power, appealing to new social groups and developing new forms of conflict resolution and new methods of responsible intervention in economic policy.

Labour organisations were already in a defensive position when the economic crisis began in European countries such as Spain in 2008. Certain factors have prompted the decline of trade unions in the last few decades, such as the restructuring of the labour market and the deregulation of workers' rights. Since the economic recession of the 1970s, there have also been changes in European labour markets, such as an increase in temporary and part-time jobs. The economic crisis has accentuated these changes and brought about others, such as the unemployment problem that is significantly affecting Spain. These factors have also contributed to weakening the power of trade unions.

Moreover, the power of trade unions has decreased following recent labour reforms, which undermined their autonomy and changed the rules regulating their representation in the workplace. To this situation we also need to add the tendency towards the decentralisation of collective bargaining, and the current crisis in the negotiation of [collective agreements](#). In fact, as my Chart shows, in the last five years the number of collective agreements signed in Spain has been reduced by almost 50 per cent, from 5,987 in 2008 to 3,378 in 2012.

Chart: Workplace agreements registered in Spain (2008 – 2012)



Note: Drawn up by author from data from the Ministry of Employment and Social Security

The unions' diminished influence in the workplace and the fact that they have been unable to halt austerity measures since the beginning of the crisis may be interpreted as a consequence of the changes highlighted above.

The economic crisis has eroded the processes of social concertation in Spain. This phenomenon, in combination with trade unions' growing inability to influence political decision-making processes, could explain why the unions have used general strikes to oppose some measures such as labour reforms, salary cuts for public-sector workers and pension reforms. However, these confrontational strategies have not forced governments to back down. Without taking into account the strikes' results in terms of workers' support, we can affirm that strikes, as traditional opposition measures, are insufficient to oppose the unpopular austerity measures.

In organisational terms, trade unions face some strategic questions related to their power in the workplace and their constituencies: Which sectors of society are they able to mobilise? Are the sectors most affected by austerity measures being represented by the unions? Part of the answer is that labour organisations have traditionally relied on relatively stable supporters from industry and the public sector (insiders), and they are now facing significant difficulties relating to the new social groups affected by austerity measures, mainly young people, precarious workers and the unemployed (outsiders). This is an extremely important point as the evidence suggests that the lack of representation of outsiders has undermined the veto powers of unions, as they struggle to mobilise this social sector.

Dealing with this new challenge, labour organisations seem to be attached to the organisational models and strategies of the past. The biggest trade unions in Spain, the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the General Unions of Workers (UGT), continue to apply the 'service model' and they have not yet developed other ways of increasing the number of their affiliates in sectors dominated by temporary contracts and instability. Labour organisations are failing to explore other varieties of unionism, such as social movement unionism or community unionism that are characterised by the creation of informative campaigns in workplaces, with workers playing a greater role in the decision-making processes of the organisations.

In institutional terms, trade unions also face some challenges: How are they going to recover the importance of concertation and social dialogue that existed before the crisis? How are they going to increase their veto capacity? How should they relate to political parties? The CCOO and the UGT are continuing to develop their role as responsible social partners. They rely on mechanisms like dialogue and concertation to gain political influence, but the rules of the game have changed. Due to the lack of consolidation among Spanish corporatist institutions, the unions are relying on a weak social dialogue model that is highly dependent on the government's will. However,

trade unions have not reacted strategically to the new governing style of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the People's Party (PP), which have very often used unilateral intervention to apply austerity measures.

Another reason for the declining ability of labour organisations to veto austerity plans is their lack of alliances with political parties because of the disappearance of the traditional understanding between labour and social democratic parties. Despite meetings with left-wing parties, such as the United Left (IU), and the building of the social organisation, *Cumbre Social* (Social Summit), unions are struggling to build a social majority to advance their alternative programme to austerity.

Overall, Spanish trade unions have used insufficient resources to relate to outsiders and, in the state sphere, they are still relying on the models of the past while failing to develop new mobilisation strategies and alliances. Labour organisations have so far failed to adapt to new times and appear conservative, overly dependent on past strategies.



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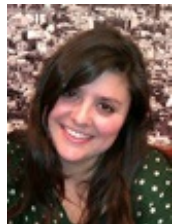
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Angie Gago holds a Journalism Degree (University of Seville, Spain), a Master's in International Relations (London Metropolitan University) and a Master's in Politics and Democracy (UNED, Spain). She is a PhD student on the Politics and Democracy programme (UNED, Spain) and is studying the role of trade unions in society and their strategies vis-à-vis austerity measures.



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