

Mujeres Libres

Aileen O'Carroll

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Mujeres Libres (Free Women) were a group of women anarchists who organised and fought both for women's liberation and an anarchist revolution during the Spanish Civil War. The work they did is truly inspirational. Their example shows how the struggle against women's oppression and against capitalism can be combined in one fight for freedom.

As anarchists they rejected any relegation of women to a secondary position within the libertarian movement. In the 1930's feminism had a narrower meaning than it does now, and they rejected it as a theory which fought for 'equality of women within an existing system of privileges'. They argued "We are not, and were not then feminists. We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It's necessary to work, to struggle, together because if we don't we'll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves".

They said: "We are aware of the precedents set by both feminist organisations and by the political parties... We could not follow either of these paths. We could not separate the women's problem from the social problem. Nor could we deny the significance of the first by converting women into a simple instrument for any organisation, even.. our own libertarian organisation.

The intention that underlay our activities was much broader: to serve a doctrine, not a party, to empower women to make of them individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organisation".

Mujeres Libres had a two pronged strategy, of capacitacion (preparing), and captacion (incorporation or participation). Their early work was a combination of consciousness raising and direct action.

In order to gain mutual support, they created networks of women anarchists. Attending meetings with one another, they checked out reports of sexist behaviour and worked out how to deal with it. Flying day-care centres were set up in efforts to involve more women in union activities.

A journal was produced, distributed and advertised via existing anarchist networks. In it women reported on what work they were actually doing. Consciousness raising was important,

every issue had an article about exceptional women, and they also published a column in other anarchist magazines. In addition their journal printed articles on cultural themes, on education, on movies, on sport. Finally there were articles that would have been seen in any women's magazine, on the value of gas, on childcare, on fashion. Later on books and pamphlets would supplement the journal.

Propaganda work was carried out via radio broadcasts, travelling libraries and propaganda tours. One member, Pepita, described her experience on propaganda trips: "We would call the women together and explain to them... that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women should not lose their independence, but that a women can be a mother and a companera at the same time..."

Young women would come over to me and say "This is very interesting. What you're saying we've never heard before. It's something that we've felt, but we didn't know"... The ideas that grabbed them the most? Talk about the power men exercised over women... There would be a kind of uproar when you would say to them, "We cannot permit men to think themselves superior to women, that they have a right to rule over them". I think that Spanish women were waiting anxiously for that call".

Many of Spain's workers and peasants were illiterate. In response, the women of Mujeres Libres set up literacy programmes, technically oriented classes, and classes in social studies. Between 600-800 women were attending these classes each day in Barcelona in December 1938. In co-operation with the anarchist unions they sent up apprenticeship programmes.

Hand in hand with producing propaganda came the day-to-day work necessary to defend their revolution from fascist attack. They supplied food to the militias and set up community dining rooms. They organised support for women in the militias, setting up shooting ranges and target practice classes. They set up a school for nurses and an emergency medical clinic to treat those injured in the fighting.

Teresina, despite her lack of experience in the medical field was named administrator. Here she speaks with pride of her role "I remember how many times fathers would come up to me in the clinic to request something, and I would say. "Please, here all of us are equals" And they would say to me, "Here, you really have made the revolution." I had such satisfaction from this. Because I administered the whole thing without any education... What I believed, that's what I put in practice there... and that's what I can tell you of what I did for the revolution. The rest, I did what everyone else did. But this was something I did".

However the revolution was more than defeating fascism, it was about building a new society which cared for the needs of all. Travelling through Catalonia and Aragon members of Mujeres Libres helped to establish rural collectives. Many women went with representatives of the anarchist union (CNT) and the anarchist federation (FAI) with makeshift loud speakers calling on peasants to "come over to our side".

In Barcelona they ran a lying-in hospital, which provided birth and post-natal care for women, as well as classes on child and maternal health, birth control and sexuality. An institute of Maternal and Childcare, named after the French anarchist, Louise Michel, was set up in Barcelona in February 1938.

Mujeres Libres provide a living example of many important aspects of anarchist theory. Firstly, they understood that the collective is only as strong as the individuals that make it up. In order to build a strong anarchist movement, they encouraged and supported women to fulfil their full potential. Indeed many members of Mujeres Libres were only 13 or 14 years old when the revolution started. Yet, like Teresina above, they discovered that they did have the ability to undertake the challenging task of building a new world.

Secondly Mujeres Libres understood the importance of direct action and self-activity, both in making revolutionaries and making a revolution. They didn't make an artificial distinction between propaganda and organising, between ideas and action. Their ideas were formed by their experiences on the ground.

Finally, the Mujeres Libres showed that ideas are never set in stone, to be implemented when the right time comes. Their ideas grew and developed, changed and became influential.

Revolution is a messy business. In order to change society fundamentally, long held ideas about what is normal and natural have to be challenged. New revolutionaries and a new revolutionary society will result from the arguments and debates that are held in many different places - the home, the supermarket, the pub - by many different people.

Mujeres Libres saw the revolution as far more than a single overnight event. It is also a process, continually changing, as disagreements are resolved, and new disputes are identified. They showed that revolution, far from being a dry academic endeavour is like life; never simple and straightforward, but dynamic.

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