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# The Labour Movement in Spain

## On Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalism

Albert Meltzer

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Despite the "official" propaganda in which the Libertarian Movement in Exile constantly invokes the name of the CNT, it is not the same thing at all. The traditions of the CNT are reaffirmed by the Resistance within Spain, which is back in the period of regional committees and local resistance, and is still unable to reconstitute itself on a nation-wide scale — which indeed it may not consider essential.

The period predicted by Marx during which Spanish labour would have to be left to "Bakunin" is, of course, over. The Communists, Maoists and Nationalists of various brands have grown considerably — though socialism and the UGT are dead. Thanks to the folly of "Toulouse" the name of the CNT has been eclipsed by schism. But we note one thing: whenever the struggle in Spain becomes acute, the workers turn to anarchism.

movement inside Spain because it dares to use the name of the CNT; (It is for this reason that organisations like the Federacion Obrera Iberica — to save the recriminations about "forging the seals" of the Organisation which are held as by apostolic succession in Toulouse — have simply changed their name, with the same aims as the CNT of old.)

The Spanish Libertarian Movement, so-called (MLE) is not a union movement, nor an anarchist movement. It is anti-fascist in ideology, but basically it looks to a "solution of the Spanish problem" rather than supporting the Resistance in any way. Time and again the expected political solutions have failed — or rather, have succeeded in the way their authors intended them, leaving the, MLE pathetically declaring that the British, French or American Governments have let them down. Even now, many cannot understand how it came about that Britain did not send an Army in to liberate Spain; why the Government did not even want to do so — and indeed, that elements in the British Government may have considered Spain already liberated — by Franco! These are the people who denounce the Resistance as "impractical", "utopian" — above all, "violent"! Many will explain that "violence" is wrong. That is to say, it was permissible in the Civil War, when it was legal; and during the World War when, if not legal, in Spanish eyes, it was granted the equivalent status by virtue of the fact that resistance *was* "legally" recognised in France, but it became "un-libertarian" even "un-Spanish" with the end of the World War!

This colours the attitude towards Resistance in Spain, and nothing marks a greater dividing line. The Resistance was carefully nourished by the Sabater brothers — of whom so little is known [Note:A book on Sabater by Antonio Tellez, trans. Stuart Christie, is coming out next Spring — published by Davis-Poynter. (ie *Sabate : Guerilla extaordinary* KSL)] — the various bands of the Resistance such as the Tallion, Los Manos etc., by Facerias and others. It had perforce to return to the tradition of guerrilla warfare and activism.



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was no longer local autonomy in which all met as equals. For a committee in Toulouse, one was asked to pick "names". The "great names" came to the fore. But what were these "great names"? They were not the names of the militants of pre-war days. They were those who came to the fore during the era of government collaboration. Among them was a division on many subjects. Some thought they should enter political collaboration with the Republican Government (pointless now that it was defeated, but it still had money stacked away in Mexico). Others wanted a return to independence — but they could not return to being a union. Only the workers inside Spain could do that.

The majority of exiles never want to compromise their position. It is understandable, but it is fatal for the struggle in the interior. In fact an exile movement is basically in a farcical position, for it is giving up the fact of struggle in the country where it exists and trying to carry one on in a country where it does not exist. It thus surrenders its usefulness as a force in the labour movement in the country where it resides; while at the same time holding back the struggle in the country from which it originates — since the considerations that hold one back from action in a more open society are not necessarily valid in the dictatorship. Time and again, therefore, the Organisation found itself in conflict with the Resistance in Spain, being built up by groups such as those of Sabater, Facerias and others.

The Resistance — because of its daring attacks upon the regime — was able to build up the labour movement time and again. It was destroyed many times; and has been re-built. It has expected help from the exile Organisation and received nothing. Worse, it has been held back. For this reason one finds today the whole of the pretended "official" libertarian movement in utter disarray — the Montseny-Isglesias faction expelling all and sundry — striking out in the last gasps of dissolution… above all, denouncing the real libertarian

support their jailer France, but after France fell, Britain seemed to be sympathetic. The British Secret Service enlisted the aid of the Spanish Resistance groups, which sprang up immediately after the disaster of 1940. They sought aid to bring soldiers out of France over the border; they enlisted the support of the "gangs" inside Spain to raid foreign Embassies and sabotage Nazi plans; they sought to co-operate [with] (though it never came to dominating) the Spanish resistance in France. Because Franco's men were at the time so violently anti-British, it was supposed Britain must "logically" want to overthrow Franco. And it was more "reasonable" to believe in a British victory — a practical proposition — than in Revolution!

Even those in the Resistance who never trusted the British agents, and who insisted on getting paid for any services they gave them, never believed that they could be double-crossed. Yet after a network of unions had been re-established in Spain during the war — and a Resistance built up without parallel in modern history, inside Spain — all the committees were destroyed. None of the militants ever saw cause and effect. Soon after the war, for instance, a meeting was called by the British Embassy for militants of the CNT to discuss the ANFD (Alliance of Democratic Forces) and the possibility of co-operation with the (pro-British) monarchists. CNT delegate Cipriano Mera reported that he could not see the point of it. A few weeks later the entire CNT committee was arrested. Cause and effect have not been seen to this day. How could it have been the British Embassy that was the traitor? Britain was "democratic", Franco was "fascist".

One could go on at great length, but it can be seen how the "anti-fascist" period, coming when the union phase had finished, helped to establish a movement in exile, in which no popular representation existed or was required, and acted as a brake on Resistance. After the war, the exiles began to fit into life abroad. What took over their organisation was not a bureaucracy so much as domination by the "names". There



On the whole there has been little or no study of the Spanish labour movement. The success of the insurrection against Tsarism so captivated the imagination of the world that attention, from the point of view of revolutionary socialism, has thereafter been riveted on Russia and what concerns its interests. The State "Socialism" that triumphed in that country is no doubt worth studying, if not experiencing: but from the standpoint of any sincere revolutionary — even one who might not consider himself a libertarian — it is surely more richly rewarding to look at the case of a labour movement that could sustain itself through generations of suppression; that could dispense with a bureaucracy; and that could maintain its character of control by the rank and file.

There are, of course, faults and failures. These may be better understood following a study of the working class movement, and dispensing with the criticism of the anarcho-syndicalist offered by Trotskyist sources which make false comparisons out of context with Russia and deal with a period of only three years out of ninety; as a result of which, even among would-be libertarians, the years of struggle and achievement are dismissed with a vague reference to "bureaucracy" which asserted itself at that period, or among Marxists, with a titter — "he-he anarchists entered the Popular Front Government" — as if there was no more to be said on the matter.

The Spanish labour movement had five overlapping phases which can be summed up in five key words — the "international"; the "union"; the "revolution"; "anti-fascism" and the "resistance". Each represents a different phase and the mistakes, and betrayals appear almost entirely in the fourth ("anti-fascist") phase.

The significant character of the movement is played down deliberately for a simple reason: it overwhelmingly disproves the Leninist thesis, equally flattering to the bourgeois academic, that the working-class, of itself, can only achieve a trade union consciousness — with the corollary that trade union

consciousness must be confined to higher wages and better conditions, and without the guiding hand of the middle-class elitist, would never understand that it could change society.

## The "International" Phase

The historians want on the one hand to say that Bakunin was a poseur who boasted of mythical secret societies that did not exist; and on the other hand that he, by sending an emissary (who did not speak Spanish) introduced anarchism into Spain. In fact, ever since the Napoleonic wars — and in some parts of Spain long before — the workers and peasants had been forming themselves into societies, which were secret out of grim necessity.

It is sometimes alleged that "liberal" ideas entered Spain only with the French invasion. What in fact came in — with freemasonry — was the political association of the middle class for liberal ideas (and the advancement of capitalism) against the upper classes, and their endeavour to use the working class in that struggle. But the working class and peasants had a known record of 400 years insurrection against the State. It is their risings and struggles, and the means employed — long before anarchism as such was introduced — that are used by historians as if they were describing Spanish anarchism. In Andalusia in particular the peasants refused to lie down and starve, or to emigrate en masse (only now is this political solution being forced on them): they endeavoured to make their oppressors emigrate — that is to say, to cause a revolution, even locally.

In the eighteen-thirties the co-operative idea was introduced to Spain (relying on early English experience); and the first ideas of socialism were discussed, basing themselves on the experiences of the Spanish workers and also borrowing from Fourier and Proudhon. The early workers' newspapers came out, especially in the fifties, and revealed the existence of work-



Those publications which appeared spoke only in the vaguest terms about the future. All that mattered was the overthrow of Franco and of Fascism. In the circumstances, a political party — with a policy dictated from the central committee — would have produced a clear line (however vicious this might be, as the Communist Party's line was after the Stalin-Hitler Pact — one typical symptom being Frank Ryan, IRA CP fighter in the International Brigade, who went from Franco's prison to become a Nazi collaborator). The libertarian movement was clear only that it was anti-fascist. And that it would have no further truck with the Communist Party.

This was not an unreasonable line to take in the circumstances, but for a fatal corollary to the anti-fascist commitment, which ultimately paralysed the entire Spanish working-class movement and has kept Franco in power to this day. This was that one must therefore accept anti-fascism at its face value and ascribe anti-fascism to the democratic powers which were also fighting against powers which happened to be fascist.

A moment's reflection will show the falsity of the position. Today China finds herself in conflict with Russia. But she is not only not necessarily anti-Communist (in the Leninist sense), she is not (in that sense) anti-Communist at all. There is no reason to suppose that if China defeated Russia she would end state dictatorship and concentration camps; to ascribe such motives to China is to deceive oneself deliberately. Neither did it follow in 1939 that anybody who happened to be fighting the Fascist Powers were therefore anti-fascist *in the same sense* that the libertarians were.

Nor had ideology anything to do with it. America, while retaining democracy at home, is perfectly able to support dictatorship abroad. Yet in 1939 it was seriously supposed even by the best of the Spanish militants that Britain and France must "logically" oppose fascism, as if nations went to war merely to impose their ideology. It was more difficult to

chist movement or of the labour organisation although their collaboration was passively accepted by most. They took advantage of the greatest weakness of the traditional anarchist movement, the "personality cult" (as witness Kropotkin, individually supporting World War I, and causing enormous damage to the movement which he in no way represented and from which his "credentials" could not be withdrawn for there were none except moral recognition).

The emergence of an orator like Garcia Oliver, or Federica Montseny, as a Minister purporting to represent the CNT was a symptom of these collaborationist moves. Keeping the matter in proportion their betrayals and compromises were effected by the defeat, and were not its cause.

It was, however, this division that disorientated the organisation in subsequent years.

Following the defeat, the libertarian movement was re-established in a General Council in Paris in February 1939. The existing secretary of the CNT, Mariano Vasquez, was appointed secretary of the Council. But this was in no way a trades union. It was a council of war, intending to maintain contact between the exiles now scattered round the world, and in particular those in France, where the majority were in concentration camps, set up with barbed wire and guarded by Senegalese soldiers, as if they were POWs, but under conditions forbidden by the Geneva Convention.

There were no longer meetings appointing delegates subject to recall, nor any check upon the representatives of the movement. Nobody in any case was interested. The working class of Spain had been decisively smashed. Its organisations were in ruins. Those in exile had to build a new life. Those inside Spain were facing daily denunciations leading to the firing squad and prison. The children of the executed and imprisoned were thrown into the streets. Large numbers of workers, were moving to places where they hoped they would avoid notice.



ers' guilds in many industries, including the Workers' Mutual Aid Association. Because of the Carlist wars — and the periodic need to reconcile all "liberal" elements — a great deal of this went on publicly, some of it surreptitiously.

The first workers' school was founded in Madrid by Antonio Ignacio Cervera (fifty years before the more famous Modern School of Francisco Ferrer). He also founded a printing press whose periodicals reached workers all over the country. Cervera was repeatedly persecuted and imprisoned (he died in 1860). It was from the ideas of free association, municipal autonomy, workers' control and peasants' collectives that Francisco Pi y Margall, the philosopher, formulated his federalist ideas. The latter is regarded as "the father of anarchism" in Spain. But he did no more than give expression to ideas current for a long time.

During the period of the general strike in Barcelona (1855) the federations entered into relationship with the International Association of Workers in London (later called "The First International"). It was quickly realised that the ideas of the Spanish section of the International were far more in accord with Bakunin's Alliance than with the Marxists. In 1868 Giuseppe Fanelli was sent by Bakunin to contact the Internationalists in Spain. To his surprise — he barely spoke Spanish and said "I am no orator" — at his first meeting he captured the sympathy of all. Among his first "converts" the majority belonged to the printing trade — typographers like Anselmo Lorenzo, lithographers like Donadeu, engravers like Simancas and Velasco, bookbinders and others. It was they who were in Spain the most active, and the most literate of workers. They formed the nucleus of the International. (Marx wrote gloomily to Engels: "We shall have to leave Spain to him [Bakunin] for the time being.") By the time of the Congress in Barcelona in 1870, there were workers' federations throughout the country. The programme on which they stood: for local resistance, for municipal autonomy, for workers' control, for the seizure of the

land by the peasants, has not since been bettered. They did not fail because they were wrong; merely because (like the Chartists in England) they were before their time. There was no viable economy to seize. They could do nothing but rise and fight.

The bourgeoisie had totally failed, during their long struggle with reaction, to modernise the country. The Government persistently retained control by the use of the army and of the system of Guardia Civil which it had copied from France.

## Workers' Federations

In 1871 workers' federations existed in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Cartagena, Malaga, Cadiz, Libares, Alella, Bilbao, Santander, Igualada, Sevilla, Palma de Mallorca — taking no orders from a central leadership, standing on the basis of the local commune as the united expression of the workers' industrial federations, and in complete hostility to the ruling class. It was essentially a movement of craftsmen — as in England the skilled worker became a Radical, in Spain he became an Internationalist. Pride in craft became synonymous with independence of spirit. Just as in England, where the village blacksmith and shoemaker became the "village radical" who because of his independence from "the gentry" could express his own views, and become a focus for the agricultural workers' struggles — so in Spain he became an Internationalist (a stand which he easily combined with regionalism).

The first specifically anarchist nucleus began in Andalucia in 1869 — due to the work of Fermin Salvochea. It was there, too, that the International became strongest. As the repression grew so the anarchist ideas captured the whole of the working class movement. But the reason was not because Bakunin, Fanelli, Lorenzo or Salvochea had decided to give Spanish federalism a name, or to label it in a sectarian fashion. It was because the



enemy. The officer in charge signalled them to pass. They did so silently, waiting to dash for it — expecting to be shot in the back in accordance with the *ley de fuga*. But the officer saluted. The Guardia Civil was loyal to the Government. In many villages the people stormed the police barracks demanding vengeance on the enemy. They were greeted with cries of "Viva la Republica". "We are your allies now. We are the officers of the Popular Front. Ask your allies in the Republican and Socialist parties if it is not so."

Even so, many anarchists never trusted them.

It was the police and Guardia Civil who were the most vicious to the fascists whom they had to detain, to show their enthusiasm for the popular cause. Later, when the tides of war had changed, they had to be even more vicious to the antifascists, to show that they had never ceased in allegiance to the properly constituted authority.

## The Compromises

It is relevant to this description of the Spanish labour movement to trace the dissolution of the CNT, since with the drift from the factories it ceased to be a union movement and became, in effect, an association of militants.

During the war what was in effect a demoralisation of many militants set in, and a division occurred between "well known names" and those militants who really made up the organised movement (the rank and file militants, *militantes de base*), since the demand for unity, understandable as it was, led to a collaboration with the republican government under the slogan of "UHP". All those who had for years been denied a recognition of their talents — and craved for it — now had their chance. Majors, generals; in the police and in the direction of government; even in the ministries themselves. Those who so collaborated did not really go as representatives either of the anar-

For this reason the Popular Front has never since ceased, through its supporters at the time, to harp on one theme only: the International Brigade. But this merits a separate article.

It was not merely the disciplinary and murderous drives by, the Communist Party that destroyed the collectivisation and self-management. One must add to it the fact that as the civil war proceeded, the workers, were leaving the factories in ever increasing numbers, for the front lines, which became ever more restricted.

## Divisions

The fact that the workers had, with practically their bare hands, prevented an immediate military victory and, as it seemed, prevented the rise of world fascism, caused a euphoric condition. The slogan was "United Proletarian Brothers": the flags of the CNT mixed with those of the UGT. The Communists and Socialists were welcomed as fellow-workers, even the Republicans accepted for their sake. Undoubtedly the whole mass of CNT workers — and others — welcomed this end of divisions which seemed pointless as against world fascism. In time of war one looks favourably upon any allies: no leadership could have prevailed against the feeling that there were no more divisions in the workers' ranks. On the contrary, those who now aspired to leadership — since the conditions of war were such that leadership could exist — began to extol the merits of their new-found allies.

Those who refer to the "atrocities" of the early period of the Civil War seldom point to the root cause of many of them: the fact that the Republican authority was now officially on the side of the workers. A simple illustration was told me by Miguel Garcia of how, in the early days in Barcelona the group he was with seizing arms from the gunsmiths' to fight the army, came in confrontation with a troop of armed Guardia Civil, the hated



Marxist part of the International was growing away from them. During Marx's struggle with Bakunin he was forced clearly to state his views in a specifically authoritarian manner. The idea of central State authority was precisely what repelled the Spanish Internationalists. The notion that they required a leadership from the centre was something they had already, in their own organisation, dispelled.

The International reached its peak during 1873/4. Its seizure of Cartagena — the Commune of Cartagena — would take precedence over the Commune of Paris for the "storming of the heavens" if greater attention had been paid to it by historians outside Spain.

The Commune of Paris showed how the State could be instantly dispensed with; but its social programme was that of municipal ownership and it was in this sense that its adherents understood the word "communist". In Cartagena the idea of workers' councils was introduced — it was understood that what concerned the community should be dealt with by a federal union of these councils; but that the places of work should be controlled directly by those who worked in them. This "collectivism" preceded by forty or fifty years the "soviets" of Russia (1905 and 1917) or the movements for workers' councils in Germany (1918) and profoundly affected the whole labour movement, which for the next twenty years was in underground war with the regime: bitterly repressed, and fighting back with guerrilla intensity.

The conceptions which the British shop stewards brought to bear on British industry — of horizontal control — during the First World War, of horizontal control to circumvent the trade union bureaucracy — were inbuilt into the Spanish workers' movement from the beginning. When the workers' federations turned from the idea of spontaneous insurrections to that of a revolutionary labour movement and began to form the trade union movement, it had already accepted the criticisms of bureaucracy which were not even made in other countries until

some forty or fifty years of experience was to pass; it saw in a union bureaucracy the germs of a workers' state, which it in no way was prepared to accept. Moreover, the idea of socialist or liberal direction — urged by the freemasons — was seen quite clearly in its class context. It was this experience brought from the "International" period that made the labour movement the most revolutionary and libertarian that existed.

## Regionalism

The essential regionalism of the Internationalist movement was somewhat different from trade unionism as it was understood in England. Instead of a national union of persons in the same craft, the basis of craft unionism, there was a regional federation of all workers. The federation divided into sections according to function. Thus it was possible for even individual craftsmen to be associated with the union movement, which accorded with the hatred most of the workers had for the factory system anyway. It also meant that when anyone was blacklisted for strike activities, he could always be set up on his own. Pride in craft was something ingrained in the internationalists. The most frequent form of sabotage against the employer was the "good work" strike — in which better work than he allows for is put into a job. It was something they employed even when there was no specific dispute (it is the reason why there were fewer State inspections of jobs for safety reasons and why today — the union movement having been smashed — one reads so frequently of dams breaking, hotels falling down or not completed to time, and so on). For this reason people trusted the union label when it was ultimately introduced and — despite the law and his own prejudices — an employer had to go to the revolutionaries to get the good workmen, or let the public know he was employing shoddy labour. "You are



With this background of the labour movement it was impossible for the capitalist class to switch it round on the basis of nationalism and harness it behind themselves, as they had done with temporary success in many countries in the First World War, and with some permanent (as it then seemed) success in the Nazi era. The Falange tried to ape the workers' syndicates but nobody was fooled who did not want to be. When the Falange failed in its task, as every attempt of the Spanish bourgeoisie failed — whether liberal, republican or fascist — the Army was brought in, in the classical manner of a ruling class holding power by force.

What took the ruling class by surprise — having seen the way in which the labour movements of the world caved in at the first blast of the trumpet (above all, the fabulous Red Army trained movement of the German workers under Marxist leadership reduced with one blow of the fist to a few, frightened people being beaten up in warehouses) — was the resistance to the nation's own army by the working people. If at that moment the Popular Front (claiming to be against fascism) — realising its fate would be sealed with the victory of the Army — had armed the people, the rising would have been over. The result of their refusing to do so meant that trench warfare could develop, in which (against heavy arms, and later troops and planes, coming in from the fascist countries) the Spaniards could only resist, keep on the defence, and never mount an attack; hence they would be bound to lose in the finish.

One of the most significant trends shown in July 1936 was the seizure of the factories and the land by the workers. This was an experience in workers' self-management which was not however unique — since the same attempts had been made by many collectives and cooperatives before — but whose scale was staggering — and which represented in itself a defiant gesture of resistance by the workers which the Popular Front Government wished to play down, and eventually suppress.

"cadres", to the same sort of defeat the man on the ground could quite easily manage for himself?

One other point must be taken into consideration, and that was the demoralisation of many militants after years of struggle in which enormous demands were made upon the delegates with absolutely no return whatever outside that received by all. There was no problem of bureaucracy (the general secretary was a paid official; beyond him there were never more than two or three paid officials) but then as a result there was no reward for the delegates, who suffered imprisonment — and the threat of death — and who needed to be of high moral integrity to undertake jobs involving negotiation, and even policy decisions of international consequence, that in other countries would lead to high office but in Spain led merely to a return to the work bench at best, or to jail and the firing squad at worst.

It is not a coincidence, nor the result of conscious "treachery", that many militants who came up through the syndicates [note: Pestana, for instance, once General Secretary, later hived off to form his own political party (the "Treintistas" — after his "Committee of Thirty").] later discovered "reasons" for political collaboration or entry into the political parties, which alone offered rewards, and every one of which hankered after the libertarian union, which alone had a broad base that would mean certain victory for whoever could command it.

The student-movement-inspired thesis is wrong: the FAI was not a Bolshevik nor a social-democratic party. If it had been, this problem would not have arisen. The problems of Spanish labour in those years were not problems of political control, nor whether the tactics of this party or that party were right or wrong (that is to think of Spain in terms appropriate to the Stalin-Trotsky quarrel, but the dispute between the rival gangsters of the Kremlin is not necessarily applicable in every country). Basically they were the problems of freedom, and of mass participation in its own destiny. We must not delude ourselves that these do not exist.



the robber, not us," was the statement most often hurled at the employer who wanted honesty checks on his workers.

"Regionalism" — the association of workers on the basis of locality first, and then into unions associated with the place of work — was something that concurred fully with the insurrectional character of the movement. Time and again a district rose and proclaimed "libertarian communism" rather than be starved to death or emigrate (the latter solution was, years later, forced on them only by military conquest). It was for this reason that the seemingly pedantic debate began between "collectivism" or "communism" in the anarchist movement — fundamentally a question as to whether the wage system be retained or not in a free society — since this was indeed an immediate issue in the collectivities and co-operatives established with a frequency as much as in modern Israel — though with the significant difference that it was in a war against the State and not with its tolerant assistance.

## Formation of CNT

The workers' organisations persistently refused to enter into political activity of a parliamentary nature. It was the despair of the Republican and Socialist politicians, who were sure they could "direct" the movement into orthodox, legal channels. It was an attempt to divide the movement, not to unite it, that led to the formation of the Union General de Trabajadores (UGT) in 1888. It was a dual union, with only 29 sections and some three thousand members. The congresses of the regional movement — the Internationalist movement which by now was transforming itself into an anarchist one — had seldom less than two or three hundred sections.

In the years of terror and counter-terror that followed, attacks on the workers' movement led to the recurrent individual counterattacks of the 1900s, resulting in the enormous protests

against the Moroccan War that culminated in the "Red Week" of Barcelona. Meantime the socialist movement stood aloof, trying to ingratiate itself with the authorities in the manner of the Labour movement in England — then still part of the Liberal Party. The demand for national-based craft unions (raised by the UGT) thus became identified with the desire for parliamentary representation in Madrid. (History repeats itself: today, under Franco, the Comisiones Obreras are doing exactly the same thing — to gain Stalinist representation in the Cortes.)

The Spanish movement was entering its "union" phase, influenced strongly by the syndicalism of France. The Solidaridad Obrera movement (Workers' Solidarity) adopted the anti-parliamentarian views of the French CGT whose platform for direct workers' control was far in advance of the epoch, and which was already preparing the way for workers to take over their places of work, even introducing practical courses on workers' control to supplant capitalism.

As the anarcho-syndicalist movement developed in Spain after experience of the way in which the parliamentary socialists had gained creeping control of the syndicalist movement in France and debilitated this movement, it was inbuilt into the formation of the CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo — National Confederation of Labour) that the movement should follow the traditions of federalism and regionalism that prevented the delegation of powers to a leadership. The CNT was created in 1911 (at the famous conference at the salon de Bellas Artes in Barcelona) as the result of a demand to unite the various workers' federations all over the country — following strikes in Madrid, Bilbao, Sevilla, Jerez de la Frontera, Soria, Malaga, Tarrasa, Saragossa. It helped to organise a general strike the same year (as a result of which it became illegal).

It rose to overwhelming strength during the world war — its most famous test being the general strike arising from the strike at "La Canadiense". From then on, for 25 years, it was



## Problems

The problem that we are familiar with is that of a labour movement hesitant to take its opportunities, while the capitalist class seizes every possibility of advancing its interests. The problem for Spanish labour was entirely different: namely, that while it was determined and even impatient for Revolution, the capitalist class remained (until only a comparatively few years ago) afraid to interfere politically lest it upset the equilibrium by which the military were the last resort of the regime, and unwilling to move too far ahead industrially for fear of the State power dominated by feudal reaction. Only a few foreign capitalists were willing to take the plunge in exploiting the country. Thus strike after strike developed into a general strike, and the confrontation thus achieved became a local insurrection, for the capitalists were asked more than they would or sometimes could grant.

It is the insurrections which have been more often the concern of historians who inevitably talk of "the anarchists" and their conduct in running this or that local conflict: in reality, the anarchists had helped to create an organisation by which the workers and peasants could run such insurrections themselves. It is inevitable that because of this, mistakes of generalship would occur and it would be futile to deny that a highly organised political party could possibly have marshalled such forces much differently (this was the constant despair of the Marxist parties); but towards what end? The conquest of power by themselves. In rejecting this solution, other problems arose which must be the continued concern of revolutionaries.

What, after all, is the point of accepting a political leadership which might seize power — with no real benefit to the working class, as was the real case in Soviet Russia — by virtue of its brilliant leadership (and its tactical and tacit arrangements with imperialist powers) — or might (as the Communist Party did in Chiang's China or Weimar Germany) lead, with all its trained

sion in the ranks of the proletariat and as the struggle deepened in the thirties could not see why they should be separated from the UGT, or the Marxist parties — the CP, POUM or some sections of the Socialist Party. "Unity" is always something that sounds attractive. But notwithstanding the adage it does not always mean strength. Those who desire it the most are those who must compromise the most and therefore become weak and vacillating.

The popular mistake, too, is to assume that because these parties were more "moderate" in their policies — that is to say, more favourably inclined to capitalism and less willing to change the economic basis of society — they were somehow more gentle in their approach, or pacific in their intentions. Under the Republic the "moderate" parties (which had collaborated with the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera under the monarchy) created the Assault Guards especially to hit the workers, and the CNT in particular. To imagine an equivalent one must assume that in addition to the police, the Army are also on street patrol — as an equivalent to the Guardia Civil — but the Government brings in a special armed force (like the "B" Specials) to attack the TUC. This was a "moderate" policy as against the "extremism" of the anarchists who wanted to abolish the armed forces (which incidentally were plotting against the Republic). That was an "impractical and utopian" idea, said the Republicans and Socialists, who aimed to democratise the armed forces instead by purging it of older monarchists and bringing in young generals like Francisco Franco (whose brother was a Freemason and Republican, as well as a "national hero"), whose "loyalty to the republic would be assured".



in constant battle, yet the State was never able to completely suppress it.

## 25 Years of Unionism

The complete failure of some libertarians to understand even the elementary principles of the CNT throughout those years is staggering. When the structure and rules of the CNT were reprinted in Black Flag some comments both privately and publicly left one amazed. One reader thought it was a "democratic centralist" body, when the whole shape and structure of it was obviously regionalist. For years, indeed, a major debate raged as to whether unions should be federated on a national basis at all. Some could not understand it *was* a union movement, and pointed out the lack of decisiveness in dealing with national (political) problems.

Another saw in the rule that delegates should not be criticised in public "a libertarian version of don't rock the boat, comrades", comparing it with the determination of the TUC not to let its leaders (quite a different matter) be criticised. But the delegates were elected for one year only. They could be recalled at a moment's notice if they were not representing the views of their members. Most of the time, as negotiating body, they were illegal or semi-legal. It was not pleasant for someone who avoided acting as a delegate, and who had the power to recall the delegate if there were sufficient members in agreement, to attack a named delegate in public. That is not the same thing at all as criticising a permanent leader or democratically-elected dictator such as one finds in British trade unionism. Nor is it the same thing as saying one should never criticise anyone at all. (It must, however, be held against the rule that in 1936/9 and after many refrained from criticising self-appointed spokesmen because of this tradition.)

Yet others, bringing a forced criticism of Spanish labour organisation in order to fit preconceived theories, have suggested it was subordinated to a political leadership, the Anarchist Federation playing a "Bolshevik" role (something quite inconceivable) or that of a Labour Party. What such critics cannot understand is that the anarchists relinquished the building of a political party of their own, and that it was only because of this that they had their special relationship with the CNT. Had they endeavoured to give it a political leadership, they would have succeeded in alienating themselves as did the Marxists. (The original Marxist party, the POUM, endeavoured for years to obtain control of the CNT: later, when the Communist Party was introduced into Spain in the 'thirties, the POUM was denounced as "trotskyists" and even "trotsky-fascists" by the Stalinists. The Trotskyists proper took the line that the very existence of a revolutionary union was an anachronism and they criticised the POUM for trying to infiltrate the CNT rather than to enter, and aspire to lead, the UGT — though the latter was a minority organisation.)

Like many other anarchist groups in other countries, those in Spain were based on affinity, or friendship, groups — which are both the most difficult for the police to penetrate, and the most productive of results — as against which is the positive danger of clique-ism, a problem never quite solved anywhere. The anarchists who became well known to the general public were those associated with exploits which no organisation could ever officially sanction. For instance, Buenaventura Durruti came to fame as the result of his shooting Archbishop Soldevila, in his own cathedral [he was actually assassinated in an ambush, KSL] — in response to the murder, by gunmen of Soldevila's "Catholic" company union, of the general secretary of the CNT, the greatly-loved Salvador Segui. With bank robberies to help strike funds, the names of the inseparable Durruti, Ascaso and Jover became household words to the many



workers who faced privation and humiliation in their everyday life, and felt somehow revindicated as well as reinvigorated.

One must bear in mind the capitalist class was at this time engaged in its own struggle against the feudal elements of Spain (which even resisted the introduction of telephones). The economic struggle of capitalism (palely reflected in the political mirror as that of republicanism versus the monarchy) was an extremely difficult one: it made the struggle of the workers to survive that much more difficult. The employers did not have as much to yield as in other countries where industrialisation had progressed; had they in fact been further advanced, the amount so militant an organisation could have obtained from capitalism would have been staggering.

As it was, capitalism fought a constant last-ditch stand against labour. It was a bloody one, too, and it should not be supposed that individual "terror" was on one side. The lawyer for the CNT, a paraplegic, well known for his stand on civil liberties — Francisco Layret who could be compared with Benedict Birnberg here, who has complained he has been put on a police blacklist — was shot down in his wheelchair by employers' pistoleros.

It was against such pistoleros that the FAI hit back. Anarchist assassination is taken out of its class context by Marxist critics. They did not think that individual attacks would "change society", that the capitalist class would be terrorised or the State converted by them. They hit back because those who do not do so, perish.

## Unity

While the local federations always opposed any form of common action with the republican or local nationalist parties, and sometimes lumped (correctly) the Socialist Party with the bourgeois parties, nevertheless on the whole they deplored the divi-