

# La Bancada Municipalista







Constellation  
of the Commons

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Name of the interviewees  
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## **Who are you and what's your connection with the La Bancada Municipalista (The Municipalist Legislators)?**

I'm Susana Albarrán Méndez. I'm a resident of Madrid although I was born in Mexico City and I've lived in Spain for 20 years, I got involved in social movements primarily in the feminist movement, in which I had already participated in while living in Mexico. I was also part of the community radio movement in Mexico as I have been here, and in 2011, when 15M happened, I was with some people and we really threw ourselves into 15M. From there, my activism in feminism was also very active because there was a very active group of feminists in the Plaza del Sol, and from there we derived other groups. When 2015 came, in the months leading up to the municipal elections, I joined many people from 15M to make a list of candidates called *Madrid en Movimiento*<sup>1</sup> ("Madrid in Motion") within *Ganemos Madrid* ("Let's Win Madrid") and then all the others converge in *Ahora Madrid* ("Madrid Now"), and after those four years of government, we became this group called *La Bancada Municipalista* ("The Municipalist Legislators").

## **Can you explain what Municipalism is?**

Municipalism is really a grassroots movement, it's shaped from a grassroots movement, in one of various incarnations. It's a movement based in the collective sphere, trying to respond to democratic, horizontal dynamics from the ground up. It sees the Institution as more of a tool of their fight or their fights to advocate politically, but it recognizes that the Institution always has its limits, and that every fight, proposal or way of doing things will eventually clash with the way the Institution is politically structured in this country. So, municipalism considers the institution as a way to amplify political advocacy and make changes in the cities, in the little towns that we're a part of, but it's not an end in itself; it's only one tool of political activism.

## **What specific social project does municipalism suggest?**

This tool seeks the improvement or transformation of a specific situation or of the city in various sectors that impact the majority of people. It focuses more on what the majority lacks, seeking equality in the city. It involves thinking a lot in local terms, keeping in mind our global context. It believes that the local sphere should be the principal one, and facing a pretty adverse context in terms of climate change, it puts life and caretaking center stage. Also, after the housing

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<sup>1</sup> *Movimiento* here refers both to the state of movement and to social movements, *movimientos sociales*.

bubble we've experienced in the cities, a goal is definitely to not keep expanding in terms of short term profit. The goal is for the 99% to benefit, and not the 1%.

**What group of political forces make up or represent the municipalist movement in Madrid?**

The neighborhoods of Madrid have always been very active in spite of the fact that we've lived through twenty-something years of PP (conservative) government where movements have been pretty invisibilized, so to speak, but that doesn't mean that the towns didn't mobilize. Really, a lot of current municipalism comes from the 70s and 80s. So, it feeds off of many of those social movements. I'm a local in Vallecas, in the Vallecas neighborhood, and for example Vallecas experienced a very strong social mobilization in terms of building houses, putting in drainage, having an electricity company... We drew, of course, from all of that social history and that of other neighborhoods in Madrid. So we really came from that. Then, contexts have been changing, and we've been reformulating ourselves in terms of regrouping around other priorities, but basically we come from the past movement. It's true that more recent municipalism, I think, is born from the housing movement, the anti-eviction movement, with the Platform for Victims of Mortgage (PAH in its Spanish initials).

**What other municipalist battles are on the table?**

Well, there's also everything with social services and municipal services that have been privatized, and because of that, one of the principal struggles of municipalism has been to remunicipalize basic services. Then there's also the matter of guaranteeing the health of people who, although their towns don't have the capability to do so, do have that capability in terms of doing community health education and meeting the sectors that are totally outside the regional health system, for example. I think that feminism has also contributed a good amount although we still can't identify a municipalist feminism, but there are a lot of us working on municipalism coming from the grassroots feminist movement.

**Can you explain what the process is like for a group of people on the endorsed list to end up governing a council?**

I can only explain what I've participated in, which has been *Ganemos Madrid*, which does draw heavily from 15M. Almost the vast majority of us have been there, we've been in the plazas of our neighborhood, in our neighborhood meetings, and seeing that force and that these were urgent issues, like the housing movement, a core group was formed called *Municipalia*. I wasn't a part of it at that point, but I joined some months later. That group became *Ganemos Madrid*, and then people from occupied social centers in Madrid and people from the university... In the end, it was a call, a convention, and a meeting. Once we'd proposed the list of candidates, because it's true that we were pretty fed up with the twenty-something years of PP government, the mobilization was very interesting. There were various groups, various lists, and we went on to shape what kind of organization we wanted, what kind of voting we wanted for our primaries, etc. I always say that it was like getting a master's in political science, and we did it all in the moment.

*Ganemos Madrid* was really the motor of the municipalist candidate list. We made our appearance more or less around the same time as Podemos, and Podemos gave their candidate lists to the European Union in 2014. As that

went very well and many of us participated in that first effort and in many of Podemos' efforts, many people came from that experience and said that we should focus on the local, on the municipal level, and see what we could do from there. So that's another place a lot of people came from.

Then *Ganemos Madrid* made a big effort to introduce themselves before forming a coalition with Podemos. They created their own participative electoral program, which took us several weeks and a lot of effort, people were really inspired. Then, once the program was established, Podemos was interested in it as well and that was when it was proposed that we would work in a coalition on a municipalist candidate list like *Ahora Madrid* (Madrid Now). From there, we ended up with various lists, and the ones of us with the least possibility of getting elected ended up in other positions, and of the 20 finalists we had five of us from *Ganemos Madrid*.

### **When was Manuela Carmena first suggested as the head of the *Ahora Madrid* list?**

Manuela came once the process was already kind of advanced, and it was the suggestion of Podemos to put her at the head of the list, and that's how it happened. In our list, which was *Madrid en Movimiento*, we had our own head of the list, who is now Councilman Pablo Carmona.

### **How is *La Bancada* related to *Ahora Madrid*?**

Well, once our councilpeople got on *Ahora Madrid's* list, we joined up with the neighborhood-based campaign, and it's not that we won the council, because by votes the PP won, but due to the structure of the assembly in session voting on who would be the mayor, the majority fell to the PSOE so Manuela ended up as the mayor. We have five councilpeople from *Ganemos Madrid* who are actually in the government, so we're participating pretty actively in the issues closest to our candidate list and most closely related to the social movements. It's true that from the beginning we saw some business that didn't fit our philosophy, including from the electoral campaign. For example, we weren't in agreement with the focus on the personal interests of Manuela in the campaign, but we accepted it. Then, in the first few weeks after the candidates had been elected, *Ahora Madrid* was supplied with a decision-making body made up of diverse people who were our councilpeople and like-minded people in *Podemos* and *Ganemos*. We called this decision-making group the coordinating committee, and on day one of the coordinating committee, Manuela said she wasn't going to attend. So we already saw that she was going to govern freely and nothing was going to constrain her when, really, one of our principal convictions at the moment of creating the candidate list was for people to be held accountable pretty closely in terms of how municipalism was going to always be in contact with its representatives, trying not to forget that they had a base and that was why they were there. So when Manuela announced her refusal to participate, we already saw that it wasn't going to go very well. In fact, in the entire government none of the principal topics that we'd proposed as the five basic ones, practically none of them have been completed. With this as motivation, we decided to separate from Manuela's government.

### **Why the name *La Bancada Municipalista* (The Municipalist Legislators)?**

Choosing a name is always complicated because you want to be innovative, you want to have a fresh impact, and the elements don't always lend themselves to a name that synthesizes everything we want. Really, we took the name of a legislative

bench in Sao Paulo, I think it was called *Bancada Activista* (The Activist Legislators), and we liked that 'legislator' part. Here in Spain, there's not much good press about legislators, but in Latin America, it sounds like a team, a group. In the end, we took on the name of our Brazilian colleagues and made ourselves *La Bancada Municipalista*.

### **Who makes up La Bancada Municipalista?**

Right now, La Bancada Municipalista is really a bunch of individuals because it's true that many of us have our own activism, often a diverse array of them. For example, the housing movement has its own organizations and it's also experiencing a complicated moment with the whole housing situation and the evictions that keep occurring and the act of getting involved in another site gets complicated. In the end, we sent out a call to the individuals who felt that they weren't represented by the *Ahora Madrid* government and who wanted to try something else; many of us came from *Ahora Madrid*.

### **What's the distinguishing feature of La Bancada?**

The distinguishing feature would be that we've come to reclaim the municipalist flag that drew us into *Ahora Madrid* and that means being in communication and connected to our base and what impacts our base; another thing would be not having individualistic motivation, that is, we're against any person who sets themselves up as, like, the idea of what the government could be. Municipalism in itself doesn't have a single face, we try to make everything rotate and have people have various faces in mind, various people. Another point would be to condition our chosen candidates to adhere to and carry out the plan, and for the plan to be a commitment to complete within the government.

### **In the Manifesto that you've shared on the web, you signal that La Bancada got a feeling of apathy from its experience with *Ahora Madrid*. What have you learned from that experience that serves now as limits for La Bancada?**

Well, exactly those, practically. This is being connected to your bases: not selfishness, carrying out the plan, fighting for a city and not for the wealthy.

### **Thinking about the text from the January 29th meeting stating that La Bancada was born as a regrouping of strengths, from a procedural and representative frustration, can you contextualize this "frustration" that has been experienced?**

Really, as the plan had been working so well and the truth is that the document was really worth it, it's also true that we've found the limits of the Institution, of what it can't do or reach; basically, what we wanted was that if we couldn't do everything, at least we wouldn't abandon those ideas that were possible, even if it were on a municipal level, it would be worth it. There are many rivalries in the autonomous community, but then there are little things that you can apply on a local level to make a difference and be braver in some things. Then, some frustrations that we were experiencing in the sessions, for example there were decisions that were pretty against what we'd laid out as objectives. For example, things regarding heritage that didn't seem like a vital need, exactly, but that have to do with maintaining the history of the city and having it belong to everyone. For example, with the carriages of Cuatro Caminos, there was a decision in a council session that we disagreed on because they were thinking of throwing them away; there was another property called El Taller de

Artillería (the artillery workshop) which also had a high historical value, but they were also against it; or the issue of the Chamartín operation,<sup>2</sup> that whole real estate long shot that we've insisted many times can't be good if it's going to negatively impact the surrounding neighborhoods, which still lack adequate services and to whom we owe a social debt. The operation says it's going to benefit the financial district, and we doubt that this will lead to economic growth in Madrid. So it was the sum of these things plus the way they work in the council. You have to recognize that the council has rules made by the PP leaders, by Esperanza Aguirre, Gallardón, etc. The first thing that many of us who didn't know how the council worked did was look at the rules, and honestly, the rules are terrible because it gives total power to the mayor and they can veto things, they have the deciding vote in assembly, etc. It's even in how it's drafted: "The mayor will be able to... the mayor will be able to..." So, it's true that we hit a limit there, but we could have proposed to change many of those things, and we think that Manuela embraced it all very calmly, without objecting at all. It's true that she comes from a different environment, the judicial sphere, and we understand that it was a good match for her, but it was definitely not a good match for us. Neither were their ways of saying certain things that we didn't agree with, and above all, from the start, they didn't want to recognize the coordinating committee that we'd provided. It was the only organ that she was going to have to recognize, and when she denied it, that was really frustrating from the start.

The same report says that the net impact of *Ahora Madrid's* cycle has not been positive, emphasizing as the worst errors "the inability to avoid the appropriation by a few people of a collective project, the failure to complete the electoral plan, and the lack of willingness to implement politics of real transformation." From what you've learned, what mechanisms should be implemented in the council to avoid the repetition of these errors?

Since September of last year, we've been meeting, trying to talk with more people to see how they perceive it and from the beginning, we've thought that this group, which is now called La Bancada because we had to give it an identity for people to follow us, has objectives that are more mid- and long-term. That is, we aren't meeting up to elect people but rather to continue building something we believe the council still needs. So, in principle, the candidate list wasn't really the end goal. Right now in this path, we've met many people who wanted us to participate as candidates. Now, well, we participate as a citizen-based endorsement list, coming to this cycle already tired. So, as we saw this was what the forces were, then it was time to put in work, and maybe a lot of people don't have time, we're still in the process of deciding if we're going to present ourselves independently or as a coalition of candidates with other forces that are also undecided on how to present themselves. As I understand, for some people it was almost like a game of who would stay with Manuela, and eventually people saw that she was pretty much making all the decisions about her course of action, and they decided to form their own coalition.

**In the same text, there's a certain sense of distrust towards the Institution, but no position is specified regarding them. Can you explain how La Bancada conceives of an Institution under municipalist conditions?**

We imagine it carrying out a real role, a bold one. Daring to suggest things or

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<sup>2</sup> An economic revitalization and architectural project 25 years in the making; see [https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/22/icon\\_design/1558535671\\_389532.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/22/icon_design/1558535671_389532.html)

changes, which could be too much to ask of an Institution but that's the idea... Trying to break down those ideas of the straitjacketed institution because there are also things that could be changed from there with more daring proposals. For example, the issue of the Chamartín operation, which is very much cooked up by the oligarchy, and I think we've been brave, although that's not how most people see it, but all the questioning that there's been regarding the operation has been from us, from the movements that have brought this to light and insisted that this contract that the BBVA<sup>3</sup> made with Adif<sup>4</sup> with the government as mediator hasn't been transparent. We've counted the whoppers and this is a negotiation filled with them.

The fact that it's being talked about more now has really been the result of our work, with the scope we've been able to have. We've also organized a lot of talks, we've organized tours in the area so that people know how things are going; we've insisted, and they agreed, on making public the request for documents that haven't been presented and for the sake of transparency should have been done aboveground by the people who made the contract. The idea is to be there but always be hands-on and distinguish ourselves in that sense, and if there's a chance to propose, for example, a bolder housing rule in terms of guaranteeing the right to housing in the terms where only the real estate agency can do it, then it's about going for that. That is, a housing regulation was proposed that would strip any family that had (illegally) occupied a house or apartment of their right to obtain a house, without understanding that maybe occupation was their only option. Not even mentioning the thousands of houses that are empty right now.

So in the end, we imagine that the institution could serve to bring to the arena and to that general level things that maybe general politicians wouldn't think of, and that we, as we really didn't have much to lose, could propose them to those above us in terms of something maybe unreachable but that has a certain coherence with a real need.

And for example, where does the aspect of self-management come into play? It's that a municipalist government believes that many things can be self-managed and that people organize themselves and people can carry things out, like a social center, for example.

**It seems like Institution is somewhat disinclined to think of itself as a tool co-managed by the public. In your experience, have you observed any problem with this co-management model?**

No, I think that people do organize themselves. It's true, because I've also had this other experience of participatory budgeting, and the first were ideas that sometimes clashed with the capabilities of the council. Of course, there was no previous pedagogical effort made, in terms of, "This is the instrument we're working with, these are the limits, and these are the capabilities." I remember that a participatory budget had been approved to make a new homeless shelter, and no one wanted it to be built in their neighborhood, and we said, instead of a shelter, why don't we come up with a mechanism that supports homeless people so they can become independent, etc. I found myself in the middle of this, and the money approved for that site was like 4 million euros or something, which seemed crazy to me and the other people

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3 Large bank "Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria"

4 Spanish initials for the Administrator of Railway Infrastructure, a branch of the Ministry of Development

in the committee because, why don't we use those four million for the people? Of course, we're used to it seeming like the Institution has to "solve our problems."

I also remember the issue of garbage: so, I come from Latin America, and everything is a little more chaotic there, so I saw it as kind of strange that in the campaign, people defended the issue of the cleanliness of the city. I mean, there are more important things... I'm not saying that it isn't a good thing for the company in charge of cleaning to do it well and fulfill their duties, but our central interest isn't that the city stays clean; we try to position urgent things at the center of our campaign, and not something that's practically solvable just by everyone putting their little bag where it's supposed to go.

**Considering that La Bancada spreads out in various fronts (feminist, anticapitalist, environmentalist, antiracist), how do you make decisions within La Bancada?**

Really, we haven't spent much time making decisions because there have been many months of trying to see what we wanted to do, to get to know each other and see who each other were. So, we didn't have our first open assembly until January. Before, we were meeting on Wednesdays every two weeks in this space, which is our typical meeting place, and that's where we've come to consensus. Then, there are the open assemblies to try to come to agreement about certain things, bring them to the public and see if people are in agreement. But on Wednesdays, we make decisions through consensus. Up to this point, we've never had to take a vote.

**How does La Bancada assure the representation and active participation of the public?**

In the open assemblies we do offer childcare so that that isn't an obstacle and actually it's worked pretty well, and the truth is, Wednesday being in the middle of the week does complicate things. This leads to some lack in participation, and we also have the issue where people can't come the same day each week, etc. So we draw on an email list, we have a channel on the social media platform 'telegram' where we send the documents. Also, it's people who we've met in other spaces, and if someone's not in La Bancada, you text them to see if they're in agreement. For more definite decisions, we're working on a digital tool that would be easy and accessible. In any case, we think that any kind of vote would have to be in person.

**And how do you ensure good outreach in the neighborhoods or among older people who aren't online?**

I think we're going to think about this the way we did with Ganemos Madrid; no one knew us there either. We made neighborhood groups that organize themselves for local outreach. Right now, we're hosting neighborhood talks with the idea that people in the neighborhoods themselves form the groups so that they can bring their social networks, have meetings if needed, if not everyone can go then elect a few people to go to the assemblies or the wednesday meetings. It's true that we're running a little tight on time, but we do something else on the horizon for the longer-term, so we always say that if we make it, great, and if we don't, we still have months to keep working.

**How do you see the pronounced lack of immigrants in the reality of some social collectives?**



Well, it's not easy, it's not easy. I've also been an immigrant, but really I'm pretty involved in the social movement life, but it's true that there are a lot of people who don't have the idea that they could change something from their position; there are also many limits in terms of if you have a NIE (Foreign Identification Number in its Spanish initials) and not a DNI (National Identity Document), that also limits a lot. In fact, one of our colleagues who was on the *Ahora Madrid* list had legal residency but not a DNI, so she was in a place where she would have been a good councilperson but she couldn't because as a just a resident, she couldn't run, she didn't have that political right, and that limits people's engagement. There's also the meeting schedule and everything, and that is complicated too. With the immigrant population there's still a lot to be done.

### **And how do you see the participation of young people?**

Young people are a whole other matter, but it's true that certain mechanisms aren't incorporated here that are more incorporated in Latin America. I'm referring to having debates in school or creating situations that more or less have to do with making decisions once you come of age and are expected to participate.

### **What does La Bancada understand as “common goods”?**

We conceptualize the environment of the common in terms of specific matters. For example, the *La Ingobernable* (“The Ungovernable”) Social Center could be a good example of the common sphere. That is, it's a building where before it becomes another speculative property deal, before it's given to a rich person to make a hotel or whatever they want, before this example of early twentieth century architecture gets demolished, before any of this happens, there are people who can give it another use, people who have met for that purpose. It's not one specific group or political party, it's a group who meets for that purpose and manages that space as a common good. Which is to say, the group works for the commons. So, in that sense we understand the commons as something that should be part of the council. It won't be able to adopt this completely, but it can aim for things to be for the common enjoyment of the people.

### **When we talk about re-municipalizing public services, what are we talking about?**

This basically means that basic services that the council has historically been in charge of and has little-by-little privatized will end up being more affordable as part of the council than as outsourced to a company.

### **What issues are there still to be worked on in municipalism?**

Basically, there would need to be a pedagogy of municipalism, which is what we're responsible for and I think that could be worked on very effectively in the neighborhoods and it would have to do with a political pedagogy as well. It's also about kind of expanding the theme of the commons and not independently searching for individual satisfaction, that “solve *my* problem” idea. Because for a long time, that's how we've functioned, asking the council about what affects me but then not really caring about what affects other people in my neighborhood. It's true that now we're connected with other candidate coalitions on a state level in the *Confederación Municipalista* (Municipalist Confederation), and we met with them two weeks ago, and we found that this confederation could also help us all

amplify this municipalist culture, not just supporting us in terms of visibility but also with the founding charter that explains what a municipalist candidate list is and what it has to cover, the minimums that must be laid out because what if some right wing person says they're a municipalist? Then they have to fulfill the stipulations in the charter. Now, if they're from the right and they fulfill this and do it well, then we'd have to see... maybe we haven't confirmed it, but I don't really know. I think that having that charter will help us because it's really gone beyond the boundaries of the individual autonomous communities, that is, we're more aware of each other in different councils and different towns, there's more recognition and that's really good because it breaks out of the logic of the autonomous communities.

**Considering the climate of political discontent and insecurity, can you describe how you sustain your hope and energy to bring yourself to participate in this new coalition?**

For me, what keeps hope and energy alive is that other people are also here, that is, that's something we say a lot both in feminism and 15M, this idea that we can't do it alone, but together we can. So, while you're with people, it helps you believe that something else is possible, not right now but maybe in the future, and there are no recipes but maybe we can recover something from before or imagine things that could be in the future; I believe that as long as there are people in this movement, I'll join in their efforts. It's harder for me to think of starting something myself. So, I think that right now, that's what motivates me, in spite of our disillusionment. We've found people who share those disappointments, more or less similar ones but in different aspects, and that lets us think of something else moving forward, together.

