Breaking fragmentation through mobilization. The development of a collective identity during Movistar's contractors' and technicians' strike in Spain

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Abstract

This article contributes to the debates over the development of solidarity among a fragmented workforce by discussing the case of a strike in which the technicians and contractors at Movistar in Spain were involved. The strike involved employees and self-employed working for different contractors. The results highlight that 'spontaneous' mobilizations can help to develop a collective identity in fragmented employment systems. More concretely, they show that the lack of involvement of unions at the beginning of the strike helped to generate an identity involving all workers that wasn't based on occupational or contractual status. However, the findings also highlight that the later involvement of independent unions, which respected the assembling of workers as a space of decision, was key to the sustainment of the collective identity. Furthermore, the results show that mobilizing can be a strong organizing tool in contexts characterized by weak institutional regulation, fragmentation and precarious working conditions.

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Introduction

In the context of increasingly fragmented labour markets the mobilization of workers with atypical or non-standard employment is a matter of concern for academics in employment and industrial relations. This discussion centres around the factors that contribute towards or constrain the development of solidarity and a collective identity among contingent workers (Simms and Dean, 2015). Furthermore, the increased use of subcontracting and the spread of self-employment poses additional difficulties for organized labour. Following this debate, Pernicka (2006) has argued that the heterogeneous and highly individualized working conditions of self-employed workers challenges the traditional aggregation of interests by unions (based on workplace interests) to promote solidarity and develop a collective identity. In this discussion, Rubery (2015) has highlighted that in fragmented employment systems, workers face increased difficulties in identifying the organization they are working for and that this has led to an increased invisibility of employers. Moreover, Doellgast et al. (2018) have highlighted the crucial role that inclusiveness of employment and collective bargaining institutions, as well as the forms of worker identity and identification, play in promoting inclusive solidarity. However, little is known about the processes behind the development and sustainment of solidarity among workers in fragmented employment systems. This article aims to contribute to this debate by providing insights from a relevant case: the 2015 strike against the reduction of the price of work among Movistar's[1] installation and maintenance technicians in Spain.

This Movistar strike showed characteristics that differentiated it from traditional strikes. First, the strike broke the fragmentation generated by subcontracting because employees and self-employed workers from different levels of service provision joined the strike. Second, it lasted between 71 and 78 days in a country where strikes are institutionalized and are normally time-restricted. Furthermore, the strike was initiated by an assembly organized using social media and direct communication. The creation of a collective identity happened in a sector with weak union presence and, to some extent, against the policies of the main unions. Moreover, the mobilization and protest used tools and repertoires related to social movements, such as occupations, elite alliance and actions, to damage the image of the brand, along with more classic forms of labour protest (picketing, strike funds, etc.). The strike was suspended (not cancelled) after more than 70 days across Spain. In only two cities, Barcelona and Bilbao, did the strike last effectively until the end, while in other cities the participation dropped off over time. The outcome of the strike was largely positive. This included some improvements in working conditions but, more importantly, the establishment of a space for mobilization and the potential increase of regulation in a highly precarious, deregulated and fragmented sector. Moreover, in the case of Bilbao, most of the strikers' demands were achieved, as will be discussed below. In this regard, the research question is to understand how in a highly fragmented employment system the strike was developed and how it was sustained over time.

In order to answer this question this article is organized as follows: in the first part, a discussion of mobilizing, organizing and the role of leadership is presented, and the challenges faced by atypical or contingent workers when attempting to develop a collective identity are discussed.

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[1] Movistar is a multi-national telecommunications company based in Spain which originated from the privatization of state-owned Telefónica in the 1990s. The company has the first position in broadband (40.5% of the total) and mobile phone line (29.6% of the total) supply in Spain, according to the National Commission of the Markets and Competency (2018).

In the next section, a brief note about the Spanish industrial relations system is provided in order to understand the context and dynamic of the strike. The third section discusses the case of Movistar, the development of a precarious sector for the installation and maintenance technicians and the start of the strike , while the next section deals with the methods. The findings are then presented in two sections. The first discusses the processes related to the development of a collective identity in fragmented workers; and the second section identifies how the strike (and the collective identity) persisted. The final section analyses the findings and highlights its main contributions to theory.

Mobilizing, organizing and the development of a collective identity

The mobilization theory, postulated in the field of industrial relations by Kelly (1998), has provided valuable insights for understanding the dynamics of labour mobilization. The approach considers that the existence of a grievance is not enough for strike action to occur. It is argued that an individual perceived sense of injustice should be accompanied by the development of a collective sense of injustice as grounded in a recognition that workers' interests are different from the employers'. Furthermore, the theory suggests that workers must attribute the source of the grievance to the employer and, crucially, highlights the pivotal role that union activist leadership plays in framing the grievance and in channelling the discontent into collective action.

Different contributions have added greater complexity to Kelly's proposals. First, it has been highlighted that injustice is not the only factor in explaining mobilization. Several scholars have emphasized the importance of dimensions of betrayal and have pointed out how collective offences and dignity demands play an important role in labour conflicts (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012, Lyddon et al., 2015). Furthermore, Pearson et al. (2010) and Jenkins (2013) have highlighted the importance of engaging with all dimensions of workers' social lives to understand how social structures provide the context for mobilization opportunities.

On the other hand, the role of union leadership has also been a matter of discussion. Darlington (2006) has pointed out the pivotal role that radical or leftist union leadership can play in providing cohesion to discontent and by facilitating the political framing of the conflict from workers' immediate economic grievances to broader social and political concerns. The crucial role of small leftist organizations or militants in providing organizing resources to precarious workers has also been highlighted recently by Manky (2018) in his study of strikes in the mining industry in Chile. On the other hand, the work of Atzeni (2009) has contested the key role that mobilization theory gives to union leadership. The author suggested the concept of 'spontaneous solidarity' to identify the moments in which a granted system and set of values, such as management's right to manage, authority relations and bureaucratic control are contested and workers can generate alternative spaces of collectivization. Furthermore, Atzeni and Ghigliani (2013) have emphasized the role of 'collective leaderships' to sustain and develop grass-roots mobilizations. In this debate, Darlington (2019) has emphasized that rank-and-file members can have an active role in translating grievances into a sense of injustice, highlighting that what appears to be 'spontaneous' doesn't mean that there are no leaders. Following this discussion, a recent contribution by Holgate et al. (2018) has emphasized the importance of bottom-up approaches ('deep-organizing') in the sustainment of workers' movements over time in opposition to top-down approaches ('mobilizing'), which they characterize as started by union leadership. Crucially, the authors argue that the process of

collective organizing and the development of grass-roots leaders are the prime conditions for successful mobilizing over time. In summary, these questions are central to understanding different labour and union strategies as they reflect the complex relationship between leadership, bureaucracy and internal democracy (Hyman, 2007, Darlington and Upchurch, 2012) and help to understand strategic unions' choices in terms of the representation of specific groups of workers (Hodder and Edwards, 2015). Furthermore, in a recent discussion Darlington (2019) has highlighted the need to pay attention to the potential conflict of interests between rank-and-file members and full-time union officers and how this can impact workplace collectivism, either facilitating or hindering its manifestation.

These debates engage with the idea of collectivism and how this is developed in the workplace and in wider spheres of society. In their discussion, Simms and Dean (2015) have pointed out that central to the mobilization of contingent workers is the process of 'solidarity building', understood as the ability to build group cohesion around collectively defined interests by union leadership. This engages with the analysis of Doellgast et al. (2018) that identifies two variables to support labour power and enhance solidarity dynamics. The first variable relates to institutional features and considers the inclusiveness of employment institutions to constrain employers' abilities to use precarious contracts or contingent work. The second concerns the ways in which worker identity is constructed and how identification is promoted to include inclusive solidarity among different segments of the workforce. Inclusivity of institutions and worker's identity remain crucial to sustaining a collective identity and solidarity dynamics.

The key issue in this debate, as pointed out by Simms (2012), concerns the fact that unions (in the British context, in her analysis, but this can be cautiously identified in other contexts) have tended to emphasize workplace solidarities and to represent a narrow set of interests, therefore missing the opportunity to emphasize solidarity that unites different groups of workers in different workplaces. Furthermore, scholars have emphasized that collective action needs to be analysed as an ongoing protest, including understandings of the start of the mobilization but also of the dynamics and processes of the strike (Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). Likewise, McBride et al. (2013) have highlighted the importance of the work of running the strike (campaigning, meeting, mobilization, etc.) to sustain a collective identity.

In this context, McBride and Martinez Lucio (2011) have highlighted the relevance of dimensions such as past occupational experiences and the legacy of workplace exploitation as important factors for the development of a collective character or collective sentiment. Following this discussion, the categories of collectivism outlined by Stephenson and Stewart (2001) are of special interest since they identify three categories. First, trade union collectivism, related to trade union-based activity and the collective interest of workers. Second, workplace collectivism, which derives from antipathetic employee responses to management but also includes informal cultural and social relationships in the workplace. And third, everyday life collectivism, related to the networks of support which employees participate in outside the workplace.

In summary, existing research has identified the complexities that workers and unions face in developing solidarity in fragmented employment systems. However, research is still needed to understand how workers in fragmented employment systems engage in collective action and the processes and dimensions that permit the collective identity and mobilization to persist over time.

Mobilisation in the Spanish context

The Spanish industrial relations system has been characterized by a strong degree of union institutionalization and industrial relations processes. The system established in the transition to democracy in the 1980s guarantees a regulatory and institutional role of unions that has led to a relatively high degree of collective bargaining coverage on the basis of the *erga omnes* effect (extension of collective agreements to all the workers in the sector and territory of application). Furthermore, unions that obtained the status of being one of the 'most representative unions' in work councils' election results are provided with expanded resources and regulatory capacities.

The system was established with the aim of promoting corporatist practices to ensure, at the same time, wage moderation and consensus. The aftermath has been that the main unions have moved from mobilization and direct action in the '70s and '80s to more institutionalized strategies in cases of restructuring (Martinez Lucio et al., 2007), trying to compensate their low associational and market power (low union membership and high unemployment and precarious contracts). In this regard, it has been highlighted that, despite the existence of sophisticated industrial relations and 'corporatist' style practices, their effect at workplace level is low due to a weak union presence and the dominance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (Martinez Lucio et al., 2007).

In this context, the 2008 recession hit Spain especially hard. The deep economic crisis has been accompanied, since 2010, by several labour market reforms that specifically targeted collective bargaining institutions and crucially diminished the institutional capacities of unions (López-Andreu, 2019). The response from organized labour was three general strikes between 2010 and 2012, but since 2013 there has been a low degree of labour mobilization and 'crisis corporatism' agreements based on wage moderation have dominated (Gonzalez and Luque, 2014; López-Andreu, 2018).

Furthermore, criticism of the historical trajectory of the main unions, traditionally circumscribed by social movements and radical unions, has been a feature of the 15-M Movement that started to protest and occupy main squares in Spain in May 2011.[2] For this mobilization wave, unions were too embedded in the social and political model that led to the economic and social crisis and were considered co-responsible for the situation. Furthermore, this has been linked to the emergence of the 15-M Movement and other grass-roots movements (anti-eviction platforms, *yayoflautas* – retired people against austerity – and other social movements) that are based in assemblies characterized by horizontality and direct communication in direct opposition to institutionalized and bureaucratic practices (Las Heras and Ribera-Almandoz, 2017). Although Movistar's strike is not strictly related to the effects provoked by the reforms of collective bargaining, the features of the strike cannot be separated from a general context that revitalized grass-roots movements, assemblies and direct action as mechanisms to express discontent in a context of suspicion regarding the bureaucratic practices of the main unions.

Case context

Telefónica-Movistar was originally a state-owned company (Telefónica) that was privatized in the 1990s and became the biggest Spanish multi-national (Movistar). Following the fate of

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[2] The 15-M was an anti-austerity movement that originated in social networks and began with demonstrations and occupations of main squares in Spanish cities to protest for the application of austerity policies in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. The movement defended direct democracy and criticized the bureaucratization of main Spanish political parties and unions.

other public-owned telecommunications companies, the company undertook several redundancies in different stages. From 1993 to 2007 direct staff at Telefónica decreased from more than 74,000 employees to just above 26,000 (Diaz Valero, 2008: 11). In parallel, the use of contractors to provide services led to the development of a sector characterized by low wages. The business model resembles the boundary-less organization identified by Mackenzie (2008) in his discussion of the privatization of an Irish telecommunications company, in which the growth of an unregulated low-paid sector relates to the separation of the provision of services (subcontractors) from the running of the network structure. In this process of restructuring, the main unions at Telefónica (the two biggest Spanish unions, CCOO and UGT) followed a 'compensation strategy' (Rodriguez Ruiz, 2014) consisting of granting favourable exit conditions for insiders in order to manage what were seen as inevitable redundancies. In parallel, the level of business at the company persisted and even increased due to their quasi-monopoly over the running of the network structure and the growth of the internet. This led to the expansion of the outsourced sector working directly for the company, including doing tasks undertaken by technicians responsible for installation and maintenance.

In the early 2000s, industrial conflict affected subcontractors when rank and file unionists and small unions promoted mobilization to regulate the working conditions of the sector. The result was the application of the metal sector's national agreement. This agreement established basic conditions of pay and working time. Since the mid-2000s the subcontracting companies encouraged employees to become bogus self-employed, meaning workers in subordinate employment disguised as autonomous work (Frade and Darmon, 2005). This included incentives such as an unfair dismissal redundancy payment and the provision of self-employed contracts in lieu of direct employment. Under these conditions the newly self-employed were required to rent their uniforms and their vans from the contractor (always with the Movistar brand on them). This led to the development of a second level of contractors, characterized by a mix of employees and bogus self-employed, mainly in micro-companies (less than 5 workers) and often owned by previous employees. In this second level, employees and the self-employed are required to work to objectives (points), and they usually do long working hours (often 10–12 hours per day).

In March 2015, a change in the commercial contract that fixes the price of work for contractors was announced by Movistar. This resulted in foreseen reductions of 30%, added to cuts in previous years of about 10–15%. This announcement and the immediate impact on the price of work led to individuals taking the initiative to organize an assembly of several employees and self-employed (without participation of unions in the organization) in Madrid. The assembly was gathered using WhatsApp groups, which accumulatively reached about 1,000 contacts. The assembly of workers declared an indefinite strike using the union Alternativa Sindical de Trabajadores – AST (that was declared illegal due to some formal problems). The movement spread to other regions in the following days, maintaining the assembly as a form of organization, with the involvement of several anarcho-syndicalist, independent and leftist unions, including Confederación General del Trabajo – CGT (who legally called for the strike at national level on 27 March 2015), Comisiones de Base (COBAS), Ezker Sindikalaren Konbergentzia (ESK) in the Basque Country and En Construcció in Barcelona (all of them with elected members in Telefónica's work councils and some of them in contractors' work councils). The movement was autonomous and territorially decentralized but nevertheless established some coordinated demands: pay increases up to the agreed level in the metal sector (about 1,200 Euros net per month) and voluntary moves from self-employed to employee status.

Methods

The Movistar strike is used to provide insights about the processes and contextual issues that shape and facilitate organization and mobilization of workers in fragmented labour markets. The methods used included semi-structured in-depth interviews with the workers on strike. Interviews were identified as a suitable technique to research lived experiences of past events. The interest is focused on the narratives of the workers on strike as lived experiences, with a special focus on how these workers narrate their experiences but also what their stories are about (Chase, 2011). In this regard, the aim is to understand the experience of the strike and also how the participants made sense of it and developed a narrative identifying the key issues of their experience. In addition, rank and file unionists with a role in the strike have been interviewed as key informants. Furthermore, two interviews with partners of the strikers who participated in the mobilizations and actions in Barcelona were also included, as this emerged as a crucial factor during the research. Access was granted to unionists and social movement activists involved in the strike through existing contacts of the researcher. This allowed the researcher to explain the research in the workers' assemblies to recruit participants. The participants were informed of the research conditions and a record of their agreement to participate was taken. Interviews were recorded and analysed using thematic analysis. This analysis was organised around key themes arising from the literature review, namely the processes related to collective identity-building, the role of union leadership and the wider social context in supporting mobilisation and the importance of everyday practices in sustaining the collective identity.

A total of 28 interviews were carried out in Barcelona and Bilbao – the two cities where the strike lasted consistently until the end – between September and October 2016. In this regard, the stories collected represent experiences of success in developing and sustaining a collective identity, albeit with different outcomes. In Barcelona, 18 interviews were undertaken, including two with rank and file unionists (one of them a woman), two with partners of the strikers, nine with employees and five with self-employed persons. In Bilbao, 10 interviews were carried out, consisting of two with rank and file unionists (one of them a woman), six with self-employed persons and two with employees. The different distribution of interviews reflects the different structure in each city, with employees dominating in Barcelona and self-employed workers dominating in Bilbao. All strikers interviewed were men aged between 30 and 52 years and three were born outside Spain (Ecuador and Peru). Whilst efforts were made to try to achieve a better gender balance, it is important to note that this is a strongly male-dominated sector, hence the lack of balance achieved.

Findings

Developing a collective identity

The start of the conflict in March 2015 was relatively unexpected by union activists. Both the long-term history of downgrading working conditions in the sector (including a previous reduction in the price of work) and the existing fragmentation of employment meant that an immediate response was not foreseen. The interviews reveal that the rationale for attending the assemblies and joining the strike included a mix of feelings of injustice (mainly related to economic reasons) alongside collective dignity and mistreatment.

> 'We were working a lot of hours for coming back home with almost no money after paying the rent of the van, clothes (…) So they make us equal, equally fucked' (self-employed, 32, BCN).

> 'I think they live in another world, who can think they can do this and we will not revolt? How do they think we live?' (self-employed, 41, Bilbao).

Furthermore, the immediate economic reasons that dominate the narratives of the self-employed sit alongside those of employees and workers with a longer trajectory in the sector and with the memory of a (relatively) well-paid and respected profession. In this case, the role of occupational memory (McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011) and the need to defend the profession was key in the rationale for the mobilization. The perspective of a further downgrading of working conditions in a sector already affected by a trajectory of impoverishment appeared to be pivotal in rebelling against the imposed change. As one employee pointed out:

> 'It was a matter of dignity, but also because I was thinking that the next step would have been forcing me to be self-employed' (employee, 40, BCN).

On the other hand, the interviews show the contradiction that some self-employed workers faced when going on strike. Some of them bought into the entrepreneurial identity. In what they recall as being 'good years', they could make a lot of money on the basis of very long working hours, often including weekends. This established a sense of being a 'small business man' among some workers, especially among those who commanded small groups of workers and competed with other self-employed workers to get more tasks. Crucially, their views change after joining the strike:

> 'I thought I was an "entrepreneur", I look at other colleagues as competitors (...). So, to be honest, I went to strike to get more money. (...) But not now, they are my colleagues (...) and during the strike I rediscovered my family, I went to pick up my kid and played with him, I played football with my friends... So now I value the time' (self-employed, 43, Bilbao).

This quote exemplifies many interviewees' views. Together they highlight the transformative character of the strike (McBride et al., 2013), including how the dynamics of the strike led not only to the development and sustainment of a collective identity but also to changes in individual's lives and values. Moreover, it shows that solidarity did not exist as a constant factor, waiting for collective action to happen, but is produced and reproduced during the strike. The latter highlights the importance of the processes and dynamics of the strike and how solidarity is achieved 'in the making' of the mobilization (Fantasia, 1988). Crucially, this established the basis for a collective identity in the medium to long term, which was necessary for reconstructing the fragmented identities of the sector.

A key determinant in the development of a collective identity was the fight for the recognition of the assembly as the legitimate negotiating actor during the strike. In the interviews the strikers showed some bitterness towards the practices of the main unions in previous conflicts and disputes in the early 2000s. In these narratives, what came to the forefront was the crucial role that the assembly played in encouraging them to join the strike. Specifically, they pointed out that they attended the first assembly with caution and decided to join the strike due to the massive attendance and, importantly, because they felt that there was no manipulation by the main unions. However, it is worth noting that the assembly did not legally represent the workers and the strike was called, instrumentally, by a union (under the command of the assembly). In this context, the success of the strike in important regions led most representative unions of the

metal sector (CCOO and UGT) to call for a 'parallel' strike of two days per week during three weeks in May. This allowed them to engage in negotiations with the contractors. This was seen by the strikers as a strategy to use the strike (that these unions hadn't called) instrumentally to gain minor concessions:

> 'They try to negotiate on our behalf with the contractors [the most representative unions of the metal sector] … and we said no, we are the ones on strike, where have they been all this time? (…) we had clear demands and we wanted to negotiate with Movistar, not the contractors' (employee, 41, BCN).

A framework agreement in the metal sector was reached between CCOO, UGT and the contractors on 5 May 2015 and the two main unions called for the end of the strike. The agreement acknowledged the existing problems in the sector and established a framework agreement to further negotiate regulatory gaps. The immediate measures included a 10% increase in pay for work done within the 'points system', compensation for work carried out at weekends with extra pay or holidays, end of fines for 'bad tasks' (tasks considered by the contractors to be poorly performed) and a reduction of subcontracting (a target of 70% direct employees of the contractor and 30% in the second level of contractors or self-employed of the first contractor). At this stage, although some issues (especially the fines, that were considered by workers as being applied arbitrarily by the contractors) were well received, the agreement was refused by the strikers' assemblies and the dispute continued. Their main concern was the enforcement and application of the improved measures in a sector affected by the price competition provoked by Movistar. Furthermore, it was considered that the strike was effective and therefore more concessions could have been obtained. However, the aftermath was that the feelings of misrecognition and the existence of a negotiating body without the participation of the strikers helped to further increase group cohesion and to underpin a collective identity around demands for respect and dignity which resulted in the crystallization of the slogan 'we fight, we negotiate'.

The participation in the strike by a minority of union activists from Telefónica, different levels of contractors and the self-employed helped to frame their demands to a company that dominates the market (Movistar) and to reconstruct the fragmented occupational identities generated by business strategies. This reinforced the recognition dimension of the strike: in this case, to be recognized as workers delivering services for Movistar. Hence, they raised their demands and wanted to negotiate with Movistar as the company that sets up the price of work for the contractors:

> 'So then in the assembly he [a Telefónica unionist] asked us: "How much are you paid to install a phone line and internet in a house? (...) So I am paid three times more. Do you think this is fair?" This is the problem of the sector (...) the contactors always say we cannot pay more, Movistar is cutting the money and so on and, irrespective of if this is true or not, our demands were directed to Movistar because they dominate the market, the Contractors just do what they say' (self-employed, 33, Bilbao).

This strategy also had the aim of escaping fragmented negotiations with the contractors, who could always argue that the price of work established by Movistar affected their margin of manoeuvre. On the other hand, and more crucially, by doing so they were confronting the employers' rationale of divide and rule developed by subcontracting and helped to create a collective identity of workers in the sector. Furthermore, the establishment of the assembly as a space of decision of all workers on strike resembles the 'collective leadership' identified by Atzeni and Ghigliani (2013) and reinforced the collective identity of the strikers.

Sustaining a collective identity

The development and maintenance of solidarity as an ongoing process was a particular challenge faced during the strike. Although strong strike groups persisted in Madrid, Barcelona and the Basque Country the impact was minor in other places. However, although the service was highly interrupted in these key areas (the strikers knew this from their contacts in the customer services managing incidences and customer complains), the media coverage was very low. According to the strikers, the power of Movistar as one of the main advertisers in newspapers, TV and radio was blocking media coverage and further action was needed to increase the impact of the strike. The strike entered into a new phase, particularly in Barcelona, where damaging the brand and gaining visibility remained crucial:

> 'We realized that we needed to develop new strategies. Some of us participate in social movements and proposed to do actions of civil disobedience. We thought that the peaceful occupation of a central building would help to visualize the conflict and to put pressure on the company' (employee, 49, Barcelona, unionist and Telefónica worker).

The first occupation of the Mobile World Centre of Movistar in the centre of Barcelona took place on 9 May and terminated a few hours later after promises of negotiation by Movistar but that the company did not go on to fulfil. This led to another occupation lasting seven days that finished on 30 May and that strengthened the visibility and media presence of the conflict. Furthermore, the outcome of the first occupation reinforced feelings of misrecognition and disrespect from Movistar and further entrenched workers' cohesion and collective identity. This suggests again the relevance of recognition and dignity in fuelling collective protest.

In this phase of the strike, the strikers became engaged in various activities to increase the visibility of the strike. The interviewees reveal that these activities helped to sustain the collective identity, especially important in moments in which the fight seemed to be facing a dead end. In this regard, activities related to 'deep-organizing' (Holgate et al., 2018) during the strike appeared as a crucial factor for the long-term protest. As one striker says when remembering the moments in which hope was low:

> '(...) trying to keep up the morale, always doing a lot of activities together: blood donations, climbing naked in the ladders in front of the company [laughs], the assemblies, picketing ... all those things make you not think too much and it helps to keep the morale high' (self-employed, 30, Bilbao)

The engagement in diverse and often innovative activities was directly related to radical and independent unions participating in the strike with their contacts with social movements and their ways of mobilizing. They helped to build coalitions with existing social movements in both cities, especially in Barcelona, where wider social movements were involved. This included the collaboration in some actions with the *iaioflautas*, an organization of retired people fighting against austerity and cutbacks, which helped in the logistics of the second occupation and solidarity-building with community and neighbourhood associations. Furthermore, it helped to build up 'elite alliances' (Tarrow, 1998: 163) with leftist candidates, enhancing possibilities to access government in major cities, such as Barcelona or Badalona. The so-called 'compromise of the ladders' consisted of the commitment of politicians at local and regional level in Barcelona not to sign contracts for the provision of telecommunications services with Movistar if they did not improve the working conditions in the outsourced companies. In this context, the strikers also had meetings with the Labour Inspection of Catalonia to discuss the status of the self-employed. Moreover, the second occupation ended with the mediation of the newly elected mayor of Barcelona to ensure negotiations with Telefónica and the contractors.

This leadership was also crucial in maintaining the strike in Barcelona and Bilbao ahead of other places (such as Madrid and others), where the effective strike ended before. In the case of Barcelona, links with wider social movements and community ties allowed the strikers to obtain a loan with a cooperative financial entity to establish a strike fund. The guarantee of several organizations and individuals granted the loan.[3] In Bilbao, where fewer workers were involved, a more classical strike fund based on individual and collective contributions was set up immediately after the start of the strike. Conversely, in the areas in which a strike fund was not set up or was not developed the continuation of the strike was more complicated.

The strike was suspended after 71 days in Barcelona and one week later in Bilbao. In the case of Barcelona the decision to cease striking was taken, not without discussion, due to the erosion of the strikers and the strike fund and the need to reorganize forces. Furthermore, as a result of the relationship with local politicians in Barcelona the Labour Inspection analysed the situation of the sector for the first time and established that the work of employees of the contractors and self-employed was an illegal assignment of workers. The company appealed the decision and a long judicial process started. Conversely, in Bilbao, the group of strikers was small and more united and the strike lasted for one more week until they reached an agreement satisfying their demands, including pay increases of between 40 and 80% and the voluntary move of the self-employed to employees of the contractors.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the strike of Movistar's technicians provides valuable insights about the mobilization of workers in fragmented employment systems. Taking into consideration the two variables highlighted by Doellgast et al. (2018) – the inclusivity of employment regulation institutions and workers' identities – those individuals working for Movistar's contractors face huge difficulties in engaging in a collective identity. In spite of the formally inclusive characteristics of the Spanish industrial relations system they were totally or partially excluded from regulation due to dominant union strategies that prioritized workers from the main company (Telefónica). Similarly, workers' identities were fragmented by outsourcing as well as management strategies to escape regulation and fragment the labour process. In the case of Movistar's contractors' workers, the formally inclusive institutions didn't help to create a collective identity. In this context, the affected workers developed alternative mechanisms to traditional union practices in order to improve their working conditions.

Our findings have identified several factors that supported the development of a collective identity. First, occupational memory (McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011) played a key role in reconstructing the collective labour process. Second, the findings suggest that collective dimensions related to dignity and, furthermore, recognition, played a crucial role in workers' mobilization, and not solely injustice. This corroborates the findings of Blyton and Jenkins (2012), among others, and highlights the importance of dignity and the demands of being treated as a human being in the workplace (Hodson, 2001) as sources of workers' grievances. Third, the findings highlight that the fact that the mobilization was not channelled by unions and was not based in specific workplace identities was crucial in permitting the development of a collective identity and in overcoming fragmentation. Following Simms (2012), we argue that narrow identities based on the workplace and, in the Spanish case, based on the institutional regulation of specific workplaces, make the development of solidarity approaches based on class solidarity of workers difficult both within and between workplaces. Likewise, the use of

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[3] The strikers also used innovative ways to return the loan. They organized a relay race from Barcelona to Bilbao (about 600 km) in which people in solidarity subsidized each kilometre (paying a fee). This allowed them to fully repay the loan.

social media at the beginning of the conflict facilitated an inclusive strategy that didn't discriminate workers by status, which is one of the potentialities of social media in union-organizing as identified by Geelan and Hodder (2017). Furthermore, the relative homogeneity of the workforce in the sector helped the development and sustainment of the collective identity.

Moreover, our findings highlight the role of mobilization as pivotal in the development of the collective identity. Crucially, they reveal the importance of the production and reproduction of the collective identity during the strike. Engagement in activities during the strike such as occupations, blood donations, protests in front of company's shops, etc. helped to sustain solidarity and show the importance of 'everyday collectivism' (Stephenson and Stewart, 2011) during the strike. This collectivism engages with the importance of the work of running the strike (McBride et al., 2013) to sustain and reproduce the collective identity. Moreover, in the sustainment of the collective identity, the findings suggest the pivotal role of the 'militancy of the employers' (Fantasia, 1988) as a source of solidarity. This was pivotal at the start of the strike but gained importance and affected the development and dynamics of the strike. Movistar's and the contractors' lack of recognition of the assembly as a negotiating actor, as well as episodes of disrespect such as the unaccomplished promises of negotiation to end the first occupation, reinforced the collective identity and radicalized the protest. On the other hand, our findings reveal differences with Holgate et al.'s (2018) discussion on 'deep-organizing' as a condition for long-term mobilization. We have identified that in a sector with a low level of organization, 'spontaneous' organization and mobilization of workers leads to the organization of the sector as a whole and, therefore, that mobilizing can itself be an organizing practice.

The collective identity developed has parallels with Atzeni's (2009) view of 'spontaneous collectivism' derived from the labour process. However, we agree with Hyman (1999) that solidarities are constructed and, from this point of view, it was the specific way the strike started and was organized without signifying differences between occupational statuses that facilitated the development of the collective identity. This suggests that specific leadership plays a crucial role in 'building solidarities' (Simms and Dean, 2015). In Movistar's strike the leadership of specific workers and the lack of union presence at the beginning of the strike was a determining factor. Following Darlington (2019) the rank-and-file members and the workers themselves developed an 'activist leadership' that helped to frame the grievances as a matter of collective injustice affecting all workers. However, the involvement of independent and radical unions was pivotal in the further development of the strike. First, they provided the legal framework for the strike and respected the assembly as the space of decision for the workers on strike. This position, which differentiated them from the policies of main unions that were viewed as too bureaucratic by the workers, appeared to be crucial for the participation of workers in the strike and reinforced their decision to participate in the mobilization, which resembles the 'collective leadership' identified by Atzeni and Ghigliani (2013). The latter also reflects a context in which grass-roots movements and assemblies were revitalized and safeguarded against more bureaucratic and institutionalized practices. Darlington (2006) has remarked on the importance of political traditions and institutions in union leadership strategies. In the case analysed, the grass-roots tradition unions involved helped to reinforce the collective identity by emphasizing the collective nature of the labour process and by strengthening a collective identity that included all the workers from the sector.

Furthermore, the union leadership involved in the strike provided resources in terms of strategies and repertoires of protest, especially in Barcelona and Bilbao. This included innovative strategies to increase visualization and to damage the brand and engagement in

coalition-building practices with social movements and politicians. These strategies have been identified as useful to leverage bargaining in contexts of weakness of organized labour (Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). Moreover, they were also pivotal in providing more traditional resources and tools such as picketing and strike funds. However, in the case of Barcelona, this was developed in innovative ways due to the contacts with social movements. From this point of view, an extended 'deep-organizing' (Holgate et al., 2018) using resources and supports from the wider social context was crucial to sustaining the collective identity and mobilization over time.

Our findings highlight that in the context of 'disconnected capitalism' (Thompson, 2013), in which management decisions tend to reflect the requirements of capital markets and shareholders and do not contemplate the consequences for workers, issues of betrayal, mistreatment and recognition can gain importance as sources of mobilization. Furthermore, we have identified that in fragmented employment systems dominated by subcontracting and the use of self-employment and other individualized employment forms, the development of a collective identity requires overcoming some of the traditional basis of union organizing related to professional and occupational identities in order to reconstruct an inclusive class-based identity. These findings suggest that future research on collective labour organization should engage with the role of informal organizations and leadership to better understand workplace collectivism. Moreover, they also suggest that mobilizing can be a transformative process that may lead to organizing and, therefore, that a balanced analysis is needed when considering top-down and bottom-up approaches.

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