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# The struggles of women against the liberalisation of ports in Barcelona in the 1980s

**Valentina Leal-Román**

Universitat Rovira i Virgili  
Member of the study group  
Història, Societat, política i  
Cultura des de Catalunya al Món  
(ISOCAC-URV)  
0000-0001-5054-5736 |  
valentinaléalr@gmail.com

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## ■ ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, mobilisations were generated in Barcelona due to liberalisation measures in the ports. This period coincided with the transition to democracy and the emergence of a new workers' movement, characterised by autonomy, grassroots participation and links with neighbourhood movements. In this context, dockers' wives organised themselves into a collective and carried out protests in support of their families' struggles, forging a movement independent of that created by the men. The objective of this study is to analyse the role of women in the port environment, showing that they were more than just companions in the struggles, configuring themselves as social actors capable of generating new forms of protest and their own content. The methodology is based on the analysis of documentary sources, such as press and photographs from the Barcelona Dockworkers Organisation (OEPB), complemented by oral sources.

**Keywords:** women, dockers, strike, port, Barcelona.

## *Les lluites de les dones contra la liberalització dels ports a Barcelona en els anys 80*

## ■ RESUM

Durant la dècada dels 80, es van produir diverses mobilitzacions a Barcelona com a resposta a les mesures liberalitzadores als ports. Aquest període coincideix amb la transició democràtica i l'emergència d'un nou moviment obrer, caracteritzat per l'autonomia, la participació de les bases i la connexió amb els moviments veïnals. En aquest context, s'organitza el col·lectiu de dones dels estibadors, que emprenen accions de protesta en suport a les lluites laborals dels seus familiars i constitueixen un moviment autònom respecte del liderat pels homes. L'objectiu d'aquest treball és analitzar els rols de les dones en l'àmbit portuari, mostrant que no van ser només acompanyants, sinó un actor social amb capacitat de generar noves formes de protesta i continguts propis. La metodologia es basa en l'anàlisi de fonts documentals, com ara premsa i fotografies de l'Organització d'Estibadors

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Portuaris de Barcelona (OEPB), complementades amb fonts orals.

**Paraules clau:** dones, estibadors, vaga, port, Barcelona.

## ***Las luchas de las mujeres contra la liberalización de los puertos en Barcelona en los años 80***

### ■ RESUMEN

Durante los años 80 se generaron movilizaciones en Barcelona por las medidas liberalizadoras en los puertos. Este periodo coincide con la transición a la democracia y el surgimiento de un nuevo movimiento obrero, caracterizado por la autonomía, la participación de las bases y la vinculación a movimientos vecinales. En este contexto, se organiza el colectivo de mujeres de los estibadores, quienes emprenden actos de protesta en apoyo a las luchas de sus familias, forjando un movimiento independiente al gestado por los hombres. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el papel de las mujeres en el entorno portuario, mostrando que ellas fueron más que acompañantes en las luchas, configurándose como un actor social capaz de generar nuevas formas de protesta y contenidos propios. La metodología se basa en el análisis de fuentes documentales, como prensa y fotografías de la Organización de Estibadores Portuarios de Barcelona (OEPB), complementadas con fuentes orales.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, estibadores, huelga, puerto, Barcelona.

### ■ INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will review the presence of women in the struggles of the port sector in the city of Barcelona, incorporating unpublished materials to investigate the subject and contribute to the debate on the participation of women in the labour movement, which has often been little recognised'.

In Spain, at the end of the 1970s, after Franco's death, an important cycle of strikes began in the dockers' collective related to the liberalisation processes of the economy that threatened their jobs. Longshoremen perform a

traditional job, consisting of loading and unloading ships and taking care of goods in the transfer process. In the 1970s, it was still a manual, male-dominated occupation<sup>2</sup>. Later, with the arrival of containers and mechanical cranes, it began to be professionalised and carried out with the support of mechanical means, all of which opened up labour opportunities for women<sup>3</sup>.

During this period, the work of dockers could only be carried out by specialised workers, registered with the Port Workers' Office (OTP), and liberalisation was intended to open up free hiring. This fact generated union organisation dynamics and the search for strategies to defend jobs<sup>4</sup>. This led to the creation of the *Organización de Estibadores Portuarios de Barcelona (OEPB)* - the Barcelona Dockworkers Organisation, as well as the creation of the *Coordinadora Estatal de Estibadores Portuarios* - the National Coordinating Body of Dockworkers. These two bodies organised the port workers' collective. These trade union organisations were created outside the political parties and other trade union organisations, with a component marked by horizontality and assembly-based decision-making, and based on mutualist principles and collective solidarity. The Coordinadora unified the workers' collective throughout Spain, acting as a central trade union of the ports and achieving an almost total representation of the dockers, grouping 10,000 workers out of a total of 13,000 in all of Spain in 1978<sup>5</sup>.

The role of women was important in this context, as they showed solidarity with the demands of the dockworkers, organising their own struggles with dynamics and strategies for collective action. This process was widely covered in the press, as some of the actions attracted social attention.

It is not possible to understand the conflictive nature of this historical moment without considering a boom in the workers' movement during the late Francoist period and the transition to democracy in Spain, which was fundamental to the collapse of the dictatorship<sup>6</sup>. This movement had a number of characteristics, such as involvement with the community<sup>7</sup>, neighbourhood organisations and the broad participation of women within factories and the social

movement<sup>8</sup>. Workers' groups arose with the need to seek different organisational alternatives to those already existing, i.e., outside the trade unions<sup>9</sup>, such as the *Unión General de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras* (UGT) and *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO.).

Studies conducted in Spain on the dockworkers' movement during this period focus on organisation, forms of union adaptation, labour relations, strikes, collective action repertoires and negotiations<sup>10</sup>. On some occasions, they mention the effects of strikes on the family, as well as the participation of women, but no in-depth attention is paid to their role and specific actions, which were part of the dockworkers' movement. References to women in dock work in Spain are scarce, being relevant the research 'Women in men's worlds: socialisation, labour organisation and public image'<sup>11</sup>, which is located in the port of Valencia and studies the insertion of women in male-dominated workplaces, such as stevedoring, where they performed administrative tasks and then worked in mechanical tasks<sup>12</sup>.

Our article focuses on the contribution of women to the dockers' struggles in the port of Barcelona. More specifically, it explores the case of the OEPB and the Coordinadora and their role in the 1980 strike. We do not intend to shed light on women's incorporation into port work, but rather on their participation in strikes and trade unionism. Given the scant academic attention that women's participation in port struggles has received, this article aims to reevaluate their role not only as supporters of their families, but also as active collaborators in the dockers' demands.

Next, we will present a contextualisation of the transformations of the Spanish economy and society during the last stage of Francoism and the transition to democracy. We will refer to the emergence of workers' movements and the participation of women, and then we will review aspects of the port movement and its struggles during the 1980s. Some of the questions we hope to answer are: What was the contribution of women to the port union movement? What models or collective strategies did women generate?

## ■ METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a qualitative historical approach that combines the analysis of visual, textual and oral sources to reconstruct the experiences and collective mobilisation of women in the port sector of Barceloneta during the 1980s. The primary sources come mainly from the archive of the OEPB, which preserves a variety of materials from that period.

A central element of the research was the analysis of photographs documenting women's street demonstrations in Barceloneta - images that had not been previously published. These photographs were examined as visual testimonies of the port union movement. Their inclusion enables a reconstruction of social memory, offering insights into the experiences of these women<sup>13</sup>.

In parallel, a systematic review of daily newspapers published in Barcelona was carried out, focusing on *El Periódico*, *Avui* and *Noticiero Universal*, which represent a range of political and ideological positions. From these sources, both textual content and images were selected based on their relevance to the research questions, particularly those that acknowledged or framed the women's protests.

To complement the documentary and visual analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who participated in the longshore strike. These oral testimonies were analysed using Atlas.ti 25 software, which facilitated the construction of categories and thematic analysis to explore how individual memories intersect with collective struggles and to recover voices historically marginalised in official accounts<sup>14</sup>. The triangulation of oral, visual and textual sources contributes to a more comprehensive and situated understanding of the social dynamics under study.

## ■ LITERATURE REVIEW: WORKER MOVEMENT, WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND ORAL HISTORY

During Franco's dictatorship, women's roles were shaped by an ideology of domesticity and submission, which confined them to the home and limited their participation in

political and labour movements. Fernández<sup>15</sup> examines the specific repression against women in post-war Spain, focusing on how Francoist policies determined their roles in society. Díaz Sánchez<sup>16</sup> discusses the repression and gender-based discrimination that women faced, including the annulment of civil marriage and the restriction of women's rights, such as the prohibition of divorce and abortion.

As women entered the industrial workforce, they began to organise for better working conditions. Domínguez Prats<sup>17</sup> points out how, despite resistance, women became increasingly involved in trade union leadership roles by the end of the dictatorship. However, this was not without challenges, as gender hierarchies persisted.

Women questioned the normalisation of gender relations and sought to blur stereotypes by highlighting freedom and independence<sup>18</sup>, understanding that they were a political subject. Initially, according to Varo Moral<sup>19</sup>, wives participated as collaborators rather than militants, performing essential tasks for the maintenance of their husbands' militancy and the consolidation of some trade union centres. Bermúdez-Figueroa and Roca Martínez<sup>20</sup> highlight the silenced narratives of women who engaged in labour and political struggles during the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that women not only supported their husbands' militancy but also developed autonomous forms of activism. They also participated in university movements, meetings of clandestine organisations and the neighbourhood movement, and decided to form associations and media. Women acquired a greater public presence with actions in the streets, which appeared in the media. Although the evolution of participation was notorious, difficulties continued to exist within the trade union organisations, as political leadership continued to be held by men<sup>21</sup>.

Oral history approaches, as discussed by Llona<sup>22</sup>, have been crucial in recovering women's lived experiences. Roca i Girona and Martínez Flórez<sup>23</sup> highlight the importance of life stories and how personal experiences intersect with collective labour struggles, providing a framework for understanding the interviews conducted in this study. These works intersect with broader debates on social

movements and political mobilisation<sup>24</sup>, which emphasise the importance of collective identity, repertoires of collective action and structures of political opportunity.

## ■ DOCK WORK AND WOMEN

Because of this relationship with the environment, port families were affected during periods of demonstrations or strikes and became involved, taking on leadership roles in the organisation of the strikes<sup>25</sup>. Dock work is usually passed on from generation to generation: 'it stays in the family'<sup>26</sup>, having a community regulation where family connections are essential for accessing the profession<sup>27</sup>. For this reason, families defended the workers when they were threatened. With technological development, work continued with the logic of labour recruitment by inheritance<sup>28</sup>. In the case of Spain, in the 2000s, more labour was required in some ports, and women were hired. The first ones were relatives of port workers, such as daughters or granddaughters. This has meant that women entering the sector have had a certain ease of access to a male-dominated sector<sup>29</sup>.

However, women's participation went beyond paid and performed work<sup>30</sup>. It is noteworthy that women were an essential engine for sustaining the family economy, the fluctuating work and income of the dockers leading many women to work part-time or full-time, in precarious jobs. Thus, in some ports, the image of men as the sole breadwinners was weakened by women's participation in the struggle for subsistence<sup>31</sup>. This is what Mankelov emphasises, highlighting the role of women in times of difficulty, where they 'played a vitally important role, particularly in times of hardship. The earnings of the dockers' wives (often in unskilled and part-time work) were invaluable, particularly in times of hardship, in helping to keep their families in food and clothing'<sup>32</sup>.

The women played roles in establishing community networks that ensured that people in distress in the port environment received the help they needed<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, the presence of women as companions and fighters was important in the strikes:

In the past, the role of women was as loyal wives and mothers; women's committees operated canteens, circulated leaflets and provided other support during strikes. The Fremantle's women's committee made history in January 1956 when it became the first to attend a WWF stop-work meeting. A leaflet issued by the women declared that "we are solidly behind our menfolk in their struggle for wage justice"<sup>34</sup>.

The participation of women in dock work is not an isolated event, but a constant, albeit sometimes invisible, fact, whether as a complementary worker, as a companion in the struggle or as a motivator of strikes.

### ■ TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPANISH ECONOMY AND SOCIETY BEFORE AND AFTER FRANCO'S DEATH

By 1957, Franco's economic model, based on protectionism and autarchy, took a turn towards liberalism. Spain was in a great economic crisis, with problematic levels of inflation, and its position in the foreign economy was minimal, adding to the afflictions suffered by European countries after World War II. Spain had a social crisis, with the population facing rationing until 1952 and the middle classes living at the subsistence level<sup>35</sup>. In the 1960s, social and student movements began to emerge, which were repressed, with the social movement being contained, but the discontent went beyond the usual limits. Alliances were made with the United States, which culminated in the Madrid Pact of 1953, with an economic and military agreement, and in 1955, Spain was readmitted to the United Nations. Also, incipient public liberties were granted so that the country would not look like a dictatorship<sup>36</sup>.

With the approval of the *Decreto Ley de Ordenación Económica* in 1959, known as the Stabilisation Plan<sup>37</sup>, Spain entered into a liberalisation of the economy, giving rise to a new stage of development based on industrialisation, private investment, and the production of consumer goods and tourism, causing one of the greatest changes in the country. This process was accompanied by migratory

waves directed to the emerging industrial zones, generating the transformation of some cities. New working-class neighbourhoods were born with wide social deficiencies: poor quality constructions, unpaved streets and deficient public transportation, among others. New working masses were also formed, which laid the grounds for conflict and configured a new profile of working-class people<sup>38</sup>.

New questions and critical reflections emerged that had an impact on the labour movement. Some sectors sought worker autonomy, combating the centrality of traditional left-wing political parties and their vertical structure<sup>39</sup>, distancing themselves from class-based trade unions and seeking to transform society from below<sup>40</sup>. Some workers sought to infiltrate the union structures provided by Franco's regime, in the vertical union with compulsory affiliation, to generate criticism from within and fracture the system<sup>41</sup>.

During the 1970s, conflicts increased, with the most conflictive localities in Spain being Barcelona, Madrid, the Basque Country and Asturias<sup>42</sup>. The peak was reached in 1976, when there was an increase in the number and quantity of hours lost, as well as in the number of workers who participated<sup>43</sup>. Employers heavily penalised the workers.

### ■ THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PORT ORGANISATION DURING THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

The structural adjustment measures and the liberalisation of the economy generated tensions with the unions, which led to the development of strikes and conflicts. The port sector was not exempt from this, which, with the important technological transformations, sought to adapt to a new market environment that was more competitive and had a new framework for labour relations. Research on port labour movements, such as that by Ibarz<sup>44</sup>, reveals how worker organisation evolved in the ports during the transition to democracy, which was accompanied by high levels of conflict<sup>45</sup>. The main measure opposed by the workers was free hiring, i.e., that companies could hire any worker and not necessarily those of the OTP. This of-

office administered port workers and controlled the census and labour seniority, granting them union advantages. For this reason, the OTP became a banner of struggle for the longshoremen, and their desire was for it to be maintained and for them to be recognised as public servants. For the workers, the end of the OTP and the liberalisation of the census meant the end of the dockers' work, which was the reason for their struggle and what led to the unification of the collective. In the words of one worker:

When UCD<sup>46</sup>, the centrist party, was in government, it issued a decree that eliminated the OTP, which meant the disappearance of port jobs, leaving us all out on the street. So, faced with this, there was a union that hardly needed explaining when the job is in question, because it is like a minimum approach. Altogether<sup>47</sup>.

The workers rethought their forms of organisation, and in 1978, they consolidated the unification of the dockers' collective at the national level through the Coordinadora, in which the OEPB, the Barcelona union organisation, was the main one. In this sense, the dockers had a late unification to establish a common struggle<sup>48</sup>. This new collective of dockworkers was characterised by working via assemblies and, therefore, by respecting the opinion of the rank and file and the decisions taken in the assemblies. Thus, in their internal bulletin, they declare: 'The assembly, as a body for joint discussion and decision-making on all our problems, must be the usual way of resolving all the situations that arise. The assembly must not be monopolised by anyone'<sup>49</sup>. In this regard, the workers refer to the monopoly of political parties, but also of trade union centres such as CC.OO. and UGT, which 'cannot understand that workers' unity is built from below, from the grassroots, and with a different style of struggle'<sup>50</sup>. This new character of the struggle is defined by the:

Continuous information, assembly-based decision-making and independence from political parties [...]. The objective we pursue is to defend the leading role of port workers' collectives so that they are the ones who, with their experience in the sector, will find possible solutions to the serious situation that the sector is going through<sup>51</sup>.

At this point, the concept of workers' autonomy that characterised the Coordinadora and OEPB is crucial, as it entailed independence from political parties and trade unions, identifying themselves as groups beyond the communist left or defined as the radical left<sup>52</sup>. Between 1978 and 1988, port unionism was based on traditional and new forms of collective action based on cooperation and the generation of a new identity<sup>53</sup>. One type of action used was that of 'minimum yields', whereby workers did not abandon 100% of their work, but only attended some ships with essential loads, intentionally reducing the pace of work. The 'selective strike' was also applied, working for certain companies that were more inclined to negotiate with the workers. Another example was the 'socialisation of wages': while some workers were on strike, their wages were covered by the comrades who did work and who delivered the total amount of their payroll to the union so that it could be redistributed among all, which helped the workers affected by the strike to subsist. To quote a worker:

I already had two small children, you're paying for an apartment, and you can't even afford to eat. So, how do we do it? [...] We said, hey, we will go to the other companies and work at minimum yield [...]. A ship that was finished in three days lasted eight. We said, hey, let's make an exchange, everyone who works. I, then, was finishing one settlement a day. I was the one who did the numbers with the company, the company paid me, and, instead of taking it each one, I took it<sup>54</sup>.

This generated a system of economic self-management based on the solidarity of colleagues, but also contributed to greater transparency and order in the wages received by workers. These aspects reflect a search for discursive coherence. In the case of minimum returns, one of the dockers' demands was to constitute themselves as a public service and, in relation to the socialisation of wages, this reflected the horizontal character, where workers should be considered equally.

Another aspect was the creation of their own means of communication, the newspaper *La Estiba*, in which

workers communicated their strikes and demands, and reported on the situation in other ports around the world and on port events in general. Proposing a new press medium was a way to counter the dominant narratives about what was happening in the port and a way to contribute to class consciousness and commitment to the collective project.

Also, as we have already mentioned, the participation of women in the dockers' struggles stands out, generating their own actions: assemblies, occupations, participation and organisation of marches, where the family was relevant. 'And many people were from Barceloneta, they were people like dockers and fishermen. [...] Here, the dockers' wives organised fantastic demonstrations of all that. It was a nucleus that hadn't existed before. There were lock-ins in the church in support of the strike<sup>55</sup>.

Other methods developed by women were to boycott the banks, queuing up at the counters to deposit small amounts of money with the aim of bringing the system to a standstill. Women had their own forms of organisation based on existing methods of communication, such as informal conversations and church meetings. The organisation brought with it knowledge of their husbands' real earnings, which helped to control the family shopping basket and achieve greater transparency in salaries:

During the strike, the women also met. This week, my husband has been paid this much and that much, while mine hasn't been paid anything (laughs) and little things were discovered [...]. The impact of the strike helped a lot to make what people received more transparent<sup>56</sup>.

In the following section, we will refer in more detail to the actions taken by women.

## ■ THE 1980 STRIKE

One of the most important conflicts in Spanish ports was that of 1980, related to the Royal Decree of 29 October, which established the modification of the OTP. From May onwards, the longshoremen took action throughout Spain and, on 26 November 1980, it was announced in the press that the longshoremen would call an indefinite strike, selec-

tively targeting companies that did not want to negotiate the framework agreement (particularly COPSA, MAPOR, CONTENEMAR and Marítima Layetana). The Coordinadora demanded the reform of the Decree, namely: that permanent workers return to the OTP census and that companies not hire personnel from outside it. The selective strike brought very harsh measures against the workers, who suffered dismissals and sanctions; in the case of Barcelona, 172 out of 1,600 dockers were dismissed. As a protest measure, the workers locked themselves in the OTP's premises and were then evicted. They claim that the companies did not comply with the conditions of a legal strike, imposing sanctions on the workers and hiring scabs or strike breakers, people hired to do the work of those on strike. The trade union confederations UGT and CC.OO., which had a minority affiliation of port workers, rejected the Coordinadora's strike, despite agreeing with its demands<sup>57</sup>.

A few days later, a local council for the port of Barcelona was set up, made up of 6 representatives of the employers, 5 of the administration, the manager of the OTP and 6 representatives of the workers, who refused to participate because they considered that this council had been created by an anti-constitutional decree<sup>58</sup>. The council imposed sanctions of 6 days' loss of employment and pay for workers who refused to work in companies. To counteract these measures, the workers applied the socialisation of wages to guarantee a minimum wage.

In addition, the wives of the workers, following their own course of action, not involved in the dockers' actions, occupied the replica of the caravel Santa María, which was a reproduction of the sailing ship with which Columbus arrived in America, and which was anchored in the port of Barcelona as a tourist attraction in the city between 1952 and 1990<sup>59</sup>. This occupation was carried out in solidarity with the demands of the dockers, with some media outlets indicating the participation of 100 women, while others reported as many as 400. The images of the seizure of the caravel are loaded with meaning, as it is a historic vessel linked to the conquest that highlights the dockers' bond with the sea. In the afternoon of the same day, the women held a meeting to plan new actions, among which it was

Figure 1. R.D. 'Encierro de portuario'.  
Source: Diario de Barcelona, 26 November, 1980.



decided that a group would remain in the offices of the OEPB. The following day, they set up a meeting to continue planning activities. The women began to organise themselves through conversations in the midst of the conflict. 'We would talk to each other and everything, and then we began to realise that if we didn't do anything, this was going to get out of hand'<sup>60</sup>. The following Figure 1 shows one of the many actions undertaken by women.

The wives of the dockers held a protest on 28 November together with the retired workers from the Social Marine Institute and, in the afternoon, they demonstrated around the port<sup>61</sup>. On 2 December, a demonstration was held, attended by women and children of dockers, from Catalunya square to Barceloneta, and practically all shops closed<sup>62</sup>. The press reports that only 3 of the 150 existing bars in the area opened, some of which put up signs indicating that the business was closed in solidarity with the dockers<sup>63</sup>.

The press emphasised that it was the women who called for the mobilisation. 'The truth is that the picket lines were formed by wives of the affected workers, and at no time did they use force or coercion, but rather kindly asked the shopkeepers for their solidarity'<sup>64</sup>. The women went around the neighbourhood explaining the idea, asking for solidarity and explaining the conflict, even collecting signatures in support of the demonstration, and they met with the director of the local market to get it closed.

By stressing the peaceful and dialogue-based nature of the women's demonstration as opposed to that of the men, we could interpret a political use that seeks to soften the perception of the protest and emphasise a mode of struggle.

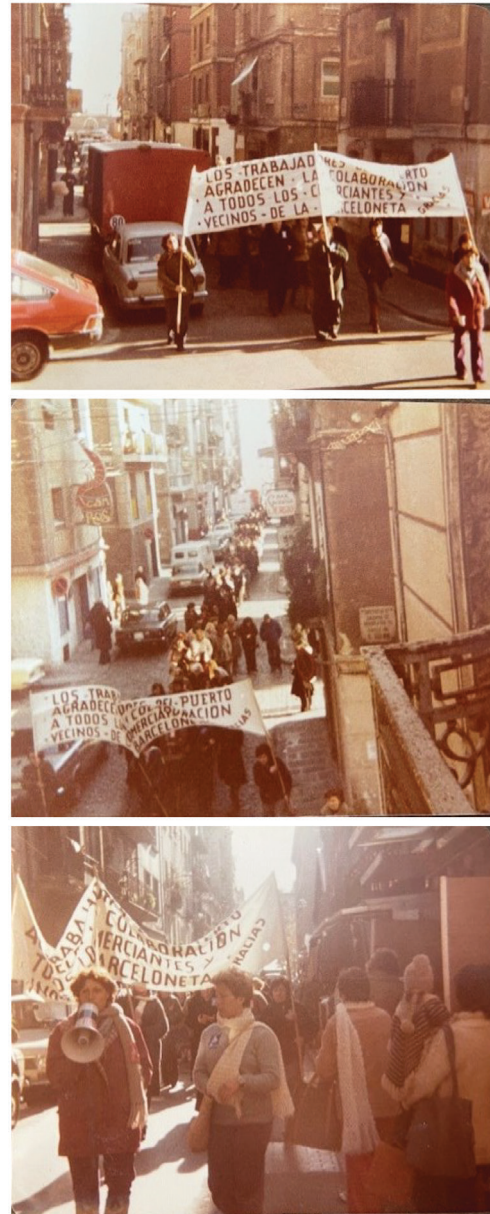
The march was led by the dockers' children, who carried a banner that read 'dockers, your children are with you'. This image, with its strong symbolic and political value, suggests the implications of the port workers'

Figure 2. Banners of gratitude to the shops, day of shop closures and women's demonstration, 1980.  
Source: OEPB Archive.

struggle, whose social crisis extends to the family and children, and not only that, but also to the survival of the dockers' profession. More than 3,000 people took part in the demonstration, although some media outlets reported that there were as many as 5,000<sup>65</sup>. The involvement of family and community networks in the conflict gave greater visibility to the impacts of the casualisation of docker employment, which affected not only the worker but also their family and neighbourhood. It is important to emphasise that until the 1960s and 1970s, Barceloneta was still the city's port, maritime and metallurgical district, with 50% of dockers living in Barceloneta, that is to say, some 750 families<sup>66</sup>. In a quote: 'And the people in the neighbourhood were very good. [...] this neighbourhood, those of us who are from here, are hurt when the neighbourhood and the people who work there are hurt, [...] in this neighbourhood we are (and long ago almost all of us were) port workers, fishermen and people who work at Vulcano'<sup>67-68</sup>.

Images from the OEPB archive<sup>69</sup> show women thanking shopkeepers and local residents with a banner that read: 'The port workers thank the shopkeepers and residents of Barceloneta for their collaboration'. This phrase recognises the support of the local community, reinforcing the idea that the struggle was for the whole neighbourhood and highlighting a social alliance, which is relevant as a means of putting pressure on the government and the employers. Let's look at Figure 2:

The press published a quote from a woman, the wife of a longshoreman, who was at the demonstration: 'Maybe this action will serve to make people aware that we are not only concerned with the cargo, but that we are also interested in and participate in the labour problems of our husbands'<sup>70</sup>. This woman, whose name we do not know, outlines a critique, although recognising traditional gender roles, and emphasises that women not only performed domestic tasks, but were also involved in the conflict, being part of it both as affected and as participants. On 12 December, there was a new indefinite selective strike, in which 60% of the workers in Spain participated, and in Barcelona women (400) took part, once again occupying the caravel<sup>71</sup>. A newspaper<sup>72</sup> interviewed some of the wom-



en and published some extracts relating to the acts of solidarity, one quote being from Rosa: 'My husband has not been sanctioned yet. But I am with all these people. My husband donates half of what he earns to the sanctioned colleagues. We want to keep jobs for everyone'<sup>73</sup>. Another quote refers to women in general: 'We will not move from here until they throw us out. We want to help our husbands in their fight to avoid a restructuring that endangers many jobs'<sup>74</sup>. These quotes express collective resistance but also solidarity, highlighting a complementary role in the struggle where the repertoire of actions extends to the family, not only as moral support but also with direct actions.

Several newspapers highlighted the occupation of the caravel Santa María, some with interesting images, such as the one we see below in Figure 3. The press photographs reveal an aesthetic value, in many cases occupying an important place in the press. In one image, the women are seen standing on top of the ship in a composition that emphasises the group as a unit, with no leaders, reinforcing the idea of a collective. Another image shows women behind a banner that says '*portuarios las mujeres con vosotros*' ('port workers, women are with you'), expressing their solidarity. In the last image, the magnitude of the caravel can finally be seen from a distance, allowing the size of the ship to be appreciated.

The press repeatedly highlighted the confrontations between dockers and scabs, as well as the difficulties in finding a solution to the conflict. It was also mentioned that the strike led to 178 dismissals, 708 six-day fines and 2,497 three-day fines for 1,600 dockers in Barcelona. Another media outlet reported that the dockers filed a complaint against scab labour at the labour delegation.

The workers indicate that with the reform only 40% of those registered in the OTP would remain, and the rest would be in poor conditions. Despite the demonstrations in 1980, the press highlighted that there was a 3.4% increase in freight traffic, with 7,518 ships entering Barcelona<sup>75</sup> and 16,500,000 tons loaded and unloaded in 1980, the most important cargoes in Barcelona being oil, non-oil liquids and solid bulks.

On 18 November, a rally was held outside the Institute for Mediation, Arbitration and Conciliation and the labour

delegation, where the issue of sanctions against 700 workers was to be discussed. However, the employers did not show up, which led to a more intense demonstration that was broken up by the police using riot control measures. On 14 January 1981, this strike came to a provisional end, as the longshoremen accepted the administration's proposal to adapt the reform decree to the OTP. In February, the 15th Magistrate's Court of Barcelona ordered the MAPOR company to reinstate the dismissed workers under the same conditions as before. On 1 June 1981, MAPOR sent a letter to the magistrate's court announcing the reinstatement of the workers dismissed on 20 November 1980. This was a great triumph for the workers.

The participation of women in this particular strike was significant and they showed that they could be part of the union struggle. There were also other similar strikes before and after the 1980s, which were demonstrations of solidarity and support for the workers, although they did not have the same impact or coverage, as can be seen in Figure 4.

## ■ CONCLUSIONS

The organisation of workers emerged as a response to the threats of free contracting that would affect their material and identity interests, in a moment of new opportunities and political threats<sup>76</sup>. The climate generated in a context of change, of political and economic reorganisation, as well as the emergence of new social and workers' movements seeking a change in living conditions, contributed to the articulation of the dockers. Those who opted for the creation of new organisations, far from the influence of other trade union organisations as well as political parties, allowed them to make their own decisions based on horizontal principles.

In this context, the role of women in the dock labour movement has been essential yet often overlooked. Far from being merely the companions of militant men, women contributed significantly to labour struggles by organising their own collective actions, strengthening community support networks and forging alliances with other social actors. Their involvement was instrumental in

Figure 3. 'La "carabela" Santa María, ocupada'.  
Source: *Noticiero Universal*, 11 December, 1980.



**Por mujeres de estibadores**

# La "carabela" Santa María, ocupada

**Hoy, huelga general en todos los puertos españoles**

Un centenar de mujeres, espaldas de estibadores del puerto, ocuparon ayer la «carabela» Santa María, en el puerto barcelonés. «De aquí no nos moveremos» hasta que nos echen «perlas», queremos ayudar a nuestros maridos en su lucha por evitar una reestructuración que pone en peligro muchas puestos de trabajo. La Policía contemplaba la escena impidiendo que otras mujeres subieran a la nave, ya que se temía que no aguantara tanto peso.

La ocupación se inició a las diez de la mañana. Varios grupos de turistas, así como los alumnos de EGB de un colegio vecino, quedaron frustrados al comprobar que no podían visitar la «Santa María». Mientras tanto, los encargados del Museo Marítimo se hallaban

nos dice Rosa, al escuchar a su compañera—. Y, alarmadamente, mi marido no está sancionado todavía. Pero estoy con toda esta gente. Mi esposo entrega la mitad de lo que gana a los compañeros sancionados. Queremos conservar los puestos de trabajo para todos...».

Subimos a la nave y rápidamente nos abordan tres mujeres. «Eres periodista?, nosotras

Figure 4. Image of demonstrations in the streets of Barceloneta.  
Source: OEPB archive.



making workers' conflicts more visible, both in public spaces and in the press. For example, the coordinated closure of shops in the Barceloneta neighbourhood illustrates a cross-sector alliance that expanded the impact of the strike beyond the port. Similarly, the occupation of the caravel Santa María served as a highly symbolic act that drew media attention and reframed the conflict in public opinion. These actions transformed what might have remained a localised labour dispute into a broader community-based movement, one that emphasised dialogue and solidarity.

Women's participation thus reinforced the social fabric of the trade union struggle, giving it a deeper social and political resonance. While they were not always recognised as formal leaders, their contributions helped reconfigure the boundaries of militancy, showing that labour struggles are sustained not only on the docks but also through the affective, logistical and symbolic work carried out in homes, neighbourhoods and community organisations.

Today, although the number of women working in ports remains limited, their presence is increasing and gaining visibility. In the port of Barcelona, several female dockworkers are the daughters or granddaughters of retired male workers, suggesting that the logic of access through family ties persists – but now includes women. Their entry continues to challenge gender norms and redefines what it means to be a dockworker.

Therefore, understanding women's role in the dock labour movement requires not only recovering their memories, but also situating them within broader processes of social mobilisation and labour transformation. This perspective not only completes the historical record but also helps reimagine the future of labour organising in masculinised sectors such as dock work.

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46. Unión Centro Democrático.
47. Manolo Conde, 2024, interview. Original language: "Cuando estaba UCD, que era el partido de centro en el gobierno, sacó un decreto que desaparecía la OTP, que era la desaparición de trabajos portuarios, con lo cual nos quedábamos todos en la calle. Entonces, ante esto, hubo una unión que no fue necesario ni casi que explicarla cuando el puesto de trabajo está en cuestión, pues es como un planteamiento de mínimos. Todos a una."
48. Jordi Ibarz, "Oficios y cualificaciones en el trabajo portuario. El caso de Barcelona en la primera mitad del siglo XX," *Historia Social* 45 (2003): 119-137.
49. "La asamblea como órgano de discusión y decisión conjunta de todos nuestros problemas ha de ser el modo habitual de resolver todas las situaciones que se nos vayan presentando. La asamblea no ha de estar monopolizada por nadie." In N. N., "Boletín interno de estibadores portuarios de Barcelona. Una opinión sobre la huelga," *El Port*, March, 1976.
50. "No pueden comprender que la unidad obrera se hace desde abajo, desde el tajo y con un estilo de lucha diferente." In OEPB, "Hoja informativa a los compañeros portuarios," February 15, 1979.
51. "Información continua, asambleísmo e independencia de los partidos [...]. El objetivo que perseguimos es defender el protagonismo de los colectivos portuarios para que sean ellos mismos los que con su experiencia en el sector vayan encontrando las posibles salidas a la grave situación por la que atraviesa el sector." In N. N., "Boletín interno de estibadores portuarios de Barcelona. Una opinión sobre la huelga," *El Port*, March, 1976, 4.
52. Centre d'Estudis sobre Dictadures i Democràcies and Fundació Salvador Seguí, eds., *Les altres protagonistes de la Transició: mobilitzacions socials i esquerra radical* (Centre d'Estudis sobre Dictadures i Democràcies (CEDID) - UAB; Fundació Salvador Seguí, 2020), 11.
53. Sidney Tarrow, *El poder en movimiento*, trans. Francisco Muñoz de Bustillo (Alianza Editorial, 2011), 68-69.
54. Josep Puig, 2024, interview. Original language: "Yo tenía ya a los dos críos pequeños, estás pagando piso y es que no te llegaba casi ni para comer. Entonces, ¿cómo lo hacemos? [...] Entonces dijimos, oye, con que a las otras empresas vamos y les trabajamos a rendimiento mínimo, no es que vayamos allí y que bajemos a tope. [...] le hacíamos un rendimiento mínimo, un barco que se terminaba en tres días duraba ocho. Pero tú ibas trabajando y vas cobrando los mínimos, pero ibas cobrando. Le dijimos, oye, hacemos una bolsa, todo el que trabaje. Yo, entonces, terminaba una liquidación al día. Yo era el que hacía los números con la empresa, la empresa me pagaba y, en vez de cogerlo cada uno, lo cogía yo."
55. Santi Rovira, 2023, interview. Original language: "Y mucha gente era de la Barceloneta, era gente entre portuarios y pescadores. [...] Aquí las mujeres de los portuarios organizaron manifestaciones fantásticas de todo eso. Era un núcleo, no existía esto. Se hicieron encierros en la iglesia, a favor de la huelga."
56. Santi Rovira, 2023, interview. Original language: "En la huelga las mujeres también se reunían. A mi marido esta semana le han pagado tanto y cómo tanto si al mío no le han pagado nada (risas) y se fueron descubriendo los pequeños [...]. La reper-

cusión que tuvo la huelga ayudó mucho a hacer más transparente lo que recibía la gente.”

57. “CC.OO. apoya y no convoca,” *Diario de Barcelona*, December 6, 1980.

58. OEPB, “Comunicado a la opinión pública y medios de comunicación,” December 8, 1980.

59. It was built for the 1951 film *Alba de América* and was ceded to the Museu Marítim. As it symbolised the Spanish spirit, it was set on fire by Catalan pro-independence groups and sunk off the coast.

60. Rosa and Marina, 2025, interview. Original language: “Nos hablábamos y todo y entonces nos empezamos a dar cuenta de que, si no hacíamos nada, esto se nos iba de las manos.”

61. “Acciones en el puerto,” *Diario de Barcelona*, December 28, 1980.

62. “La Barceloneta cerró en apoyo de los estibadores,” *El Periódico*, December 1, 1980.

63. “Los estibadores portuarios. Apoyo total de los comerciantes y bares de la Barceloneta durante la jornada de ayer,” *Diario de Barcelona*, December 2, 1980.

64. *Ibid.*

65. “Tancament de botigues a la Barceloneta per solidaritat,” *Avui*, December 2, 1980.

66. “Los estibadores portuarios. Apoyo total de los comerciantes y bares de la Barceloneta durante la jornada de ayer,” *Diario de Barcelona*, December 2, 1980.

67. This refers to Talleres Nuevo Vulcano, a shipyard located in Barceloneta.

68. Rosa and Marina, 2025, interview. Original language: “Y la gente del barrio se portó muy bien. [...] este barrio, las que somos de aquí, sentimos que nos hagan daño al barrio y a la gente que trabaja, [...] en el barrio este somos (antes más, antes casi todos) portuarios, pescadores y que trabajan al Vulcano.”

69. They are images without identified authorship and that are part of his private collection, but open access through his archive.

70. “Quizá esta acción sirva para mentalizar a la gente de que no solo nos ocupamos de los pucheros, sino que también nos interesamos y participamos de los problemas laborales de nuestros esposos.” In “Solidaridad en el barrio con la huelga de los estibadores,” *Diario de Barcelona*, December 2, 1980.

71. “400 mujeres ocuparon la Santa María,” *La Vanguardia*, December 12, 1980.

72. “La carabela Santa María ocupada,” *Noticiero Universal*, December 11, 1980.

73. Rosa and Marina, 2025, interview. Original language: “Mi marido no está sancionado todavía. Pero estoy con toda esta gente. Mi esposo entrega la mitad de lo que gana a los compañeros sancionados. Queremos conservar los puestos de trabajo para todos.”

74. “No nos moveremos de aquí hasta que nos echen, queremos ayudar a nuestros maridos en su lucha por evitar una reestructuración que pone en peligro muchos puestos de trabajo.” In “La ‘carabela’ Santa María, ocupada,” *Noticiero Universal*, December 11, 1980.

75. This information coincides with an OEPB document entitled “algunos datos sobre los puertos españoles y en especial en Barcelona” dated 5 May 1981. Therefore, we are referring to a document provided by the OEPB for dissemination in the media, which provides figures on ports as well as background information on the organisation itself, port work practices, and the OTP.

76. Sidney Tarrow, *El poder en movimiento*, trans. Francisco Muñoz de Bustillo (Alianza Editorial, 2011), 45.

