

Public or private?

What is Semente?

Perhaps this is not the best time to reopen the debate about public and private schools, taking the initiative of creating a network of grassroots schools, in the current context of ongoing privatisation of public sector services. Far from our intention to add reasons to dismantle public sector, no matter if the area is education, health or the little remaining industry still not privatised. The activists of “Semente” have a long history of support to public services in our country; we think that in a fair society the profit and mercantilisation should be banned from activities such as education and health. In particular, in our society, we think that capital and the church should be as far away as possible from these services. But in truth, our initiative cannot be classified under any of those categories - neither public nor private - and we shall explain the rationale for taking this step forward.

We start by looking at the state of public services in our country, and even if this analysis offers nothing new, it will be shared by all people concerned with the fight for good quality galician public services. As we already mentioned, we ourselves are among these people.

When looking at language, public schools, especially in towns and cities, has been contributing for many years to the process of language substitution towards castillian-spanish in our society. In some cases it is an active force of this substitution, in others it cannot withheld, despite best efforts from part of the teachers, to revert this process, and not even maintain speakers of our language.

From a minimally progressive point of view, the attack on public services in the area of education (Galinhas Azuis managed by Opus Dei -a religious organisation—, private companies taking more active roles in Universities, complaints from Education Minister Wert about plans to make education in Catalonia more pro-spanish...), health (sending patients from public to private health providers, new hospitals in Lugo and Ponte Vedra...) or other areas (fraud in social housing in new housing developments...), cannot be interpreted but as a new step in dismantling these services to be absorbed by private capital interests. This will mean the worsening of working conditions of workers, but also worsening the quality of the service itself.

The question arises: How much can we hold back before creating alternatives? Complaining is out of question and fair, but attacks on public services are nothing new. For years we have been trapped in a whirlpool that is stealing away basic rights and the frustration has been building up. We need, in parallel to these initiatives, others that allow ourselves to show the kind of country that we want, that allow us to build. That allow us to tell our friends: This is the Education that we want for our children. Beyond good-willed individual efforts; beyond books, articles or web pages. Realities.

There are people who believe that, in the face of these aggressions, there is only one way to act - periodic protests on the streets and wait for the arrival of the left to power (and here each one can fill with the name of their preferred party). But how long until it comes? How much uninterrupted time in government is needed to change the current situation? Can we allow ourselves to wait for all this time?

Our opinion was, and still is, that it is time to build. But build what? A private school? It would be that if we define private as antonym of public, but this would imply to assume that unions, culture or sport societies, are also private. Actually the difference lies on profit-seeking, in taking economic advantage of a necessity. The initiatives which are non-public but still not-for-profit, and organised and managed by social movements, are historically referred to as community or grassroots, popular initiatives.

The schools of Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil or the cration of institutions of government parallel to the State ones in Kosova are but two international examples of grassroots initiatives. Other nations without state also developed schools to fulfill the right of children to be educated in their language - Diwan schools in Brittany, Bressola schools in Nord Catalonia, and Ikastolas in the Basque country are the closest examples. They have not forfeited their requests for a good quality public system, but they expressed through acts that they did not want a public system at any cost, in particular not at the expense of their language. Even in the Basque Country, the success of Ikastolas forced the autonomous government to convert many of them to public schools.

But Galiza was not completely devoid of these initiatives: consumer co-operatives (like the one founded in 1903 in Sam Joám de Mugar dos), "economatos" or company stores, the most combative unions, are initiatives that speak for the will of the people that organises to create networks, that do not want to wait to claim what is their own. In the area of Education, the schools founded with money from emigration are an example of generosity of galician people that wanted a future for their children in their own land. The Escolas de Ensino Galego (Schools of Galician Education), founded by the Irmandades da Fala da Corunha at the start of the XX century, are also grassroots, popular initiatives to guarantee the right of galician children to not feel as strangers in their own country.

For all of this, our proposal is to embrace the historic semantics of grassroots movements to negate a dichotomy that leads us to immobility. And to proclaim that these initiatives in which we meet to create our own future are not private, but community or grassroots based. Because it is the grassroots movements which creates them, and because we do this for ourselves, the workers of Galiza.

In Vigo, same as in Compostela, Corunha, Lugo or Trasancos, we needed a school that guaranteed the rights of our children to speak galician; a not-for-profit project, whose hypothetical economic benefits would revert back to the improvement and growth of the project. An initiative in which there is a fund of solidarity to guarantee the non-exclusion of anyone for economic reasons. Financed in part by contributions of people who, have they children or not, make a recurrent monetary contribution because they share the necessity of this kind of projects. People who want to show by acts the existence of a community that wants schools in galician. And now we have Semente. A reality that sprung up, and is growing up day by day.