

# The Insufferable Human Drama of Evictions in Spain

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**With 500 families being evicted in Spain every day, foreclosures have become a source of great suffering. But luckily, there are still those who resist.**

Throughout this crisis, there has always been a certain alienating quality to the pronouncements of European leaders and technocrats. Sometimes one is led to wonder if these people are actually talking about the same continent — or the same universe, for that matter. Just today, for instance, the European Central Bank [announced](#) that “the eurozone is starting to heal.” Indeed, the major weakness the central bankers could detect from the commanding heights of their glass-and-steel tower in downtown Frankfurt was “falling bank profits.”

But this morning, huddled together with activists and independent journalists in a small apartment in Madrid, the eurozone seemed to be far from healing. Together with Santiago Carrión from the [Associated Whistleblowing Press](#), we were there because the [Platform for those Affected by their Mortgage](#) (PAH), which runs the [Stop Desahucios](#) (Stop Evictions) campaign, had called on the city’s *indignados* to protect Juana Madrid and her two daughters of 21 and 17, who were about to be evicted from their humble home in the poor neighborhood of Orcasur. The atmosphere, of course, was tense.

The living room was full of people, most of them photographers, while outside the first chants of activists could be heard as people prepared to physically block the entrance to the apartment. Nervously dragging on her cigarette, Juana’s baggy and dark-ringed eyes said it all: this was a woman on the verge of a breakdown. Her voice was calm and subdued, but her facial expression exuded despair. “We have nowhere to go,” Juana’s 21-year-old daughter Isa told us in the kitchen. “If they evict us today we will end up on the street tonight.”

Sadly, the story of Juana and her daughters is by no means an exception. Ever since the start of the crisis in late 2008, over [350.000 families](#) have been evicted from their homes. According to government figures, Spain currently faces a staggering wave of [500 evictions per day](#) — 150 of them in Madrid alone. The vast majority of these involve families whose main breadwinner lost his or her job in the recession and who have inadvertently fallen behind on their mortgage payments to the bank. At 25.02%, Spain’s unemployment rate is the highest in the developed world, higher even than in the U.S. at the peak of the Great Depression.



Recent months have seen a wave of high-profile suicides by people who were about to be evicted from their homes. The most paradigmatic case was that of a 53-year-old woman in

the Basque Country, who [jumped from her balcony](#) and plunged to death as foreclosure agents made their way up the stairs of her apartment. The *Wall Street Journal*, meanwhile, tells the [harrowing story](#) of a Spanish locksmith who was taken aback when he pried open the door of a foreclosed apartment for police, and encountered a woman giving birth inside. According to the locksmith, it was “evident that the stress of the foreclosure had induced premature birth.”

Since then, a number of high judges have spoken out against the “inhumane” foreclosure laws in Spain, which they [consider](#) to be “overly protective of the politically influential banks”. Under immense media pressure, the conservative government finally passed an emergency law allowing the most vulnerable families to be spared from eviction. Still, the new law will only cover some 120.000 people and does not tackle the root of the problem, which is the fact that the government keeps squeezing workers, students, homeowners, pensioners and the sick and disabled in order to pay for the folly of a tiny elite of gambling bankers.

The human tragedy, after all, is only part of the story. The other part, as the Spanish *indignados* rightly point out, is the *estafa*: the fraud. Many of the mortgages that now shackle millions of families to unpayable debt loads, came about under highly dubious circumstances to begin with. The banks never cared if people would be able to repay their debts: as long as house prices kept rising, a defaulting family could still be evicted and replaced by another. After the bank reclaimed the property, it could just re-sell it at a profit. The fact that lives are being destroyed and families shattered in the process is wholly irrelevant for the financial imperatives of the bank.

And thus, the people end up paying the banks triple: first through the usurious interest rates they pay on their mortgage loans (which are essentially conjured up [out of thin air](#) by the banks); second through the tax-payer-funded bailouts of the same banks, after many of these mortgages started going bad; and third through the homes they are losing and which subsequently fall back into the property of the bank, which can — a few years down the line, when real estate prices will have recovered somewhat — sell on the property to a third party.



Juana’s situation was a bit different, however. Unlike millions of others, who are being threatened by the bank because they are struggling to pay their mortgage, Juana did not even own a house: she lived in social housing. What’s more, she wasn’t even provided with a real reason for her eviction. Initially, on April 12 this year, she received a notice from the social housing office (IVIMA) that, because she had fallen into unemployment and was unable to pay her rent, she would be evicted — *unless* she immediately paid 1,250 euros in cash.

Within a matter of days, soliciting friends, neighbors and activists, Juana managed to secure the funds. But the people at IVIMA refused to accept it. In a second notice, they told her the real reason for her eviction was that they had received complaints from neighbors that she was a rowdy nuisance. Again, within a matter of days, Juana produced a document with signatures from virtually every person in her street attesting that she was a good neighbor and no one ever had any problems with her. And so again, the reason for her eviction shifted.

This time, the official reason Juana and her daughters were being evicted from their home was because Juana's bike "[scratched the walls of the staircase](#)" when she carried it up into her apartment. According to Juana, this is blatantly untrue, but the broader point here is obviously the sheer absurdity of the official logic. As both Juana and PAH activists told us later, the real reason for the eviction is actually much more sinister. In fact, Juana's eviction appears to be part of a massive privatization drive pushed through by the Rajoy government in order to pay for its 40 billion euro EU bank bailout. Apparently, even social housing is not immune to this drive.

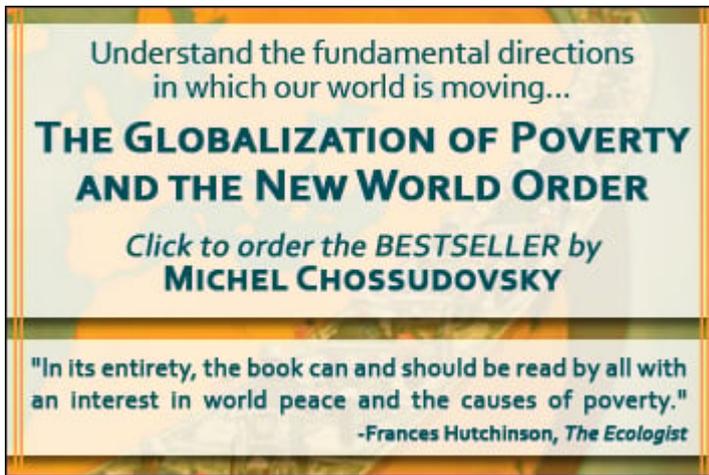
Juana, assisted by a lawyer from the PAH, tried in vain to contact the social housing office, which simply refused to speak to her. Now the reasons are clear. By forcing out families on the quasi-legal basis of nonsensical excuses, the city council can sell the houses on to third parties and make some much-needed money so Rajoy can continue to bail out the banks. In protest against this bizarre logic, Juana, in a state of total desperation, decided to stage a [sit-in protest](#) in front of the social housing office. But after sympathizers began to join her in front of the IVIMA office, police ordered the camp to be disbanded.



All of this underscores the fact that the European debt crisis, far from being resolved, is actually being used as an excuse to expropriate the homes of law-abiding families and engage in a massive redistribution of wealth towards a tiny elite of powerful bankers and privileged politicians. David Harvey, the famous geographer, coined a term for this: it's called "[accumulation by dispossession](#)". Another way of putting it is to say that bankers and politicians are engaging in institutionalized theft. The capitalist class — obsessed as it is with the notion of private property — actually seems to care very little for personal belongings when that property is not its own.

The idiocy of Juana's situation is clearly beyond words, and the sheer injustice of the evictions is so blatant as to render the story utterly incredulous. Yet it's true. And it's happening on a truly massive scale. Luckily, however, there are those who resist. Today, as the technocrats at the European Central Bank pretended once again that everything is under control, a few dozen indignant Spaniards came together and decided to take matters into their own hands. They occupied the doorstep of Juana's home and refused to let police enter. And they won. Juana can keep her home. For now.

"Popular pressure has successfully paralyzed this eviction," one lady of the PAH [told](#) the assembled press afterwards. "It's a great victory, and we will keep on struggling. Unfortunately, however, it all comes too late for the lady who committed suicide this morning." With a heartfelt sadness in her voice, she dedicated today's success to Victoria Mesa, the 52-year-old who [jumped from her balcony](#) today after receiving a foreclosure notice in the mail. Swallowing back the tears, she lifted her hands towards the heavens. "I just hope she sees what we are doing here."



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