

The 1931 Barcelona rent strike

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The Barcelona Rent Strike of 1931 not only served to reduce rent costs for working class families but was also an education in self-organisation for thousands of workers. It, along with other struggles in those years, created an organised working class that in 1936 made the most successful attempt yet to overthrow capitalism and create libertarian communism.

Shanties and Slums

In the 15 years leading up to the strike Barcelona's population had increased by 62%. The city was one of the fastest growing in Europe. Inflation was running rampant but wages had not risen. There had been rent increases of up to 150%. Only 2,200 council houses had been built. Barcelona was in the midst of a huge housing crisis as shanty towns grew around the city.

The CNT was an illegal organisation during the 1920's and thus many members had been reduced to the role of passive spectators as dedicated militants battled with the police and pistoleros. The dictator, Primo de Rivera, had fallen in 1930 and the new government (who declared a republic in '31) let the CNT re-emerge.

As anarchists, the CNT wished to widen the union into a real participatory social movement. To do this they had to broaden its realm of influence. They knew that only via mass organisation, participation and struggle could the foundations be laid so that people would acquire the skills to construct a new society.

The Idea

In January 1931, Solidaridad Obrera² published an article calling for action around the housing crisis. In April that year the CNT construction workers set up the Economic Defence Commission {EDC} and said they would study the *expense that corresponds to each worker for the wage earned* in relation to rents. On May 1st the EDC presented its first basic demand that there should be a cut of 40% in rents. Three articles quickly appeared in Solidaridad Obrera. The EDC followed these up, demanding

- a 40% reduction in rents.
- that the unemployed enter the workplaces to demand that the bosses hire 15% more men.
- that food prices would be agreed and local defence groups would weed out speculators.

After the publication of these demands individual actions began to take place. Workers re-installed an evicted family on May 4th. The EDC sought to encourage this action by holding meetings in working class areas of Barcelona and the surrounding towns. Many of these meetings were held through June and into July.

Large numbers of women attended and got involved as it was usually left to them to pay the bills and rent. Mass leafleting took place and a huge rally was built for. On 23rd June an evicted family was re-housed by the local people in Hospitalet and this caused great discussion in that part of the city.

The mass rally on July 5th declared the demands of the campaign to be :

- For July the security (deposit) should be taken by landlords for rent.
- From then on rent would only be paid at 40% of the previous rate.
- That the unemployed should not have to pay rent.

If the landlords refused to take the reduced rent then they would get nothing as a rent strike was recommended.

No rents for Landlords

The EDC claimed that there were 45,000 strikers in July growing to 100,000 in August³. Every working class estate became organised so that the authorities did not have enough guards to prevent evicted families from being re-entered onto property.

From the end of July onwards the repression of the strikers grew with the Chamber of Catalonia (i.e. Chamber of Commerce) ordering the arrest of all organisers. The EDC rally and leafleting due to be held on July 27th was banned.

In early August the EDC began to publish a series of articles exposing landlord tax-fraud, pointing out how there was one law for the rich and another for the poor. In turn the state arrested 53 members of the CNT. This led to a riot inside the prison and a general strike outside. By October, the EDC were forced to go underground after the CNT had been heavily fined for not turning over the names of those involved.

The strike was ending, however it never entirely ended in many districts. What successfully broke it was the practice of arresting tenants when they returned to their homes. Some tenants put their hope in a Rent Decree (December 1931) which depended on legal ways of pursuing a claim for fair rent, but unsurprisingly it proved completely useless.

The Fruits of the Rent Strike

It had taken major repression by the state to end the strike but a valuable journey had begun. For many young people this was the first time they had been exposed to the ideas of anarchism and direct action. They would go on to join the CNT and become the revolutionaries of 1936. The rent strike was the beginning of many campaigns which established anarchist ideas and practices in the communities. People were exposed to playing a vital part in fighting their own oppression. They became fuelled with a belief in challenging the way things were. All illusions in the Republican government were quickly shattered.

The lessons of mass action and self organisation would later be put to use by the people who went on to make history in 1936.

When the fascist coup happened in 1936 in Spain, the left there and in other countries called for the state to put down the fascists. The more radical Marxist groups called upon the state to 'arm the workers' (earlier the same demand was heard when the fascists took power in both Italy and Germany). Yet the anarchists of the CNT got out onto the streets, took the arms for themselves and immediately began to defeat the fascists.

Why did this happen? Anarchism has a proud tradition of self-activity and mass participation. The anarchists in Spain did not cry out for the state to put down the fascists. In 1936 tens of thousands of anarchists were ready to seize arms and fight the fascists. No leaders, no calls on the state, just people who knew what to do and went out and did it. This self-organisation was in part the legacy of the Barcelona rent strike of 1931.

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