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The question of trade union unity in CCOO: antinomies and paradoxes

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ABSTRACT

Trade union unity was a central idea around which the debate in the labor movement coalesced during the later stages of the Franco regime. The initial aim of this paper is to examine the positions and actions of the protagonists of the new workers' movement, Comisiones Obreras, that emerged in the 1960s, and then to interpret its evolution from the following decade onwards. The aim is to identify the antinomies and paradoxes of the projects for the creation of a unitary trade union organization during the period. With the transition from dictatorship to democracy between 1975 and 1982, a plural model of trade union organization finally became consolidated in Spain.

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Introduction

There is a historiographical consensus on the leading role inside the anti-Franco militancy of the social movement named *Comisiones Obreras* (literally in English the 'workers' commissions'; Spanish acronym CCOO). Emerging in the late 1950s, in the decade that followed *Comisiones Obreras* would acquire an importance that went beyond the strict bounds of labor and trade union activity. In fact, *Comisiones* represented a first preserve for the unity of the opposition to the dictatorship. The new movement, with its commitment to the workers' cause and the search for tactics to achieve its demands – which were not exclusively economic – considerably broadened the fields of action of the anti-Franco movement, in both its social and its political dimensions. The advent of *Comisiones* expanded the repertoires of collective action for the movement as a whole and thus increased the possibilities of bringing down the regime (Molinero & Ysàs, 1998).

Along the way, the notion of trade union unity – how it was conceived, and how it might be achieved – constituted a permanent reference point and was the subject of intense debate inside the workers' movement, even though eventually the efforts to achieve it would prove unsuccessful. Without abandoning unity as an objective, in particular the unity of joint action, the model of trade union organization that finally prevailed was a plural one. This outcome was due in part to the subordination of trade union activity to political commitment during the transition period, which was palpable not only in the largest opposition organization, the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), but also in the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), re-founded in 1974 in Suresnes, and in the newly created political and trade union organizations as a whole.

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The workers' challenge to the dictatorship: the *Comisiones* movement

If there is one thing that characterized the political culture of the anti-Franco movement, it was fragmentation. Although it shared similar rituals, a common language based on rights and freedoms, and the ultimate goal of overthrowing the dictatorship, the experience was punctuated by frequent clashes between the allies; indeed, the disagreements between the partners of the Popular Front lasted longer than the Front itself. Later, other lines of fracture were superimposed, such as the one that split parties and trade unions in exile and those inside Spain. This phenomenon was most evident, for example, in the socialist organizations and in the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo – Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (CNT-FAI), the anarcho-syndicalist movement influenced by the more radical groups of Spanish anarchism inspired by the FAI, created in 1927. Last but not least, there was the 'communist question', consisting of a tacit agreement by the forces defeated in 1939 to isolate the PCE and exclude it from any anti-Franco alliance (Babiano, 2015).

Moreover, as the years passed and the struggle against the dictatorship continued, several generations of militants overlapped inside these organizations. Those who had had their political baptism during the Republic and the Civil War saw politics in general and the struggle against Franco in particular in a different way from those who had joined the militancy in the wake of the great strikes of the early 1960s and who followed very closely the experiences of anti-colonial liberation in Algeria and Cuba, which in turn had generated a new gallery of revolutionary heroes such as Ben Bella, Fanon and Guevara. Later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the emergence of the far left, the cultural patterns of fragmentation were repeated (Pérez Serrano, 2014), with a new line of fracture between 'reformists' and 'revolutionaries', and between 'orthodox' (García Abad, 2022) and 'revisionists'. Indeed, Spain had at least three different Maoist groups (Díaz Macías, 2021, 2022) and the Trotskyists had split within two years of becoming a new party (Causa & Martínez, 2014).

Comisiones Obreras (or CCOO) were on the fringes of these new trends, due not just to their chronology but also to the 'socio-political' nature of the movement. This made them a unique phenomenon in the context of the political culture of anti-Francoism, given the persistent fragmentation to which we have referred. Their unifying and unitary character was repeated in other social movements that developed slightly later and bore similarities to them (in this respect at least) such as the neighborhood movement and various professional platforms. In any case, acting together with the rest of the social movements from the 1960s onwards, the *Comisiones* movement was the key force behind the workers' mobilization and the mounting challenge to the dictatorship. It was a novelty that represented an alternative to the repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to rebuild the classic trade unions in the strictest secrecy.

The two-year period 1953/1954 marked the first attempts to set up workers' commissions on the occasion of the first elections of the Spanish Trade Union Organization (OSE), the regime's official trade union. The aim was to put forward alternative candidates and programs to those of the official structure. At the same time, in the factories and workshops, groups of workers began to assert themselves with regard to elementary questions of pay and working conditions; workers would go to the management offices to register their complaints or demands on behalf of their colleagues. Rather than being formally elected, the people who expressed these demands were those who dared to do so, and it was not uncommon for them to be anti-Franco militants. Consequently, *Comisiones Obreras* emerged as a shop floor movement (Erice, 2007). This phenomenon is well known, as is the fact that the activists who encouraged these joint actions were often communists or Catholics. So, it can be said that *Comisiones* put an end to the isolation of the communists; they built bridges, particularly between communists and Catholics.

The members of *Comisiones* moved on to making declarations and then to drawing up strategies. This can be seen very clearly from 1966 onwards, a key moment in the history of the organization. Benefiting from a certain thawing in labor policy over the previous three years, promoted by Solís Ruiz, secretary general and national delegate of the official unions, *Comisiones* spread to practically all urban and industrial areas of the country. The presentation of candidacies at the trade union

elections of 1966 and the positive results obtained generated a perception of victory in the movement which spread among the big factories (Ruiz, 1994). As a corollary to this process of expansion, the following year saw the first nationwide coordination meetings.

In this context of expansion, in 1966 *Comisiones Obreras* published two important public documents: *Ante el futuro del sindicalismo* ('Facing the future of trade unionism') and *¿Qué son las CCOO?* ('What are the Workers' Commissions?') The first was approved in Madrid on 31 January and the second in June. Both represent declarations of a strategic and self-defining nature, and both were drafted and approved by *Comisiones* in Madrid and subsequently ratified at national level. In 1967, two new documents appeared which were relevant to the question of trade union unity: the project that the CCOO proposed to the workers in response to the new Trade Union Law, and the Final Communiqué of the CCOO national assembly. These two texts were published within a short period, in May and June. The first was *Comisiones'* reply to the government's draft Trade Union Law, which would be passed some years later. The June communiqué was the first in a series that would be published after each assembly or General Coordinating Committee.

Subsequently, successive public statements were made by the *Comisiones* movement. For the rest of the 1960s, they referred to specific issues raised by the course of the confrontation with the dictatorship or from actions inside specific companies, such as the discussion of collective agreements, the repression unleashed against the activists and leaders of the movement, and calls for industrial action and protest. On 27 October 1967, *Comisiones* coordinated its first nationwide protest and on 3 November 1970 it called for political amnesty on the eve of the Burgos trial prosecuting members of the Basque separatist organization ETA.

From the early 1970s until the time of the transition, as we will see below, there was an abundance of strategic declarations on trade union unity, accompanied by related articles by union leaders. The first four documents mentioned above were a launchpad for the presentation of *Comisiones'* position on the question of unity until the end of the Franco regime. *Ante el futuro del sindicalismo*, the initial draft of which was partly the work of the dissident Falangist Ceferino Maestú and his group, took the form of a kind of decalogue (Maestú Barrio, 2006). The third point read as follows: 'The workers, throughout the history of the workers' movement, have proved that their strength, their capacity, comes mainly from unity' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987). After an appeal to the experience of history, point 6 espoused a specific formula – a single trade union organization, and a method – the assembly (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987).

The entity proposed was to be flexible, taking the form either of a federation of branches or of a trade union chamber, although other forms of unity were not to be ruled out. This trade union organization would be characterized not only by its independence from the state and political parties but also by its democratic workings and its ideological plurality, as stated in point 7 (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987). As opposed to the Francoist trade union, the workers' trade union, as we have seen, would emerge from a process of constituent assemblies and would be pluralist, respecting the rights of each tendency within it. In other words, the two key ideas were the single or unitary trade union organization and the assembly. The assembly as a tool was merely a transposition of the question of the unity of the way *Comisiones* functioned; indeed, the holding of assemblies had helped to create many of its branches.

In *¿Qué son las Comisiones?*, the arguments of *Ante el futuro del sindicalismo* are repeated. The *Comisiones* declared themselves to be 'a form of a united opposition of all workers, without distinction of religious or political beliefs or commitments'. Likewise, they did not claim to be a trade union, defining themselves as 'an independent movement of the working class to define the interests of the working class' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987). This condition was put forward in opposition to the compulsory and forced unity imposed by the official unions of the dictatorship. Following this line of argument, unity is opposed to division, which is described with great hostility in the document as 'a class suicide in the Spain of the monopolies' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987). A new reason for defending unity was the type of socio-political trade unionism that *Comisiones* would advocate. It was argued that any trade union that wanted to transcend immediate issues, and

to set itself the goal of emancipation, had to understand that 'only the unity of the workers in economic, social and political action' could achieve this goal (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987).

While *Ante el futuro del sindicalismo* appealed to historical experience as a starting point, *¿Qué son las Comisiones?* dismissed the way of building trade unionism in the underground that had been tried unsuccessfully by the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) and the CNT. CCOO claimed to represent a step forward for the workers' movement, in that they had been able to 'take the necessary step from clandestinity to legality', rejecting the secrecy imposed by the official trade union structures and refusing to be considered an 'illicit association'. For this, it was necessary to continue 'working in the light of day with our names and signs in front of us' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987). However, the following year a Supreme Court ruling declared CCOO to be illegal. Until then, unionists might occasionally have been detained at police stations and fined, but now the *Tribunal de Orden Público* (TOP), the special court for the prosecution of political and trade union offenses created in 1963 (Águila, 2001) was handing down sentences of several years. People who had previously stood as shop stewards in official trade union elections were now dismissed from these positions in droves. In short, *Comisiones* now faced new difficulties. When a new call for elections was made by official unions in 1971, a minority chose not to stand and called for the return to clandestinity in order to limit the effects of the repression.

In 1967 the regime promoted a reform of the Trade Union Law, which it would only be able to pass four years later. Together with the rest of the democratic trade union organizations, CCOO rejected it out of hand, and drew up a document of alternatives to Franco's project that would guarantee trade union freedom and workers' collective rights. As was to be expected, this alternative project also considered the question of unity. Thus, out of a total of nine points, the third, entitled 'Workers' unity', was considered to be the greatest asset of the working class; therefore, the future trade union should welcome all tendencies into its midst, rejecting, for example, any arbitrary division between skilled and non-skilled workers (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987).

After the first general coordination meeting, this time called the National Assembly, in June 1967, the final communiqué began by declaring that the Assembly (with a capital letter) had taken place in a spirit of 'unity, solidarity and democracy'. A little further on, it recalled three features that were considered to be characteristic of the Assembly. First, it is said that *Comisiones* was not an organization, but a 'coordinated force, an open movement'. Similarly, its independence from all political, trade union and religious groups was stressed. This first national communiqué also called for unity, underlining that 'the Assembly has thus reaffirmed once again that the CCOO is an open, unitary, democratic, independent and mission-based movement' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987).

After a decade of trial and error in the factories and workplaces, the Communists had approved *Comisiones'* strategy. The fact is that it was a project that went beyond the confines of party ideology. As we noted above, it was a shop floor movement, far removed from the cultural canons of the opposition that emerged after the war and during the diaspora. As a shop floor movement, moreover, CCOO were closer to the issues that affected workers in their daily lives. Of course, the Communist militants in CCOO followed party lines, and were eager to recruit new militants. Proselytism is a key part of the activity of any party; but this does not mean that the Communists in CCOO did not have their own cultural codes that might be distinct from those of the party apparatus in Paris. In fact, these differences in political culture would be expressed in the confrontations of later stages. Nevertheless, a form of unity forged in a way that was distinct from alliances between parties or political forces would be one of the distinctive features of *Comisiones'* political culture. In fact, after the first broad inaugural outlines, in the 1970s this question became central to the debate on trade union tactics and strategy that was intended to lead to the creation of a unitary trade union.

Trade union unity as an objective: projects and practices

At the beginning of the 1970s, all the parties to the left of the PCE (Pérez Serrano, 2014; Sans, 2017) and others of a more moderate line, such as the socialism of Tierno Galván or the transformed *Partido*

Carlista (Clemente, 1990), participated in *Comisiones*. However, alongside its General Coordinating Committee, in which the Communists of the PCE had a strong presence and which constituted the core of the movement, other sectors emerged to claim their inheritance. This was so particularly in the important industrial area of Catalonia. In 1968, the National Workers' Commission of Catalonia (CONC), formed by a nucleus of militants of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), the organization that had come to represent the PCE in the region, acted as coordinator, linking the social question to the Catalan question – something that none of the other *Comisiones* had done up to that time.

Around 1970, the CCOO Platforms were formed, inspired by the *Círculos de Formación de Cuadros*, which arose as a result of the crisis of the Catalan CCOO between 1967 and 1969 caused by the organizational implosion of part of the new left represented by the *Front Obrer de Catalunya* (FOC). The FOC, founded in 1961, would bring together socialists, progressive Catholics and dissident communists (García Alcalá, 2001; Hernández, 1972). The platforms were created as an alternative influenced by the workers' desire for autonomy and in an attempt to coordinate the project of the *Comisiones Obreras de Empresa*, which in the end would not come to fruition (Sans, 2017). Emerging from this same tendency, the 'Sectors', promoted by the *Organización Comunista de España* (OCE-BR), were also active throughout the country, but particularly, once again, in Catalonia. This was a Maoist organization influenced by the French May 68 movement, which was born out of a split from the PSUC in 1968. Unlike the Platforms, the Sectors saw the CCOO movement as the embryo of a trade union; from a tactical and strategic point of view they were committed to the use of legal methods, both on the shop floor and inside Franco's political institutions (Sans, 2017).

In April 1971, Sectors published the first Manifesto of *Comisiones Obreras* calling for the creation of the *Frente Unido Obrero* and the *Central Sindical Única*, in which it was recognized that the project would be 'the demonstration that the class as a class is unified, but not organized' in the absence of 'a body to unite it' (Sectoros de CCOO, 1971). The strengthening of CCOO was the necessary means to carry out 'an indefinite General Strike until the triumph of all the demands and the fall of the Regime', as, it was stated, had happened in France in 1968 (a claim that reflects a certain amount of wishful thinking; Sectoros de CCOO, 1971). In short, the role of the *Comisiones* movement was tactically subordinated to the political action of the opposition in order to strengthen it organizationally and to allow it to play its part in the defeat of the Regime. This approach represented a shift from some of the distinctive elements of the *Comisiones'* political culture that the movement had advocated in its public statements on unity since the previous decade.

In this connection, we now turn to the document, drawn up in 1972, entitled *Por la unidad del movimiento obrero de masas* ('For the unity of the mass workers' movement'; CCOO, 1972). This was a draft that the CCOO of Madrid, known as *Inter-ramos* or *Inter*, had commissioned from the leader Nicolás Sartorius, recently released from prison in April 1972, with the support of the leader of the *Comisiones Sevillanas*, Eduardo Saborido (Sartorius, 2013). The General Coordinating Committee planned to discuss it in June of that year, at its first meeting since October 1971. However, the debate on the document on unity was aborted by the police when they broke up the meeting on 24 June 1972 in the convent of the Oblates in Pozuelo de Alarcón in Madrid and arrested all those present. Ten of the leaders who formed part of the Coordinating Committee were put on trial in what became known as *Proceso 1001* (Babiano et al., 2013; Pérez & Muñoz Ruiz, 2022).

The document on unity asserted that Francoism was in a terminal phase and, therefore, that it was important to discuss the role that the labor movement and *Comisiones* should play in the process of dismantling the dictatorship (Sartorius, 2013). Three basic problems were analysed: the rejection of traditional trade unionism, both economic and reformist, because of its easy fit inside the capitalist system; trade union autonomy, abandoning Lenin's and Trotsky's conception of the trade unions (widespread among the Communists) as the link between the party and the masses; and, finally, 'the longed-for unity', to be obtained by addressing numerous obstacles (CCOO, 1972). It was accepted that one component of unity was the agreement of the classic trade union organizations, although it specified that this agreement should be in tune with the *Comisiones* movement itself, taking as its

guide a 'unity of principles' and a necessary 'synthesis of the different positions' given that, with the possible exceptions that might be made, the unity of the entity would require the unity in action of the different sections (CCOO, 1972). In an appendix to the document, reference was made to workers' congresses and specifically to the need to prepare for a Democratic Workers' Congress. However, this was more a general objective than a practical plan – an expectation to be fulfilled based on the specific experiences of the rank and file which would be the embodiment of workers' unity (CCOO, 1972). In short, it would be an open process that would not be explicitly defined.

Finally, in relative harmony with the Manifesto of the CCOO Sectors and the document of the Coordinating Committee, the workers' mobilizations and struggles that were taking place at that time in different parts of the country would show "both the need and the 'possibility of coincidence and unity towards a General Strike, and even its conversion into a National Strike' (CCOO, 1972). Thus, the idea of the need for unity was intertwined with the process of preparing a general strike as an instrument to bring down the dictatorship.

The question of strike action, *pace* certain authors (Pala, 2021), should be examined in some depth – not because it offers an explanation in itself, but because it had an influence on the course of events and the debates that were to follow (Tébar Hurtado, 2012). Indeed, in its discourse and the slogans repeated by its militants, the PCE frequently used the notion of strike action as a Sorelian energetic myth, an instrument of revolutionary transformation adapted to each particular situation, along the lines maintained by the party since the end of the 1950s (it had tried, and failed, to launch a General Political Strike and a National Strike in 1958 and 1959). In this connection, it is worth recalling that the documents approved during the Third Congress of the PSUC, in January 1973, included the idea of the 'historic moment of the General Political Strike' (PSUC, 1973a). The question of strike action had raised doubts among some of CCOO's most prominent leaders, in particular Cipriano García Sánchez who, since the arrest of the members of the General Coordinating Committee, had taken charge of its reconstruction, and the leader of the Catalan Commissions, López Bulla, who was head of the CONC. Both travelled to Paris in secret for other reasons and took the opportunity to consult Carrillo on the question early in 1974. Carrillo subsequently clarified the party's position on this strategically important issue in March, when he informed the PSUC Secretary General, López Raimundo, that the 'historic moment' had to be contrasted with the 'specific moment' of the General Political Strike (PCE, 1974a). This position was eventually established in the report that the secretary general presented to the party's Central Committee in April of the same year (PCE, 1974b), and was later adopted at the Second Plenum of the PSUC Central Committee held in France between 30 July and 3 August 1974 (PSUC, 1974).

Thus, the question appeared to be settled. However, we will come back to this argument later, because the conception of the new workers' movement as a fundamental instrument of the strategy to defeat the dictatorship by means of strike action would continue in 1974–1975 within the leading groups of *Comisiones Obreras* and the PCE-PSUC. The idea of a generalization of local scale or short strikes and conflicts rather than a mass action designed for a fixed date was gaining ground. This is how the workers' leaders of the General Coordinating Committee would put it in 1974, in response to the profound crisis in the Francoist Vertical Trade Union; at most they were considering proposals for a 24-hour general strike against the high cost of living, for an increase in wages, against repression, and for amnesty and democratic freedoms (Lluita Obrera, 1974).

Months later, the Catalan CCOO (CONC) expressed their disagreement with 'certain formulations and orientations' of the document on unity drawn up in 1972, as well as with the movement's general approach to the problem (Documentos-API, 1973). In March 1973, the Standing Committee of the Catalan CCOO published an extraordinary issue of its newspaper *Lluita Obrera* which contained a text, written by López Bulla, then head of the Catalan *Comisiones*, and by the journalist and CCOO member Jorge González Aznar, that was broadly in line with the views of the leading group of the General Coordinating Committee who had been arrested. However, some of the ideas set out in the project were contested. Critically, it was pointed out that the proposal focused primarily on the analysis of the trade union structures and of the role of the organizations, and not enough on the

workers' representations that actually existed as a result of Franco's trade union elections, which had increased progressively over time (Lluita Obrera, 1973).

In addressing the shortcomings of the workers' movement, especially in its leadership, the text drew attention to the problem of sectarianism (an issue already noted in the document on unity). The steps towards unity that had been taken were marked by pointless controversies and mutual misunderstandings which had sometimes undermined the progress made. In this regard, the report sent to the PSUC leadership by López Bulla, signed under the pseudonym 'Salvador Roig' (Roig & López Bulla, 1973) and drawn up some months after the appearance of the special issue of *Lluita Obrera*, was much more explicit. The leaders of the Catalan *Comisiones* rejected the idea of 'synthesis' of ideological principles formulated in the document on unity. Class unity, understood as a basic foundation, did not rule out the fact that

The overcoming of these contradictions cannot be put forward as a "synthesis", in an opportunistic vision of unity, with the abandonment of certain basic principles of the workers' movement. Nor can it be claimed that unity is the "absorption" of all the existing tendencies by one or another which has proclaimed itself to be "true", endowed with a monopoly of political or organizational correctness. Unity can only be the fruit of a long process based fundamentally on the unity of interests of the working class as a class (Lluita Obrera, 1973).

In short, its main criticism was directed at unity understood as a 'synthesis' between the action of the masses and the agreement of the organizations, without placing sufficient emphasis on the role of the representatives elected by the workers in the successive trade union elections. This same critical view was expressed again at the meeting of the General Coordinating Committee of CCOO, held on 16 June 1974, which called for the maximum use of legal mechanisms (Lluita Obrera, 1974). The leaders of the Committee at that time, with Cipriano García at the head, insisted on the importance of an 'integral use of all resources' to close the gap between illegal and clandestine work and activities inside the law, which was attributed to the excessive influence of agreements imposed from 'above'. It was stressed that it was impossible to develop and influence events fully from clandestine positions. The immediate task was to win over a large part of the trade union officials, who were believed to be distancing themselves from the leadership because they had been abandoned after the 1971 elections (Lluita Obrera, 1974).

Finally, the members of the Coordinating Committee addressed another issue which had been pending since the earliest days of *Comisiones*, that of autonomy. Adopting the traditional position of CCOO, it emphasized the need to banish 'forever the concessions of the workers' movement as a "transmission belt" or as a "nursery" for one or another political organization' (Lluita Obrera, 1974). Likewise, in the Communiqué of the VII General Meeting of CCOO held in June 1974, it was proposed that unity and unanimity should be acknowledged as being two different things, that possible differences on specific issues were not an attack on unity and that it was necessary 'to make others understand that respect for minority opinions can never be a brake on the struggle' (Lluita Obrera, 1974). This was a question that had a particular bearing on the Catalan *Comisiones*, since the groups that made up the Sectors (with which the CONC coincided in many areas) were profoundly affected by the incorporation of a large part of the leadership and militancy of the OCE-BR into the PSUC and, therefore, into the leadership of the PCE (Morán, 1986).

The internal communist debate on CCOO and the unitary trade union

Between May and June 1975, the first phase of the OSE trade union elections took place for the appointment of shop stewards. Turnout was high, and in many leading companies the result was the election of a majority of representatives linked to the *Candidaturas Unitarias y Democráticas* (CUD) promoted by CCOO and the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO), a minority trade union movement created by progressive Catholics in 1960.

The hierarchy of the official Francoist trade union regarded these results as a heavy defeat (Martín Villa, 1984). The scale of the victory and the results are difficult to gauge accurately due to the

considerable differences in the reports of the data (Babiano, 1995). Nevertheless, these elections marked the beginning of a new period, brief but intense, a prelude to the debate in communist circles regarding the creation of a unitary trade union organization (Almendros Morcillo et al., 1978). The nature and rationale of this debate have received contrasting historiographical interpretations (Tébar Hurtado, 2013), ranging from those that argue that several actors intervened to avert a breakup of the official trade union structure and the creation of a unitary trade union in Catalonia (Fina, 1978) along the lines of the Portuguese *Intersindical* (Balfour, 1994), to those that minimize its importance (Cebrián, 1997) or deny its existence or, at most, restrict it exclusively to Catalonia and a very small group of leaders (Molinero & Ysàs, 2017) in a socio-political context in which the creation of a unitary trade union seemed beyond the realms of possibility in the face of the copious international aid received by the UGT, the strengthening of the USO, and the resurgence of the CNT.

But the truth is that the issue did spark an internal debate among the Communists, more explicit and complex than has been suggested (Pala, 2021; Tébar Hurtado, 2013). The fact that the workers' leaders were at the same time Communist militants, in some cases members of the leadership, fueled this debate within the party itself. The breadth of the discussion, the range of the interrelated issues, the various phases and the actors involved make it an important factor to consider with regard to the decision that was taken in October 1975 to strengthen *Comisiones* and to promote their structuring as a 'new type of trade union' during the first half of 1976. The discussion was largely focused on the leadership of the PSUC and the Catalan *Comisiones*, and responded to two visions of the relationship between legal action and the illegal or clandestine structure of the movement (Pala, 2021). Although one should not underestimate its impact further afield (given that other protagonists included both the PCE, starting with its secretary general, Carrillo, as well as leading figures among the Carabanchel 10, notably Camacho and Sartorius) here we will try to contextualize a debate whose polemical tone helped to conceal to some extent a long-standing problem regarding the future of the CCOO movement.

At the end of 1974, there had already been a discussion in the Central Committee of the PCE about CCOO concerning the dilemma of whether to make them a communist trade union or a socio-political movement (Pala, 2021). Earlier, the same discussion had taken place in the PSUC, at the meeting of its Central Committee at the end of July and beginning of August 1974, which concluded that the fundamental role of CCOO was to be placed in unitary politics (PSUC, 1974), as an instrument that would facilitate and strengthen it (PSUC, 1973a). Although this would not represent a conflict in terms of the general design of CCOO policy, in practice it did contain elements of subordination to the communist movement.

It has also been hypothesized that the reasons for the failure to achieve true trade union unity were related to the inability of *Comisiones* and the Communists to adopt the 'general strike' as a strategy (Domènech, 2008; Santolària & Colomines, 1990). However, in 1975 the General Coordinating Committee of CCOO itself (led, it should be remembered, since June 1972 by Cipriano García, a member of the PSUC and the Catalan *Comisiones*) had insisted on defining the 'specific moment' of the general mobilization, oriented fundamentally towards the trade union elections in June, as set out in the Communiqué of 16 June 1975 under the title 'Towards the General Strike, towards National Democratic Action' (Zamora Antón & Ibáñez, 1987), in a similar way to the CONC Declaration published at the same time (Lluita Obrera, 1975a). Thus, the Communists introduced a reformulation of the original term, not only in form but also in orientation and meaning (Babiano et al., 2013).

This internal debate among the Communists also responded to concerns other than the call for a general strike as an instrument of their strategy. The role of *Comisiones* came under the spotlight on the occasion of the Second National Conference of the PCE, held in France in late July 1975, centered on the approval of the *Proyecto Programa* (Nuestra Bandera, 1975). Although no collective decisions were taken at that time on trade union unity, a debate on its role would begin after the June election results and in the coming months (Carrillo, 1975). Many testimonies agree that certain

authoritative voices in the party leadership, such as the Seville leader Manuel Delicado, had explicitly proposed incorporation into the UGT; others, such as the then prominent member of the PCE, the economist Ramon Tamames, suggested (though not openly) a move towards trade union plurality (M. Avilés, personal communication, 22 April 2008; J. López Bulla, personal communication, 17 July 2022).

In his speech, López Bulla clearly set out the dilemma they faced: to opt for clandestine work or to move the whole movement towards democratic legality: '(...) This in one way or another also imposes a coordination of the workers and trade union movement of a new type on the basis of these trade union positions' (Carrillo, 1975). Therefore, the decision on the matter was about how to formalize the long sought-after relationship between the clandestine structure and legal action and representation. But neither the time for this formalization was specified, nor the form it was to take. This may explain the support given by the head of the Workers' Movement of the PSUC's Barcelona Committee for the positions of Isidor Boix, until recently a prominent member of the Catalan Communist leadership who now advocated working inside the structures of the official Vertical Union as a way of building up a unitary trade union, writing off the structures of CCOO as insufficient (Tribuna del Partido. Boletín de orientación ideológica del Comité de Barcelona del PSUC, 1975). This position caused deep concern among the leading Catalan Communists (Pala, 2021).

The Vertical Union, unaware of these possible overtures, would have offered not only the possibility of a space for CCOO in which to act but also political incentives for them to organize and create traditions of direct democracy in the assemblies and, in practice, 'free' collective bargaining, even though it was still illegal. Until then, both the leadership of the PSUC and the CONC had considered that the OSE could be reformed (Pala, 2021) and this was the coincidence with Boix's positions. Thus, during the initial stage, this proposal might have had the support of the PSUC leadership (Pala, 2021). In reality, Boix was not putting forward ideas of his own, but was seeking to align with the position the Communist leadership had held with regard to CCOO since the 1960s and in support of the creation of the unitary workers' union – ideas present in some of the articles he had published under a pseudonym some years earlier ("Balcells, 1969) – as witnessed by the various public statements analysed in previous sections of this article. In other words, *Comisiones* were an embryo of the future unitary union, not the unitary union itself.

In that summer of 1975 Boix and another PSUC leader, Manuel Pujadas, published the book *Conversaciones sindicales con dirigentes obreros* ('Trade Union conversations with workers' leaders'), which began to circulate toward the end of September (Tébar Hurtado, 2012). Both defended their idea of the breakup of the official trade union structure. The elected trade union officials were now the protagonists; as López Bulla had proposed at the Second National Conference of the PCE, this required a new type of coordination of the workers' and trade union movements based on the workers themselves, but going a step further: the intended consequence was that the organized, and therefore clandestine, part of *Comisiones* would be diluted within this new trade union project and that, with it, the illegal structure would disappear. Indeed, many of its leaders had been dismissed during the workers' struggles of the previous years (Boix & Pujadas, 1975).

At the beginning of September, the PSUC leadership was already discreetly considering whether to confront and tackle a problem that was leading to possible contradictions between the unitary model of the CONC and the CCOO Coordinating Committee (Pala, 2021). A pamphlet published by the party recorded the speech given at the Plenary Session of the Central Committee by López Bulla, at the time the main leader of the CONC, in which he said 'however painful it may be, trade union plurality is a fact', with trade union unity understood as the path towards the Constituent Trade Union Congress that other forces and attitudes would have prevented; there was no other alternative than 'to march on the path of the reconversion of the *Comisiones*, as we know them, but at the same time broadening, extending and consolidating them, towards the Trade Union of the Workers' Commissions' (López Bulla, 1976).

In the prologue to the book on the CCOO General Assembly published by Laie, Camacho also announced the holding of a Constituent Trade Union Congress of *Comisiones Obreras* (Camacho,

1976b). Two weeks later, the CCOO leaders imprisoned in Carabanchel made their position public in a letter, reproduced in early October by the CONC's newspaper (Lluita Obrera, 1975), in which the main argument was that while it was necessary to continue exploiting to the full the recently won legal platforms, this could not lead to the other extreme (namely, considering the legal positions to be sufficient and the illegal structures of *Comisiones* unnecessary):

because this could be a temptation to the workers' movement, especially after a victorious election, which should be avoided; like any unilateral position which distracts from the reality of the Dictatorship, it is false and leads to serious mistakes (CCOO, 1975).

This would be reason enough to show that *Comisiones* were not just a temporary substitute for the dysfunctional Francoist trade union, but were in fact the future of the Spanish labor movement – a new conception of trade unionism that would have to be built. It was not a question of taking over trade union posts in order:

to “transform” (as we sometimes read) the vertical union into a democratic one, but to politically assault the vertical union – as an essential part of the Regime – and, by breaking it up to create a completely new one on a totally different basis. This is, in short, a political revolution and, therefore, also a “trade union revolution” with its constituent period and its constituent congress, as *Comisiones Obreras* has been proposing for years (CCOO, 1975).

Even though Isidor Boix was not named, the criticism of his position was obvious. Although a thorough use of legal platforms combined with the strengthening of the structures, at all levels, of the CCOO movement was proposed, the letter insisted that ‘they are two sides of the same coin, two lines of force that walk intertwined, that interrelate continuously. Any deficiency in one of them has negative repercussions on the other and vice versa’ (CCOO, 1975).

It was also stressed that at that moment, when everything indicated that ‘the Regime is preparing to lock itself up in the “bunker” and to go down killing’, the actions of *Comisiones* should avoid any kind of tension that might trigger a backlash from the authorities and create an infernal cycle of legal and illegal terrorism. The path insisted upon was that of the unity of the opposition, of both the political opposition and the trade unions, seen as the prerequisite for the ‘political revolution’. For this reason, *Comisiones Obreras* had to be ‘a factor of unity’, facilitating this political agreement between the opposition, giving express support to the program of the *Junta Democrática* that represented a part of the opposition led by the PCE (CCOO, 1975).

At that time, the traditional fragmentation of the opposition seemed to have been overcome with the creation of a unitary body, known as *Coordinación Democrática*, which was known colloquially as the *Platajunta*. This was the sum of the *Junta Democrática*, headed by the PCE, and *Convergencia Democrática*, which in turn had been created by the PSOE. Although the *Platajunta* comprised political parties and groupings as well as individual personalities, old protagonists of the exile, such as the CNT and the Republicans, had been excluded. However, CCOO and UGT were represented. The presence of *Comisiones* was quite unusual, because until their constitution as a trade union a month before the disappearance of the unitary body in October 1976, they had been merely a socio-political movement, as the members had been saying of themselves for ten years.

Finally, the members of *Proceso 1001* who remained in prison wrote a public letter in which they expressed their view that it was not the time to raise the issue of ‘the famous workers’ congress’ at the national level; at most, the best course of action was to do so after the liquidation of the dictatorship, as the culmination of what was called the ‘national constituent period’, but this ‘was a delicate issue’ (CCOO, 1975).

The PSUC Executive Committee, which met on 14 November (PSUC, 1975b), and also, obviously, the leadership of the PCE, which resolved the issue at a meeting of cadres of the workers’ movement held in France shortly before Franco’s death, between 30 October and 2 November (PCE, 1975a). The debate and conclusions were published in *Nuestra Bandera*, the party newspaper (Carrillo, 1975). In short, the main ideas were to accept CCOO rather than to sink it without trace in the projected unitary union, rejecting what Carrillo called the *Portugalization* of the process (PCE, 1975a). This

marked a definitive break with the attempts to emulate the Portuguese model, which had previously been put forward by the Secretary General himself at the Enlarged Plenum of the PCE Central Committee in late April 1974 (PCE, 1974b; Sánchez Rodríguez, 2004). For Carrillo, the role of the labor movement represented 'a political struggle' (PCE, 1975a). The working class, it was said, 'will mobilize ultimately and fundamentally today for political objectives' (PCE, 1975a). This was a Leninist view of political and trade union consciousness: the latter was subordinate, an initial step in the process, that would be raised to the political terrain in which the party was the main reference point (PCE, 1975a). This undoubtedly expressed the need on the part of the Communist leadership to recover essential elements of the traditional Lasallian model in the division of tasks between the party and the trade union. This was the essential problem underlying the debate, and the source of all the other questions of when, where and how the unitary trade union was to be achieved.

By December 1975, after the death of the dictator on 20 November, the confrontation between the different positions on the role of CCOO and trade union unity was already public and well known (Tuñón, 1975). A complicated phase now began, with the task of explaining a shift that involved giving a precise political meaning to the role of the CCOO and, at the same time, guiding this socio-political movement to structure itself as a trade union organization in competition with the rest of the trade union organizations that were already in operation. The difficulty lay in achieving a reformulation of the CCOO, hitherto defined as an instrument in the project to construct a unitary trade union, and to actually make it this all-embracing trade union in and of itself.

The colloquium 'Trade union elections and the future of trade unionism' held in Barcelona on 15 December 1975 was attended by some of the workers' leaders who had been released from Carabanchel prison, after the royal pardon issued a few weeks earlier (Trebball, 1975). At this public event, Camacho spoke of the beginning of a new historical era and of concord and reconciliation, of a trade unionism that represented 'a creative synthesis', far removed from the old class-based unionism, and taking up elements of the old workers' councils. He supported political pluralism, but held that 'trade union pluralism would be suicide for the working class'. Likewise, he defended an inter-class, gradualist project to justify the participation of the CCOO in the Democratic Council set up in 1974:

We have never been in favor of all or nothing. We welcome any step forward . . . We are determined to accept the democratic system. We accept what has been built so far. We do not want to lower the economic standards we have achieved by implementing a Portuguese-style situation. We don't want to liquidate formal freedoms . . . we value them very highly. We know that formal freedoms can lead some to live in great palaces and others to live under a bridge . . . Well, we don't want anyone to live under a bridge, but neither do we want to destroy the palaces . . . (A pause). In any case, we would preserve them, even if only as museums (Tuñón, 1975).

For his part, Sartorius argued that they had to 'do away with the idea of the trade union as the transmission belt of a party', and that the priority was the presentation of economic and political demands ('today people are asking for political amnesty and freedom just as in our time they were asking for a pay rise'). He optimistically asserted that the workers' movement was in a boom period similar to that of 1966 and 1967, reaching high levels of autonomous organization. However, with regard to the question of how to combine the autonomous structure of the labor movement with the mass entry into the trade unions, he ended by repeating the classical idea of combining the 'legal' with the 'lawful', without offering any further details (PSUC, 1975a). In his public statements regarding the debate on the future Trade Union Congress, he alluded to the key question of unity: 'We are all democratic and united, but we have to make this a reality . . . The workers have learned the value of unity over recent years . . .' (Tuñón, 1975). The questions of how, when and where this unity was to be achieved remained unanswered, at least in public.

The next day, 16 December, Sartorius's book *El resurgir del movimiento obrero* was presented at the headquarters of the publishing house, Laie, in Barcelona (Trebball 1975). In a way, the work could be interpreted as a response to the book published by Boix and Pujadas a few months earlier (Sartorius, 1975). On 18 December, the Executive Committee of the PSUC proposed putting an end to

the controversy aroused by the positions identified with Boix, rejecting them as attempts to liquidate the CCOO (Pala, 2021).

Trade union unity – an impossible goal?

In 1976, CCOO were still publicly defending the unitary trade union project. In January, the Catalan CCOO (CONC, 1976a) stated that it was compatible with the commitment to organizational strengthening and structuring which represented the *de facto* transition from a socio-political movement to a union or 'organized movement' (CONC, 1976b). 1976 was a key year in the transition to democracy, as Franco's death increased the political opportunities for collective action. The mobilizations for the negotiation of the agreements at the end of 1975 spread exponentially during the first quarter of the following year: the demand for amnesty for political prisoners and exiles, as well as the demand for freedoms, were omnipresent in the platforms of demands approved in the company assemblies. The volume of strike activity, measured in terms of the number of strikes and strikers as well as the number of working hours lost, reached levels unknown since 1936 (Sartorius & Sabio, 2007). Alongside the workers' movement, neighborhood associations, the student movement and professional associations occupied the public arena in the fight for freedom. It was this enormous mobilization that brought down the plans of the first government of the Monarchy, which consisted of a sort of continuity of Francoism without Franco.

This was, in short, the background to Sartorius's article 'Dialectics of unity in the trade union movement' published in issue 7 of CCOO's new newspaper *Zona Abierta* (Sartorius 1976). This article was unique in its theoretical approach, with its constant appeal to Marxist dialectics; the discourse of *Comisiones* tended to be imbued with a direct class-based language that reached the level of militancy but was not usually so overtly Marxist. Starting from the classic ideas of the movement, by 1976 the CCOO model combined two factors, the members – as the basis of the union outside the workplace and responding to the need for a permanent organization – and the grassroots movement in the factories, made up of delegates elected in assemblies and councils: In other words, a model reflecting the movement to which *Comisiones* had traditionally been aligned and which now projected itself into the future by looking to the unitary structure encouraged by the Italian trade unions. It was to be a 'new type of trade union', which would combine some of the characteristic features of the movement's past inside a new kind of organization (Sartorius, 1975, 1977).

The 30th Congress of the UGT held in Madrid between 15 and 18 April 1976, with its decision to tolerate the Arias-Fraga government, definitively buried any prospect of a unitary trade union (Babiano, 1995; Vega, 2011). At the same time, the experience of the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sindicales* (COS), created in July 1976 by CCOO, UGT and USO, came to an end when the Socialists walked out (Marín Arce, 1996).

On 9 May 1976, Camacho took part in a round table attended by various trade union organizations (COS, USO, UGT and the CCOOs of Catalonia), defending the idea of 'unity in freedom' to challenge the authorities' proposal to pass a trade union law (Camacho, 1976a). Once a decision had been made on their structure (that is, whether they should be a confederation, a federation or a general union), *Comisiones* would constitute the organized, socio-political, unitary, democratic and independent trade union workers' movement (CCOO, 1976). However, given the close relations between German social democracy and the PSOE-UGT (Muñoz Sánchez, 2012), as well as the context of the Cold War, the Spanish Socialists were highly unlikely to agree to a unitary model, especially given their weak position vis-à-vis CCOO and the PCE. A clear and definitive horizon of trade union plurality was therefore emerging.

CCOO also requested authorization to hold its General Assembly in June in Madrid, but this was refused by the Ministry of the Interior (first under Fraga and later under Martín Villa). The Assembly was held in Barcelona on 11 July, clandestinely, with the participation of 500 delegates, and no definitive agreement was reached on a future constituent congress; nor was a decision taken to start affiliating workers and become a trade union organization in competition with the UGT or the USO

(Vega, 1995). Perhaps in fact this decision had already been taken and now the issue at hand was how to present it publicly. This was done in the public act of presentation of the PCE leadership, in the plenary session of the Central Committee of which Camacho was a member, held in Rome on 27 and 28 July 1976. Camacho advocated trade union unity and the Constituent Trade Union Congress, without renouncing the structuring of the 'new type of trade union', proposing a name such as *Comisiones Obreras, de Técnicos y de Profesionales*, which was finally rejected. But he also completed his speech by praising the role of the party in the creation and development of the *Comisiones Obreras* movement (PCE, 1976). This speech would not be made public until September (Camacho, 1976), and shortly afterwards, at meetings of the Secretariat and the General Coordinating Committee of the CCOO, held on 17 October, the decision was taken to create the 'new type of trade union'. Thus, a contradiction arose; if the Communists had defended the character of *Comisiones* from the beginning as a movement that opposed the underground proposals launched by the groups further to the left, now it was these same minority groups who opposed the resistance of the socio-political movement to becoming into a classical trade union, which was defended by the Communists as a 'trade union of a new type' ((Köhler, 1995); Gómez Alén, 1995; Vega & Gordon, 2007). Immediately, the Secretariat and the CCOO organization as a whole promoted the creation of the territorial organizations, which were set up very late in the autumn, and the branch federations, which were set up in the first months of 1977, pending the approval of the Law on Trade Union Freedom of April 1977. This move by the CCOO made the creation of the unitary union impossible. Its invocation of trade union unity, which would never actually be abandoned, would gradually take on a different tone and would now be re-situated in the search for unity of action (Gimeno Igual, 2021).

In the new period of political changes, marked by a deep economic crisis, the existence of distinct cultures within the Communist sphere would become more evident. In the report of a PCE conference attended by trade unionists from Madrid in July, there was talk of accepting the idea that trade unionism and politics should be situated on interrelated planes, each of them autonomous, thus rejecting the 'transmission belt' model and giving support and respect to their status as independent entities. However, it was said, 'there are comrades who look down on trade union work, but in fact trade unionism is everyone's business' (PCE, 1977). Gradually, the position of trade unionists in the party and Communists in the union meant that CCOO would have to be autonomous – something that the movement had sought since its origins (Gimeno Igual & Tébar Hurtado, 2022).

Conclusions

The history of the pursuit of trade union unity during the period analyzed presents certain contradictions and paradoxes. For example, it is worth thinking about what it meant for the Communists to promote and strengthen the reformulation of CCOO, defined until then as a means to an end, as the unitary trade union that it had always been projected to be. But this brings us to another question, concerning the relationship between CCOO and the Communist Party. The study of the phenomenon of *Comisiones* cannot be reduced to an assessment of the role of the PCE and the PSUC in their construction and development. However, at the beginning, the Communists endowed the movement with a particular orientation and identity which took the form of trade union activity carried out by militants, but with a very limited theoretical dimension. The practical experience and its results would sometimes contradict the strategy of a party that conceived the role of the workers' movement as subordinate to its political ends.

In the first stage, the PCE and, consequently, the PSUC promoted CCOO as a broadly autonomous entity, given the clandestine circumstances in which the militants acted. However, in their relations with CCOO there was always a line of continuity marked by the codes of the Communist political culture, embodied by the metaphor of the 'transmission belt'. For this it was not necessary either to have a totally defined trade union policy, or for *Comisiones* to be a traditional-style trade union. The

will for this to be so depended on, and was decided, by the party, of which a large and important group of the movement itself were members.

After its legalization, the PCE no longer approved of the autonomy of CCOO to engage in trade union activity. Clashes between party and trade union became frequent, over trade union action and the process of political transition itself. Examples are the occasion of the failed general strike of 1979, the contents of the Workers' Statute, and the *golpe de timón* (a desire to set a new course) that led to criticism from the party leadership regarding the radicalization of the union mobilization and the proposal of a change in direction, which triggered a crisis in the relations between the party and the union throughout the spring and summer of 1980. In this context, the crisis of the PCE that culminated in the 1982 elections accelerated the consolidation of CCOO as an autonomous trade union.

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