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► **To cite this version:**

Marcos Ancelovici, Montserrat Emperador Badimon. Anti-eviction Mobilizations (Spain). Della Porta, Donatella; Klandermans, Bert; McAdam, Doug; Snow, David A. The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements, Wiley, pp.1 - 3, 2022, 10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm510 . halshs-04695801

HAL Id: halshs-04695801

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04695801v1>

Submitted on 12 Sep 2024

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Anti-eviction Mobilizations (Spain)

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Forced evictions are increasingly becoming a global phenomenon (Soederberg 2018). This trend has been particularly dramatic in Spain, where 713,791 evictions took place between 2008 and 2020 (Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial), <https://www.poderjudicial.es/cgpj/es/Temas/Estadistica-Judicial/Estadistica-por-temas/Datos-penales-civiles-y-laborales/Civil-y-laboral/Efecto-de-la-Crisis-en-los-organos-judiciales>), and has affected both homeowners and tenants to the extent that it became one of the central sociopolitical issues of the 2010s (Ancelevici and Emperador Badimon 2019).

At the same time, anti-eviction protests and housing rights mobilizations also developed. Although the housing rights movement was active before the 2008 crisis (cf. Aguilar Fernández and Fernández Gibaja 2010), it grew rapidly in 2011 as new cohorts of activists joined in the wake of the “Indignados” or the 15M, as it is known in Spain. As a result, the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca, PAH), one of the main organizations denouncing evictions founded in 2009, started to attract new participants and, soon enough, its weekly assemblies were full of working-class and lower-middle-class Spaniards and immigrants about to lose their homes. In just a few years, the PAH grew from one chapter in Barcelona to more than 200 local chapters throughout Spain. Simultaneously, neighborhood-level collectives and networks focusing on evictions and housing rights, such as the Stop Evictions Platforms (Plataformas “Stop Desahucios”) and housing commissions (*comisiones de vivienda*), were formed in all major Spanish cities. And a few years later, the new local tenants’ union (Sindicato de inquilinos) emerged to denounce the growing eviction of tenants and defend the right to stay put. All these organizations are assembly-based, horizontal, weakly institutionalized (they have neither public funding nor employees), and bring together both people directly affected by evictions and activists (Ancelevici and Emperador Badimon 2019; Santos 2019).

Anti-eviction mobilizations rely on a rich and diversified repertoire of action characterized by different temporalities. *Short-term tactics* focus on specific evictions at a particular time and place, imply a sense of urgency, and can be used before, during, or after the eviction has taken place. Before the eviction – that is, in the time lapse between the reception of the eviction notice and the day of the actual eviction – activists try to negotiate directly with the landlord or the bank to get the eviction suspended and, ideally, cancel or restructure the debt. If the landlord or the bank refuses to negotiate, as is often the case, activists engage in disruptive tactics that operate as negative inducements. These tactics range from quiet actions, wherein, for example, activists pretend to be bank customers and ask for manifold time-consuming services that prevent desk clerks from carrying out routine tasks, to bank occupations that can last for several hours, even a day, during which activists demand to meet with the branch manager to force a negotiation and sometimes hold press conferences (Ancelevici and Emperador Badimon 2021).

If such “preventive” tactics fail and the eviction takes place, activists engage in civil disobedience and attempt to physically block the eviction. In Spain, eviction blockades follow a particular protocol. First, very early in the morning, activists gather in front of the building to prevent the police, local court bailiffs, or the locksmith from accessing the home. When bailiffs arrive to carry out the eviction, activists try to negotiate a temporary suspension of the judge order with them. If they fail and the bailiffs decide to proceed with the help of the police, activists either sit down together or form a human chain to block the eviction while they chant slogans inviting neighbors to join them and celebrating the right to stay put. If the eviction succeeds, activists requisition vacant housing, usually in the form of newly constructed housing blocks or single apartments owned by equity funds, to rehouse the evicted family. Sometimes, entire blocks are thus taken over and managed by their new occupants through the use of assemblies. It is worth pointing out that they often express their willingness to pay a small amount of rent for their use of the place in the hope of thereby avoiding the stigma commonly associated with squatters (Martinez 2019).

In addition to these short-term tactics, anti-eviction activists also use *long-term tactics* that emphasize the structural nature of evictions and aim at reforming mortgage laws and housing policies. These tactics build on educational work, which involves providing formal and informal training so that new recruits can acquire theoretical knowledge and practical skills, and informational work, which involves the production of detailed reports and critical maps about real-estate investments, rent fluctuations, vacant buildings, evictions, and gentrification, to construct narratives, justify demands, and organize neighbors. Such educational and informational work is thereafter the basis of what is perhaps the main long-term tactic of anti-eviction activists in Spain: legislative campaigns aimed at reforming existing laws.

These campaigns take advantage of the Popular Legislative Initiative (Iniciativa Legislativa Popular, ILP), an institutional mechanism that allows citizens to propose a legislative reform if they manage to collect 500,000 signatures at the national level. If they manage to collect the signatures, the ILP must be accepted for debate at Congress and adopted. It can be rejected at any step of the process, and can also be amended to the extent that the final proposal may look very different from the initial one. In 2013, the first housing-related ILP was instigated by the PAH and attracted 1.4 million signatures. It focused on mortgage laws and demanded a ban on the eviction of vulnerable families, the institutionalization of the “payment in kind” procedure (*dación en pago*, that is, the full cancellation of the mortgage debt in exchange for the property), and massive investment in social housing. While the ILP was being debated at Congress, housing rights activists put pressure on elected officials by means of demonstrations and *escraches*, that is, disruptive rallies outside the homes and workplaces of politicians opposed to the ILP in order to expose them and shame them as bearing responsibility for homelessness and eviction-related suicides (Barranco and Parcerisa 2020; Flesher Fominaya 2015). Although the 2013 ILP led to a reform that did not include most of the demands of housing rights activists, it was an opportunity to raise awareness among the general public. Furthermore, activists were able to learn from this experience and take advantage of a different political context in the 2015 Catalan ILP, which became bill 24/2015 and prevents “large” landlords (those owning more than 15 apartments) from evicting vulnerable tenants and forces them to offer “affordable” housing.

Since 2011, anti-eviction mobilizations have thus managed to stop several thousand evictions, have rehoused hundreds of families, and reformed housing regulations and laws at the municipal and regional levels. Although this may seem like a drop in the ocean of the Spanish

housing crisis, it has directly and very concretely benefited thousands of people and shaped regional as well as national Spanish politics.

SEE ALSO: Capitalism and Social Movements; Care and Social Movements; Direct Social Action; Everyday Activism; Global Austerity Protests; Homeless Protest Movements (United States); Indignados Movement (15M) (Spain); New Left and Social Movements (Europe); Podemos; Squatters' Movements; Urban Movements.

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