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Key words: Las Kellys, Sindillar, job insecurity, domestic workers, labour unions**Sindillar and Las Kellys: From job insecurity to self-organization**Homera Rosetti
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Experiences such as Sindillar and Las Kellys highlight the invisible reality of domestic workers and chambermaids. These two associations reveal the need to find vindication mechanisms to organize two of the most socially excluded sectors aside from the mainstream trade unions and political parties. They are certain about their vindications and have become good examples of the work and feminist struggle in the Spanish State.

Chambermaids and domestic workers organize themselves outside the large trade unions to raise their voice

Traditionally every year on the 1st of May the labour movement takes to the streets. In the morning, mainstream trade unions lead the main congregation, and federations, union representatives and the large political parties come together in a festive protest march. In the afternoon, anarchist groups, independents, small trade unions and groups of female and male workers who don't feel identified with the CCOO's and UGT's consensus syndicalism also march. Among them this year were Las Kellys and Sindillar, organizations that assemble two of the most precarious and less recognized sectors of the collective negotiation: chambermaids and domestic workers.

These two associations have a lot in common. First, they organize themselves with a complete lack of resources, independently from the large political and union organizations. The workers, all of them women and the majority migrants, share their experiences and organize themselves because there is a lack of spaces to conduct their demands. Their principal fighting mechanisms are mutual support, solidarity from other associations and, especially in the case of Las Kellys, the social networks.

The first trade union of domestic workers

Sindillar is defined on its blog as a "group of organized women who fight against job insecurity and emotional, social, political and economical precariousness" related to care workers and domestic workers. Created in 2011, it is the first trade union in the Spanish State assembling that sector. 50 women of 16 different nationalities got together at the founding assembly, and diversity continues to be a constant feature.

They seek to make their members' work visible and to develop syndicalism training, professional training and emotional training. To do that, they are supported by the centre for Women Culture Francesca Bonnemaison –"Bonne"– which provides a space from which they work on the "fundamental autonomy and empowerment project", along with other women and feminist groups. Music, gastronomy and creativity are the main ingredients of their activities.

The union tasks are not easy however. The legislation for domestic workers and caregivers usually leaves them unprotected. Sindillar reports that 85% of workers have no written contract; they have no right to unemployment benefits and, consequently, after 20 or 30 years working few of them manage to access a retirement pension.

Not only that: the majority of these workers –migrant women– face major difficulties to get residence permits, since they will never have a one-year contract of 40 weekly hours, as Immigration Laws require. The lack of the correct paperwork, residence and work permits, along with foreign language-related difficulties in many cases and the lack of family support have led domestic migrant workers to become one of the most vulnerable population groups.

“We try to face the labour discrimination together”, explains in an interview to the paper *La Directa* Isabel Escobar, one of most committed activists of Sindillar. “We need to fight back, because domestic work has become a form of slavery”, she denounces loud and clear. Apart from being exploited in terms of work, many women suffer from arthritis due to the intense effort in performing their work, or illnesses derived from the use of detergents and other toxic elements.

In the Spanish State, there are roughly 700.000 domestic workers. On one hand, sectors of the middle class have progressively joined the high-class in employing domestic workers and care workers. Furthermore, there’s a new phenomenon of sectors with low economic resources – usually elderly people who need to be looked after– that employ domestic workers to attend them. Since the work is developed in a private ambit, labour abuses are less likely to be perceived, so these groups become even more invisible. In that context, Labour Inspection has a difficult job.

Chambermaids break the silence

Another silenced sector over the last few years is that of the chambermaids. Known popularly as ‘Las Kellys’ –“the cleaners”–, they organized themselves a year ago through a Facebook group to denounce the shocking labour conditions they endure. The outsourcing of chambermaids' work has left it in the hands of temporary job companies, which has fulminated the rights accomplished during the past few years through the protests. Today, cleaners earn 700 euros a month, have seasonal jobs and, in many cases, work part-time.

Las Kellys are fighting to contain the amount of work, against the free extra hours (they denounce that “it is impossible to clean 24 rooms in 6-7 hours) and to recognize the professional illnesses associated with constantly being overworked. Among their claims, they ask to be protected under the Hospitality Sector’s Collective Agreement –that sets a wage of 1.200 euros–, despite working through outsourced companies. By subcontracting them, they become mere cleaners instead of chambermaids covered by the Agreement, and, consequently, they lose out in terms of job category, wage and conditions.

Since March 2016, when their activity started, 'Las Kellys' Association have reported more than 30 cases to the Labour Inspection addressed to hotel chains and subcontracting companies for violating the Agreement and more than 15 claims before a court. They have also led more than a dozen protest acts against the violation of their rights. Here, in Barcelona, their complaints have reached the City Council, which has committed to not circulate job vacancies related to the sector with abusive conditions.

100.000 chambermaids are estimated to work in the Spanish State and, according to Las Kellys, half of them fall outside the Agreement. They are women with family burdens, migrants and scared of denouncing insecurity in their workplace. At last, through Las Kellys, some of these women have overcome their fear and have stood up for themselves. One of the influential factors in making this step forward has been their health problems. Making 80 beds, day after day, can

cause serious injuries (lower back pain, tendinitis, cervical injuries). Also the use of cleaning products, as is the case of domestic workers, can lead to chronic sicknesses and disabilities, such as fibrositis.

“We have got together as hotel workers because trade unions haven’t done their job”, declared the spokesperson of Las Kellys Lanzarote, Myriam Barros to the radio station Ona Mediterrània. “We didn’t want to form part of any large trade union, because, until now, everything they’ve done has been inefficient. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have to join together to defend our rights”, she added.

Mainstream Trade Unions, in crisis

The 15M call “they don’t represent us” was also in some way addressed to the large trade unions. Young people with no future, feminist groups, undocumented migrant associations and deeply deprived sectors of the labour market who joined the great citizen protest in 2011 didn’t feel represented either by the traditional spokespeople of the labour market. That was clear after seeing the composition and running of the squares.

Mainstream syndicalism, noticeably missing at 15M –and later in movements like PAH or the mass demonstrations– highlighted this representation crisis. If not, why would a Trade union of street vendors –a sector that assembles one of the most excluded workers– organize themselves in a completely independent manner? Why did Las Kellys manage to make themselves heard for the first time, using means as precarious as twitter and facebook? Why are domestic workers, migrants or musicians organizing themselves independently from the main trade unions?

Labour protests are sometimes unexpectedly reactivated. Experiences of self-organization, while spontaneous and precarious, are spreading. Meanwhile, the mainstream trade unions lose credibility and members. Scandals like Andalusia’s RIFs, millionaire bank accounts belonging to the historical Asturian leader José Ángel Fernández Villa, Caja Madrid’s black cards used by workers’ representatives and public funds dedicated to traveling or dining out, all of that published by the media, have contributed to the discredit of the main trade unions.

Two indicators explain this decrease. According to the CIS barometer, on one hand, trade unions –along with financial bodies and political parties– are among the lowest-valued institutions. On the other hand, latest figures show that during the recession the main trade unions have lost more than half a million members throughout the State, which is a fifth part of their membership.

The ‘precariat’ and the same class exploited as always

The lack of awareness of job insecurity has probably been a key factor in the aforementioned syndicalist crisis. New movements have boosted organizations, which already felt distant from trade unions, such as young people and women. These are precisely the social sectors which suffer with temporary jobs more and who need to organize themselves.

According to the British economist Guy Standing, this is called the ‘precariat’, a new social class characterized by insecure and unstable working conditions. In an interview to Crític he stated that “precariat is the new social class of global capitalism” and remarked that “in Spain, today, it is 40% of the population”. But does this description depict the reality of domestic workers or chambermaids? Are they part of a new social class, extended globally, and hugely exploited?

The writer and journalist Owen Jones explains in the Prologue of his book “Chavs: The Demonization of the working class” that, when Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto in 1848, the bulk of the labour class was conformed by servants and domestic staff. It wasn’t until the 1940’s and 1950’s that the industrial working class –today a significant minority– started emerging. It is, then, a working mass that has never been homogeneous. Transformations experienced over the last few years, with an acute growth of the services sector and huge insecurity with regards to labour conditions, for Owen Jones, are connected with the changes

suffered by the social and economical system.

It's in that context that Las Kellys and Sindillar appear. In the same way as happened with 20th-century servants, domestic employees and chambermaids are not recognized –despite doing an essential job– because they are not seen. Their work is associated with the caring tasks traditionally performed by women at home. Being women, devoted to manual labour, poorly paid and highly populated by migrants invites elitist prejudices of class, gender and race when the topic of these groups is discussed.

Self-organization experiences such as Sindillar and Las Kellys highlight hidden realities and the need to discover new vindication mechanisms, in order to help the most excluded –both in social and labour terms– raise their voice. Creativity, mutual support and assemblies are the definitive ingredients for the new recipes. And empowered women will be the chefs.