# Sebas, the Teacher: A Role Model of Commitment and Republican Values

**Dolors Bassa**

I associate Sebas Parra with the virtues of commitment and republican values in the truest sense: people's liberty, equality and fraternity, individually and collectively. I also identify him with values and class consciousness, and the intersection of these concepts: education, revolution and solidarity.

When I think about the first time I met Sebas, a thousand and one images come to mind. Did he impress me? Was it important? Certainly! Sebas was and always will be someone I associate with many moments and stages of my life. For me and for many others, Sebas is a role model, a guide in the ongoing struggle to consistently defend wide-ranging social justice (each in our own way) and to defend an alternative world and a social and free Catalan Republic.

My first memory of him is practically anecdotal. From 1976 to 1978, I was a student at the Teacher Training College (*Escola Normal*) in Girona. There I was introduced to the leading authors and ideas in the field pedagogy. At one point, some students mentioned that we could arrange a meeting with a teacher from Girona who came from the working class, had been a mechanic and applied Paulo Freire's methods. It was Sebas Parra, about whom I knew nothing. As usual, we went to the meeting with our notebooks and pens – to take notes – but Sebas talked with such enthusiasm and fervour and involved us so much in the group dynamic that we didn't take any notes at all. I remember that he explained things in a very pedagogical way but was critical of the education we were receiving at the college. We ended up talking about capitalism and neoliberalism, and of how revolutionary education should be. That encounter with Sebas was a topic of discussion among the small group of students who were there for quite a long time, both in class and during our breaks in the café.

Later, after we had become better acquainted through other encounters due to our shared circumstances, I told him about the commotion that his meeting had caused in the group. With his serious, yet sarcastic attitude, he told me that was the objective, that that was his intention. This demonstrates how consistent his way of seeing and living life was. He was clear about his goals and, despite his personal

simplicity, never sat around waiting for solutions. He sought the winding and meandering methods needed to be instructive and didactic at the same time. He was a principled activist and an active militant, not only of Freirean pedagogy, but of emancipatory pedagogies everywhere.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was actively involved in cooperation work in an organisation, the North-South Commission of Torroella de Montgrí, which supported the town twinning between Torroella and San Juan del Sur of Nicaragua. The Commission proposed that I be the representative on the ONG Coordinating Committee for the Girona and Maresme regions, and I began to encounter Sebas on a regular basis. He was president of the twinning committee and was one of the driving forces behind the town twinning of Salt and Quilalí. I was just a beginner and he was experienced to the core, especially when it came to Latin American policy, cooperation and education. Sebas was one of the driving forces behind the Coordinating Committee's meetings and activities. He actively participated in everything that was organised – activities, project proposals and conferences – and best of all, he openly and insightfully shared his ideas, approaches and arguments. He made all of us think, even without intending to do so. At that time, many of the twinning committee members were travelling to Nicaragua. When we returned, we shared our experiences and our impressions of the talks (*plàtiques*) we had had there. Those of us in the field of education had been fascinated by Nicaragua's National Literacy Crusade, which reduced the country's illiteracy rates in record time. One of the leaders of this campaign was Orlando Pineda.

In the Girona region, many activities and talks were organised to familiarise people the campaign and ask for their support. One place where talks were held was the Adult Education School in Salt. The director at that time was Sebas Parra. Together with other teachers, he organised talks and activities with the participation of many of the associations involved in cooperation with Nicaragua.

A few years later, in 2001, Orlando Pineda was invited to the 25th anniversary of the Adult Education School in Salt. After that, he returned several more times to Catalonia and the Girona region. I remember when the University of Girona presented him with the *Mestres 68* Award in 2003 to recognise his work in the field of education, in a ceremony attended by many teachers and representatives of Girona's civil society. At that ceremony, Sebas introduced me to Orlando. He was quite a character, someone with whom you could easily converse and *platicar* for hours on end. We met several more times, including in Managua. With his straw hat and dark complexion, the *maestro* was an icon of *los Nica*. Speaking with him made

me realise he was the human, political and pedagogical example of an exceptional teacher. I understood why he was so close to Sebas Parra. With some reflection, I realised that Sebas represented the same thing in our country: an icon of coherence and militancy.

We organised suppers and meetings with Sebas and Orlando in various municipalities in the region. The twinning associations between towns and villages in Nicaragua and in the Girona area were increasing in number and activity. What an intellectual impact they had on many of us! The insight they provided helped us relate the concepts of education and solidarity, personally and collectively. At that time, we were captivated and seduced by everything that had to do with the Sandinista Revolution. The *Yo, sí puedo* campaign mobilised students, young people and teachers for Nicaragua. The campaign used material provided by the Cuban government, thanks to the efforts of Sebas Parra, Joan Colomer and Orlando Pineda at the First World Congress on Literacy in Havana, in which they participated. I clearly remember conversations with Orlando and Sebas about Nicaragua, about the work done in different regions with the help of the volunteers. And about the *Yo, sí puedo* campaign and the benefits it brought to the communities. In addition to reducing illiteracy, it provided audiovisual material and organised leisure activities in places where, previously, there had been no electricity.

Sebas continued to promote projects in Nicaragua. Given his commitment, this was not surprising. He knew how to attract and involve many people, increasing the collective effort of the projects and promoting their dissemination. Examples include the *brigadistas* who went to Nicaragua every year, the Carlos Fonseca Amador Popular Education Association (AEPCFA-Girona) project, the Paulo Freire Institute in Spain, the People's Alternative University (UPA) and the Group for Research and Action with Cultural Minorities and Foreign Workers (GRAMC). I and many others remember being personally involved in talks and conferences, writing articles or collaborating financially in various small projects. One example is the 2012 book *Enseñar, aprender, salvarse*. It was published in Spanish by the Paulo Freire Institute, which sent 200 copies of the book to Nicaragua with that year's *brigadistas*.

Sebas was a tireless activist who knew how to convey this energy to the people around him. He was also a teacher in the truest sense of the word. A teacher for everyone, a teacher and an educator of everyday life, of learning to learn. He recommended readings and spread knowledge in a pleasant but critical way, with the perspective of a thinker who raises and enlightens consciences and unmasks

the conventions and false information of a society confused by media with biased views of reality.

Sebas encouraged me to read two books by Eduardo Galeano. *Open Veins of Latin America* helped me begin to appreciate Latin American countries and their political and social processes. And I kept *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World* on my bedside table for a long time.

He liked to analyse today's society and its difficulties with a critical eye, always actively listening to those he debated. He wanted and hoped for an alternative to the consumer society and capitalism and believed in searching for new formulas. In every discussion group in which I participated at that time – about internationalism, Nicaragua, education for the people or international cooperation – Sebas was an active and indispensable player and advocate. Our debates shifted from trade union struggles to pedagogical struggles to socio-political struggles, always in defence of freedom, social rights, justice, solidarity and fraternity.

I was also active in the General Union of Workers (UGT) trade union. I started in the Spanish Education Workers' Federation (FETE), where Sebas was a long-time active member who had even been part of the management of the Girona region for some time. He often came to the FETE office with his colleague Joan Colomer, also a member of FETE. That became another place where we would meet and discuss political, social and trade union issues. He was not very interested in the day-to-day work of the trade union. Instead, we discussed the role of class unions in contemporary society, or strategies needed to reach out to everyone, especially the most vulnerable classes, or how the idea of the collective, of the common good, of "unity is strength", could change the social and national structures of the country.

As a result of his analyses and the many discussions with him and with others from the same social environment, some initiatives of my own emerged: so-called social policy activities, organised by the UGT trade union. A very special one was the Social Film Series, which was quite successful for several years. We screened films from the ONG Coordinating Committee's collection on labour, social, feminist and other issues with ideological underpinnings in transformative politics. We showed them at the Museum of Cinema and organised a forum-debate afterwards. The idea was to introduce people outside the UGT to the union through the film plots and at the same time reflect on them from a different perspective than the conventional debates on labour issues that usually took place in the union's office. We clearly understood that the UGT was a class union and that the post-film forum-debates

were an opportunity to discuss more than labour and service issues with shop stewards or the membership.

I also had many talks with Sebas about politics. We talked about what it means to believe in internationalism and left-wing politics and how to act on them in a consistent way. We discussed the decades of imperialist offensives, the surge in the internationalisation of capital through a process of unequal development that left a minority of “winners” and a large majority of “losers”, the decadence of a capitalism, and a “Spanishism” (*espanyolism*) incapable of generating new opportunities. He believed that the only real alternative was the unity of the working class. I introduced him to the idea of a better future through an independent Catalonia. He spoke to me about the need for an internationalist revolutionary struggle. Together we talked about how national struggles should be international in their substance. We discussed ideas from Marx and Engels, but also from Constantine Cavafy and how his own journey to Ithaca as a liberating educational practice. Our conversations always ended with an affirmation of the existence of social classes, which the official discourse seemed to deny (then and now), and how the future Catalan Republic should be a network of collaboration and solidarity.

While in prison I received a couple of letters from him. He told me what was happening in the Girona region as well as something I was unaware of: his imprisonment in 1976. He encouraged me to remain vigorous in the defence of fundamental rights and to read and write to mentally protect myself from the anguish and personal hardship I might suffer from being in prison. He also confessed to me that he had left the UGT union and told me we could talk about it when I was released.

I believe that reading and writing, which he recommended so highly to me, were tools he always used, not only to educate himself, but also to protect himself from other ideas and from the mechanisms of capitalist society, to express his anger at the formal system and to question current practices. Someone once remarked that his hand was as quick to write as his head was to think. And, as a result, the many articles he has left us are treasures to help us reflect.

In terms of political ideology, although we were not affiliated with the same party, we did have many similar views: defending the struggle against social inequalities and for peoples’ self-determination. Perhaps that is why he always gave me his support and offered help for whatever I needed in my most difficult moments. Or

perhaps, behind that image of toughness, of intellectualism, of non-conformism to the system, of a teacher, and an armoured body and manner of expression, there was a person capable of great love, of great emotion, with a big heart, who reached out to anyone who was suffering or having a hard time.

When I sat down to write about my memories of Sebas and the ideas I shared with him, I was curious to reread the emails we had exchanged. I realised that they were always about new initiatives and projects he was promoting or involved in. Unfortunately, during the years 2017-2021 there are none, due to my incarceration. Before 2017, when I was Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Families of Catalonia, he wrote to ask for an appointment to discuss a project. I remember receiving him in the Ministry's office, in Barcelona, as always accompanied by Joan Colomer. And one of the last emails I received from him was about participating in a tribute to Miquel Soler Roca in Barcelona in September 2021. He gave me the necessary indications and the script of the event (he always carefully prepared anything that depended on his planning). And the next email was to inform me that he had an unexpected health problem. Email was our preferred means of communication, when meeting in person was not possible. If we wanted to talk by telephone, it had to be through his close companion, Empar.

Someone once dubbed Sebas Parra "a master weaver of collaborations". This is a good definition of his character, of his actions throughout life. An ongoing collective struggle in the world for the right to education and cooperation. He was a restless person, uncomfortable with the system, a generator of initiatives and collaborations wherever he went. He has left us many texts, articles and books on education and revolution, with ideas full of determination, commitment, hope and dreams, but also of non-conformism, steadiness, obstinacy and perseverance.

Sebas never renounced his principles, despite all the odds, and praised what he believed in even if applying it in practice had not been as successful as he had hoped. A good example of this is the pride he felt and expressed in talking about the UPA in Girona.

He was and is an example of work at the service of the people, of the community and of emancipatory struggle. We would need many more people like Sebas to build a fairer society, in which the passion, commitment, struggle and perseverance, which he maintained throughout his life of solidarity, commitment and consistency, would lead us to "another world is possible".

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Sebas died of cancer at the age of 76 in December 2022, but his spirit and desire to continue the fight for the dream of a better world will always be with us. We miss you, but you are present in every social commitment, in every struggle and in every trench.

Always moving forward, always, like you, Sebas!

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