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The struggle to survive

Unemployed self-help and direct action during the Republic

5.1 Unemployed street politics

This chapter will explore the patterns of social and political polarisation that developed around the unemployed and extra-industrial struggles in Barcelona. As we saw in Chapter 3, the unemployed played a prominent role in the social protest of 1930–31. Following the birth of the Republic, the overriding objective of the moderate anarcho-syndicalists, then hegemonic within the CNT, was the organisation of the unemployed in union-controlled labour exchanges (*bolsas de trabajo*). These had several attractions. For instance, since the existence of a reserve army of labour endangered the authority of the unions, the *bolsas* established a vital connection between the unemployed and the labour movement, ensuring that the jobless remained under the influence of class culture. The CNT's aim was to force employers to recruit new operatives exclusively through its *bolsas*, thereby providing work for the unemployed. From a syndicalist/ corporatist perspective, the *bolsas* would allow the CNT to extend its control over the supply of labour and, more generally, enhance its power over the economy and society. The *bolsas* were also schools for industrial activism: unemployed members were encouraged to undertake union activities, such as fly-posting and picketing and other tasks, which were remunerated at the daily wage rate for semi-skilled manual labourers; following the creation of the defence committees, the *bolsas* served as a conveyor belt for recruits to the paramilitary bodies inside the CNT.¹ Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the *bolsas* enhanced militancy: strikes could begin in the knowledge that the jobless would not become a weapon in the hands of the employers.

From the start of the Republic though, most unemployed practices developed outside the unions, in the streets, and they were invariably conditioned by the memory of past survival strategies employed by the dispossessed in Barcelona. Illegality, both individual and collective, provides one such example. Notwithstanding its various forms, most illegality can be described as 'occasional' or circumstantial, a response to the precarious conditions of everyday life, rather than 'professional'. Indeed, in the absence of a developed welfare system, a significant part of the urban population was obliged to transgress the law in order to guarantee its physical and material survival.² Hence the

regularity with which basic foodstuffs such as fruit, vegetables and bread, the fundamental components of proletarian diets, were seized from bakeries and shops. The *modus operandi* commonly employed was for a lone woman to enter a shop or bakery and order provisions as if undertaking her daily shopping. Once the groceries were packed, ‘persons unknown’ would enter the shop and ensure that the foodstuffs were removed. Normally, the implication or threat of violence was enough to allow the seizure of foodstuffs but, when appropriate, these were backed up with physical force.³ Larger groups of unemployed workers sometimes joined together in more organised raids on port stores and warehouses, actions that were often conducted at night.⁴ Another common way the unemployed ate was ‘eating without paying’ or, as it was sometimes described in the bourgeois press, *comiendo a la fuerza* (literally, ‘eating by force’). This was generally the preserve of impecunious males, who, either alone or in groups, entered a restaurant or bar, ordered and consumed food, before either refusing to pay or fleeing. On one occasion, jobless workers succeeded in demanding food in the Barcelona Ritz. In a rare and hedonistic case, three unemployed men spent a night on the town in a Paral·lel cabaret before leaving in the early hours of the morning without paying a large drinks bill. More frequently, groups of unemployed workers toured hotels and restaurants demanding food from the kitchens.⁵ In the peripheral *barris*, where the city met the countryside, the unemployed often seized food from nearby farms and, throughout the republican years, the estates around l’Hospitalet to the south of Barcelona and Santa Coloma to the north were raided by the jobless. So great was the problem that, according to the Sociedad de Patronos Cultivadores (Small Farmers’ Association) in l’Hospitalet, a local agrarian pressure group, by the end of 1931 farmers were obliged to guard crops ‘at all hours, day and night’.⁶ There is also evidence that unemployed workers requisitioned valuable items, presumably with the intention of selling them to third parties, namely the regular thefts of religious icons from churches, bicycles and car parts (one unemployed mechanic was detained stripping down a luxury car in the street).⁷

In a city with a buoyant clandestine firearms market, it was not difficult for unemployed workers to acquire pistols for armed robberies. Again, this assumed a variety of forms. In inter-class spaces such as the Rambles, armed street crime was directed at rich pedestrians. More common were armed raids on apartments and villas in the bourgeois districts of Sarrià, Pedralbes and Vallvidrera, and on the weekend homes of the well-to-do scattered around the outskirts of Barcelona.⁸ Another favoured location for hold-ups by lone gunmen and small groups was the isolated *carreteras* (roads) that connected Barcelona with neighbouring towns. Press and police reports reveal that on a single evening an active armed group might stop up to five cars before returning to the city.⁹ Taxi drivers’ purses were frequently targeted: the common practice was to hire a taxi and direct it to a suitably isolated destination, often the outlying *carreteras*, before seizing the driver’s money and, sometimes, the taxi. Other popular targets of armed illegality were rent or debt collectors.¹⁰ All this occurred alongside a constant stream of attacks on commercial establishments such as tobacconists, bars and jewellery shops and the armed bank couriers who transported money around the city.¹¹

Owing to the absence of reliable crime statistics, it is difficult to gauge the extent of these practices. The crime pages of the daily press recorded illegality, but this was often exaggerated for reasons of political expediency. Equally, the victims of these attacks were often warned by their assailants not to report attacks to the police. As *La*

Vanguardia noted, robberies on the *carreteras* were regularly underreported due to fear of reprisals; this was confirmed by the police, who offered full confidentiality to victims of robberies on secluded country roads, which by night were popular with rich lovers.¹²

What we can be sure about is the strong normative element contained within the practices documented above; this is perhaps clearest in the removal of collection boxes and icons from churches. Many unemployed workers were ready to justify stepping outside the law in order to survive the ravages of the recession. For example, two unemployed workers confronted by a farmer while seizing crops informed him: 'The land is for everyone!'¹³ Shopkeepers and shop workers regularly reported that those who seized groceries from shops justified their actions in terms of the recession, that they were unemployed and, through no fault of their own, lacked the economic resources to purchase victuals. Similarly, those who ate without paying in bars and restaurants justified their actions in terms of their 'right to life'.¹⁴

Unemployed illegality was so deeply embedded in the property relations of 1930s Barcelona that it is difficult to disguise its pronounced class character. In the overwhelming majority of cases, unemployed self-help was directed at the middle and upper classes, the real possessors of wealth in the city. For instance, since car ownership was possible only for the wealthy, the hold-ups on the *carreteras* affected elite members of society exclusively. Conversely, there were very few recorded instances of intra-working class crime. While this is not easy to measure, if we recall that *Solidaridad Obrera* made every effort to reflect the everyday concerns of Barcelona's workers, from dangerous stray dogs to pollution, it is striking that reports of workers falling victim to street crime or theft were exceptionally rare. In 1931, there was one report of a worker robbed of his wages at gunpoint. The response of *Solidaridad Obrera* was both predictable and illustrative: it invited workers to take direct measures of self-defence, counselling that 'it is necessary for us workers to arm ourselves, to prevent them [i.e. criminals] from robbing us of the fruit of the sweat of our brows'.¹⁵ Workers certainly resented those who attempted to steal from them, as was discovered by a foolhardy pickpocket (*ratero*) who infiltrated the CNT May Day demonstration in search of wallets and watches: the hapless felon was spotted by marchers and heavily beaten before police managed to protect him from the wrath of the crowd.¹⁶

Another practice that developed in direct proportion to unemployment was the street trade of jobless workers. These jobless traders peddled foodstuffs, which, for the most part, they purchased from wholesale markets with their savings, although it was also rumoured that some produce was seized from farms and allotments.¹⁷ Because street traders habitually sold their wares near markets and shopping areas and had no expenses, they could undercut market traders and shopkeepers, making them very popular with working-class consumers, especially in the poorest *barris*. Such was the growth of this commerce that street traders constructed *el mercadet*, a purpose-built trading zone near the Raval, which allowed free access to all unemployed vendors and attracted working-class consumers from all over Barcelona.¹⁸ While not a form of direct protest, street trade nevertheless reflected a popular struggle for a new proletarian economy.

This same struggle can be seen in agitation against Barcelona's high rents, which started in October 1930.¹⁹ Shortly before the birth of the Republic, a rent strike began in the waterfront district of Barceloneta, quickly spreading to the poorest *barris*, such as the *cases barates*; localised rent protests also began in Sants, a *barri* with a large factory

proletariat, and areas with concentrations of shanty houses.²⁰ For the most part, the rent strike was a protest of the unemployed, the unskilled and the underpaid, for whom issues of material life and consumption loomed large: for the jobless, it signalled complete liberation from the burden of rent payments; for the low-paid, it promised an immediate material gain without the hardships of an industrial stoppage. Although the rent strike demonstrates the capability of



Figure 5.1 A female street trader with her wares

Source: L'Avenç Archive

the dispossessed to assert their aspirations spontaneously, it did not occur in a vacuum: it was rooted in a multi-faceted web of relations and solidarities derived from neighbours and kinship and drew on long traditions of community autonomy. In keeping with all rent strikes, this mobilisation was strengthened by democratic grassroots decision making.²¹ It was also inextricably tied to the radical mobilising culture propounded by the CNT since World War One. While the CNT did not initiate the rent boycott, it was no coincidence that it began in Barceloneta, an important union stronghold and the site of La Maquinista, Barcelona's biggest metal factory, and *cenetistas* were deeply involved in the street committees and neighbourhood groups that organised the strike.

Nor can the development of the rent strike be separated from the mass expectations aroused by republicans before and after the birth of the Republic, when they proposed a new deal for tenants and rent controls.²² (Naturally, once the rent strike had spread across proletarian Barcelona, this quickly changed, as the republicans appreciated the size of the

Pandora's Box they had opened.) With the ERC in power, many tenants doubtless wished to give notice to republicans of their earlier commitment to act on the housing question. Significantly, the rent strikers were emphatic that they did not seek to embarrass the new authorities, stressing the economic content of their aspirations, which they believed did not presuppose the bankruptcy of the property-owning class or the revolutionary abolition of landlord-tenant relationships. Thus the rent strikers announced their refusal to pay exorbitant rents, which, they insisted, had to be reduced by 40 percent, a 'modest' cut that they believed would still yield a 6–17 percent financial return to the landlord. This cut was to be applied only to rents under 100 pesetas per month, i.e. those paid by workers.²³

Although the rent strike always belonged to the streets, radicals inside the CNT were quick to recognise its significance as an urban struggle. In particular, a group of *cenetistas* and anarchists from inside the Construction Union established close ties with the neighbourhood associations and activists who organised the strike. This was unsurprising, for this was the *sindicato* with the highest rate of unemployment of all the Barcelona unions: approximately 40 per cent of its 30,000 members were out of work in 1931, and rent payments created huge problems for its essentially unskilled, low-paid members still in work.²⁴ Shortly after the birth of the Republic, Construction Union activists founded the CDE (Comisión de Defensa Económica or Commission for Economic Defence) to study living costs in Barcelona.²⁵ Headed by two *faistas*, Arturo Parera and Santiago Bilbao, the CDE appreciated that the rent strike was an important act of economic self-defence through which the underpaid, the unemployed and the dispossessed could reappropriate space and free themselves from market domination by taking control of everyday life. In a series of meetings and notes in *Solidaridad Obrera*, the CDE welcomed the rent strike as a justified response to 'scandalous rents' and 'indecent conditions' and offered workers succinct advice: 'Eat well and, if you don't have the money, then don't pay your rent!'²⁶ The CDE also demanded that the unemployed be exempted from rent payments.²⁷ In essence, the CDE's struggle was reformist, for an increase in the social wage and collective consumption.

Another form of unemployed mobilisation was street protest. Given that the jobless have few protest resources (perforce they have no labour to withdraw), unemployed workers' movements tend to present their agenda to the authorities in the public sphere via street action and demonstrations. There were several peaceful unemployed demonstrations in the days after the birth of the Republic. On 20 April, barely a week after the fall of the monarchy, the unemployed marched on the Generalitat and the council chambers in Republic Square, in the city centre. Although there is some circumstantial evidence of activist involvement, this march and others were not intended to discomfort the new authorities. The marchers' main demands—the six-hour day in industry and public works—both figured in the ERC's programme before the April municipal elections and could hardly therefore be viewed as revolutionary. Equally, the readiness of the demonstrators to take their demands to the new authorities suggests that they had a certain amount of faith in the republicans. A delegation of the unemployed entered the Generalitat to parley with key political figures, including President Macià, Serra i Moret, the head of the Generalitat Comissió Pro-Obrers sense Treball, Civil Governor Companys and Mayor Aiguader i Miró. The unemployed representatives reported that, in their discussions, the ERC leaders offered 'not only verbal support but real assistance', assuring that 'governmental action in the form of a subsidy or

unemployment insurance will undoubtedly be forthcoming', along with public works. Upon learning of this new commitment by the authorities, the demonstrators outside the Generalitat were jubilant, and they withdrew peacefully from Republic Square.²⁸

However, on 31 April, a new unemployed demonstration arrived in Republic Square in a more defiant mood, and this time the protest ended in violence. According to *Las Noticias*, the marchers, 'on the whole young people', attacked nearby shops and requisitioned comestibles, one of the most elementary forms of protest available to the unemployed. When the marchers reached the Rambles, they entered La Boquería, Barcelona's central market, seizing more food; later, a nearby warehouse in the Raval was stormed and more victuals were removed.²⁹ While it might appear harsh to criticise the authorities for failing to 'solve' unemployment in the two weeks they had been in power, the riot gave eloquent notice that the jobless wanted more than just platitudes and promises from the city's new rulers.

The 31 April riot occurred on the eve of the first May Day of the republican era, the most significant event in the proletarian calendar. The new authorities hoped that May Day would underline the consensus between the Republic and the labour movement. The reformist workers' organisations represented in government—the PSOE and the UGT—saw it as a 'day of peace', while the ERC, in keeping with its populism, made May 1 a public



Figure 5.2 An unemployed workers' demonstration. The banner reads 'Without Bread and Work'

Source: Francesc Bonamusa, Pere Gabriel, Josep Lluís Martin Ramos and Josep Termes, *Història Gràfica del Moviment Obrer a Catalunya*, Barcelona, 1989, p. 191

holiday, 'a day of the people'.³⁰ Yet the May Day celebration revealed the divergent interests of the constituent parts of the 'people', as unemployment and the divisions it unleashed fractured the cross-class alliance that had ushered in the Republic. Thus the May Day demands of the l'Hospitalet CNT—the introduction of the six-hour working day and the 'disarming of all the institutions that served the monarchy, such as the police and the Civil Guard' underlined that the Republic had not gone far enough down the road to freedom and justice for the most militant sections of the working class.³¹

But the most graphic measure of proletarian identity and power was the huge May Day rally and demonstration organised by the Barcelona CNT at the Palau de Belles Arts, near the city centre, the first open show of support for the Confederation in its birthplace since the early 1920s. Highlighting the importance of consumption-related issues for the CNT, as well as the inevitability of conflict with republicanism's middle-class base, the theme of the rally was 'The First of May against Unemployment, Inflation and for a Reduction in Rents'. This promise of positive action in favour of the unemployed and the unskilled attracted around 150,000 workers from the *barris*, the largest mass gathering in Barcelona since the birth of the Republic.³² Some of the tenants' associations active in the rent strike also attended. It was clear that these community groups had established close ties with the radicals from *Nosotros*, who had draped a lorry in red-and-black flags from which a succession of anarchists and community leaders addressed the crowds, calling for immediate action on behalf of the jobless and the low-paid, such as rent cuts and the readmission of the unemployed into the factories.³³ At the end of the rally, the marchers set off for the Generalitat palace in Republic Square to present their demands to the authorities. By the time the front of the demonstration had reached the Rambles, its rearguard was almost half a kilometre away in Urquinaona Square, as tens of thousands of workers proceeded ineluctably towards the Generalitat, breaking everyday routines and power flows and giving notice of their intent to move from the urban margins to reclaim the city centre.

Upon learning that the massed ranks of the CNT were bound for the Generalitat, Macià revealed his lack of confidence in the security forces by ordering that the Catalan police, the Mossos d'Esquadra, were to take sole responsibility for guarding the Generalitat Palace and Republic Square. However, as thousands of demonstrators arrived in Republic Square singing the anarchist anthem, 'Los hijos del pueblo' (The Children of the People), the small contingent of Mossos was very quickly outnumbered. Fearing that his agents would lose control of the situation, the chief of the Mossos d'Esquadra made an urgent call for police reinforcements. A contingent of the Guardia de Seguridad, the state police, responded first. When these reinforcements arrived in a square packed with demonstrators, they also found themselves outnumbered and unable to reach the Mossos inside the Generalitat. The commander of the Guardia de Seguridad, who apparently believed that marchers were attempting to storm the Generalitat, ordered his men to open fire above the heads of the demonstrators. What had previously been a peaceful demonstration was suddenly engulfed in violence. As marchers ran for cover, a 45-minute gun battle ensued between the guardias and armed workers. Calm finally prevailed when the hated guardias were replaced by soldiers, who were cheered through the streets by marchers as the 'sons of the people' who, unlike the police, would not fire on workers. When the fighting ended, a policeman lay dead and two more were wounded, along with ten workers.³⁴

It would be wrong to interpret the violent conclusion of the May Day march as evidence that Barcelona was on the eve of a new period of *pistolerisme*. Although the *armed faïstas* and *grupistas* that provided security for the march opened fire on the police, it must be remembered that the first shots came from the Guardia de Seguridad. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, right-wingers and former members of the anti-republican *Sindicatos Libres*, who had recently been banned by the new authorities, had joined the demonstration and were in Republic Square in order to provoke violence—the majority of those arrested on arms charges were ex-Libres, compared with just a solitary *faïsta*.³⁵

After the violence, the authorities displayed a new keenness to reduce the tensions that were developing around unemployment. However, rather than undercut social protest, piecemeal measures resulted only in further conflict. For instance, a council-rim allotment scheme, which created 2,000 plots on Montjuïc on which jobless workers could grow fruit, required a permanent police guard from attack by those who did not have a plot.³⁶ Similarly, in early May the council began to issue food vouchers to those unemployed workers who could demonstrate that they had resided in Barcelona for at least five years. The voucher system inevitably brought new tensions to the surface: besides frustrating the many migrant workers who were not entitled to municipal welfare, it was underfunded and quickly proved incapable of meeting the needs of those unemployed who qualified for assistance. With as many as 3,000 unemployed workers converging on the office in Hospital Road, a narrow street in the Raval from where the scheme operated, it was not long before fights broke out between jobless workers and the police.³⁷ In June, following clashes with the police, unemployed workers stormed the welfare offices and seized food vouchers. Later, the unemployed attempted to march to nearby Republic Square and issue new demands on the authorities, only to be repelled by the police, resulting in further violence.³⁸

Since the riots of 30 April and 1 May, the republican authorities had become extremely concerned about the volatility of street protests in the city centre and were now determined to deny the unemployed the right to define public space. Any attempt by the unemployed to bring their demands to the centre of the political and administrative power of the city would now meet with police repression. Yet this could not bring urban peace: by trying to deny the unemployed access to the only forum in which they could express themselves, the authorities increased the competition for public space and made it more violent. Thus, when the unemployed found their path to the Generalitat blocked, they turned back into the Raval and vented their anger on the middle class, attacking shops and entering bars and demanding food.³⁹

In an attempt to avoid large concentrations of unemployed workers in the city centre, the ERC-controlled Generalitat and city council established a series of soup kitchens across Barcelona. Again, new protests developed. Besides providing free meals, the kitchens brought little relief to the unemployed, who still had to bear the burden of rent payments. On one occasion, a publicity visit by republican politicians to soup kitchens in the *Can Tunis cases barates* provoked a riot.⁴⁰ In addition to allegations of graft and corruption in the awarding of catering contracts, most criticism of the kitchens focused on the quality of the food, which *Solidaridad Obrera* described as ‘slops’.⁴¹ In early July, *La Vanguardia* reported that ‘a spirit of protest’ developed among the unemployed regarding the quality of the meals in the Hospital Road soup kitchens. When *asaltos* arrived to

impose order, fighting erupted and a worker was shot. Carrying the bloodstained shirt of the wounded man, the indignant patrons of the soup kitchen set out to protest to Republic Square, only to be attacked by the police when they reached the Rambles. That afternoon, a second march was charged by Guardia Civil cavalry, and sporadic street battles ensued for several hours in the Raval.⁴²

There was an underlying logic to these street protests. A recurring feature was the collective demand of the unemployed for access to the streets and the defence of their right to occupy public space. Thus, at the end of July, the unemployed began another peaceful march to the Generalitat. When the marchers were charged by Guàrdia Civil cavalry, frustrated demonstrators resisted the security forces before entering hotels to demand food.⁴³ The calculated attack on the property of the urban middle class, whether its seizure or its destruction, became one of the hallmarks of unemployed street politics. Another characteristic was their organisation. For all the apparent confusion that reigned in the streets, the protesting crowds revealed both coherence and structure. Depending on the opposition they met from the forces of order, protesters might withdraw, regroup and launch counterattacks on a range of selected targets, whether the security forces, shopkeepers, hoteliers or market traders.⁴⁴

These unemployed street politics were inflected by Barcelona's long history of direct action protests, of which they formed part. These 'traditional' protest forms endured into the Republic; for instance, when, in Barceloneta, on a Sunday in late July, a tram collided with two workers, injuring one and killing the other, a crowd quickly formed on the streets and began to vent its anger on Tram Company property, overturning three trams and burning another. When the police attempted to enter the *barri* to impose order, they were forced out, only re-entering under cover of darkness. The following day, however, when the tram service recommenced, there was, according to *La Vanguardia*, a 'popular uprising' (*motín popular*), as residents—men, women and children—ripped up pavements and tram lines and blocked roads with barricades to prevent the circulation of trams and police, who were both forced from the *barri* again. Faced with this popular pressure, the council yielded to the central demand of the community—that the tram service be suspended—and introduced bus transport.⁴⁵

A further point of commonality between unemployed street politics and working-class customs was their anti-police content, perhaps the most defining feature of jobless protests. Since the police were the guardians of state power on the streets, since the unemployed spent a lot of time in public spaces like parks, and since the streets were the main forums for unemployed protests, relations between the two were inevitably tense.⁴⁶ The struggle of the unemployed with the police was inseparable from popular traditions of resistance to authority. So great were these traditions that detainees frequently appealed to passers-by to intercede on their behalf. Crowds were often more than happy to oblige, attacking the police and attempting to free detainees whether they knew the arrested person or not.⁴⁷ For instance, in early September 1931, in a street in the heart of the Raval, a 'common criminal' arrested by the police cried for public support. In reply, residents left their tenement blocks to attack the police and attempt to free the detainee, while other neighbours bombarded the security forces with bottles, cans and rocks from their balconies. In the end, police fired warning shots into the air before removing the detainee.⁴⁸ In another case, according to a police report, in La Torrassa, when an *asalto* hit a felon in the course of an arrest, the agent was surrounded by an aggressive crowd.

The swift intervention of the Guardia Civil and the police was required ‘otherwise things would have turned very nasty’.⁴⁹

The full repertoire of these complex street politics was acted out in the rent strike. By the summer of 1931, the rent campaign had been ‘appropriated’ by the CDE, which organised a series of mass meetings in the *barris*. The rent strike spread like wildfire. At the end of July, the CDE claimed that 45,000 tenants were refusing to pay rent in Barcelona. By late summer, over 100,000 tenants had joined the mobilisation, and in September there were reports of ‘significant resistance’ to rent payment in Calella, 50 kilometres to the north, and Vilanova i la Geltrú, 30 kilometres to the south, as the strike spread to surrounding towns.⁵⁰ Importantly, the CDE provided strategic leadership for the rent strike, constituting a point of liaison for a coordinated protest. In response to appeals from the authorities for the strikers to submit their demands individually to arbitration, the CDE explained at length that the campaign would continue to rely on direct action methods. First, because the urban poor needed an immediate improvement in their living standards, a panacea once advocated by the republicans—passively awaiting the conclusion of arbitration procedures—was not a realistic option. Second, the CDE had little faith in the republicans, who had reneged on their earlier commitment to act on the housing question and were now apparently prepared to tolerate the ‘oligarchy of the landlords’.⁵¹ Third, the CDE claimed that the notoriously intransigent landlord class, which was unaccustomed to any challenge to its authority, would only make concessions to tenants under pressure. In the light of the above, the CDE argued that if the rent strike ended, tenants would effectively be disarming themselves in the face of their enemies with no guarantee of any rent reduction.⁵² These sentiments were echoed by the anarchist newspaper *Tierra y Libertad*, which considered the rent strike ‘opportune’: it ‘will do more in a few months than several centuries of legislation’.⁵³ It also should be recognised that, given that the rent strike started independently of the CDE, it was far from obvious that it could end the mobilisation, even if it so wished.

The CDE attempted to politicise working-class awareness of consumption issues: it promised a struggle for a new urban meaning in opposition to the vision held by speculators, renters and shopkeepers and, indeed, by the republican authorities, of the city as a place for profit and exploitation. Following a visit to La Boquería market, a CDE delegation remarked that because of uncontrolled food prices, ‘“life” is a privilege. The people either do not eat or, at best, eat little and badly’. The CDE also denounced shopkeepers for cheating consumers by adulterating foodstuffs and doctoring weights. Days later, at a CDE meeting attended by 1,500 people in Barceloneta, where the rent strike began, CDE organiser Santiago Bilbao excoriated shopkeepers and landlords for ‘robbing’ the workers, after parsimonious employers had already ‘pilfered’ from their wage packets.⁵⁴

The additional layer of organisation provided by the CDE was crucial given the limited protest resources of the unemployed: it allowed for the coordination of those who were individually weak, linking street and neighbourhood networks in a powerful collective resistance to the urban *status quo*.⁵⁵ By appealing to an undifferentiated working-class community, the CDE mobilised many non-unionised workers in the rent strike. The open nature of this action was of paramount importance, for agitation on living standards could only really be effective if it attracted the widest number of workers, irrespective of political creed or organisational affiliation. The only demands the

CDE made of new strikers was that they register with the strike committee and subsequently act in absolute solidarity with other strikers. This resulted in a kind of united front in the streets. There was a high degree of grassroots autonomy and popular control, which enabled the CDE to mobilise far beyond its own organisational structures. At the same time, the link between the rent strike and the CDE and, by extension, with the CNT, threatened to open up a new front in the struggle for urban power, uniting the fight for community self-determination with the struggle for workers' control of industry.

For many workers, the rent strike provided a real experience of community decision making and popular democracy. Strikers discussed neighbourhood problems in popular assemblies, and the specific grievances of tenants in different *barris* were incorporated within the overall struggle for a reduction in rents. Some tenants demanded improvements in housing quality, and the unemployed demanded free public transport to facilitate their search for work, while in the *cases barates*, one of the strongholds of the strike, the rent campaign fused with longstanding demands for school provision, health facilities, street lighting and transport links with Barcelona city centre. In the Horta *barri*, the rent strikers issued an audacious series of demands for a working-class space, including the removal of the *Guàrdia Civil* from the area and the immediate closure of the local church.⁵⁶

The resultant sense of collective ownership of the rent protest made for a profound level of solidarity, drawing on the order of the *barris* and the reservoir of community loyalties and networks. As the CDE announced, 'rather than sleep on the streets, we are ready for anything'. Accordingly, when landlords ordered the electricity or water supply to be cut to strikers, sympathetic workers reconnected them. Similarly, when landlords evicted tenants for the non-payment of rent, CDE activists, strikers and neighbours were always on hand to return tenants and their furniture to their flats. Meanwhile, when evictees could not be reinstated immediately, there were always neighbours prepared to offer beds and temporary accommodation. This solidarity was reinforced by the relatively uniform existence and experiences of the strikers. For instance, according to one worker, the 'majority' of tenants in the *cases barates* were unemployed migrants who simply could not afford rent.⁵⁷ As the tempo of evictions intensified, the crowds became more innovative and structured in their street protests. The reinstatement of tenants increasingly assumed the form of community celebrations, drawing in rent strikers from neighbouring streets and, at crucial moments, from other districts.⁵⁸ Practices such as squatting and returning evictees to flats betrayed elements of counter-cultural ideology, a working-class view of housing not as a source of profit or property but as a social need.⁵⁹

Collective force was integral to the strikers' resistance. During a popular protest against an attempted eviction in the Can Tunis *cases barates*, a lorry of *Guàrdia Civil* had to be dispatched to prevent the torching of the local church, which was, in the view of the residents, a symbol of oppression. Assaults on bailiffs—the quickest and most effective way of preventing evictions—became commonplace, and there were reports of bailiffs refusing to carry out evictions through fear of reprisals.⁶⁰ In late August, in l'Hospitalet, an angry crowd attempted to lynch two bailiffs.⁶¹ On another occasion, bailiffs left their lorry behind while fleeing an angry crowd. When police squads started escorting bailiffs, violent street battles resulted, sometimes involving working-class women and children. The prominent role of women resembled 'traditional' consumption protests, and the police were frequently unable to counter female militancy and withdrew without

effecting evictions. Another similarity with earlier protest repertoires was the collective marches on landlords' houses. Following the reinstallation of an evicted family in Sants, residents marched to the landlord's abode, warning him not to re-evict his tenants and announcing publicly his contravention of the moral code of the community. Some landlords reported to the police that threats had been made against them by armed rent strikers.⁶² News of successes—that families had been reinstated or that evictions had been thwarted—travelled from *barri* to *barri* by word of mouth and brought added confidence to protesters.⁶³ Meanwhile, *Solidaridad Obrera* provided a focus for the strikers, publishing the names and addresses of those who opposed the rent protest.⁶⁴

5.2 Repressing the 'detritus of the city'

As we saw in Chapter 3, there was no place within the 'republic of order' for any struggle that developed outside the new institutions. However, the authorities set about containing the unemployed in part because their street politics threw the antagonistic interests of the jobless and republicanism's middle-class base into sharp relief. From the start of the Republic, commercial pressure groups placed unrelenting pressure on the authorities to repress unemployed street traders, frequently accusing the police of being too 'soft' on these 'lawbreakers'.⁶⁵ The new authorities were extremely receptive to the demands of their important middle-class social constituency, especially since several Esquerra councillors were drawn from the urban petite bourgeoisie. Indeed, there was a significant overlap between the new republican political elite and the commercial associations directly affected by unemployed practices.⁶⁶ For instance, Enric Sànchez, president of the *Unió General de Venedors de Mercats* (General Union of Market Traders), a market traders' group at loggerheads with the street traders, had been an ERC candidate in the April 1931 council elections.⁶⁷ It was understandable then that the authorities should be sympathetic to the demands of market traders and shopkeepers for tough action against street traders.

There were also many ties between the republican movement and the landlord class. In l'Hospitalet, the president of one of the republican groups in Collblanc was head of the property owners' association, and both bodies were located in the same building.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, jurisdiction over the *cases barates*, one of the centres of the rent strike, rested directly with an ERC-controlled quango, the *Comissariat de Cases Barates*. But the COPUB, the main landlords' association in Barcelona, did most to encourage repression of the rent strike.⁶⁹ According to the COPUB, which had a highly idealised view of housing conditions, the 'state of insubordination of many thousands of tenants [and the] state of anarchy in Barcelona, especially in the peripheral districts' was the work of 'irresponsible elements' intent on 'harm[ing] tenants' interests' and rupturing the 'harmony between landlords and tenants'. These 'agitators' were part of an 'organised offensive against global property' designed to 'provoke conflicts' and create an 'unnecessary state of alarm' in order to 'compromise the new political institutions' and 'damage the national economy' before establishing a Bolshevik dictatorship. It was thus the duty of the authorities to adopt an 'unyielding' policy of repression, including a ban on the CDE, on behalf of the 'tenants of good faith', thereby 'maintaining the principle of authority' and 'the triumph of order and social peace'.⁷⁰ While not averse to threatening