

# **The Revolution in Spain**

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As many of you will know there is a great deal written on the Spanish Civil War. Not just standard history and accounts of the war and its wider political impact, but personal memoirs, poems, journalistic diaries and novels. In *Homage To Catalonia*, George Orwell has written one of the better accounts of what it was like to be in Spain at the time. In terms of atmosphere and drama he goes a considerable way towards giving the reader some idea of the mood in Spain in 36. Orwell hints at the revolution that was taking place, and at the atmosphere of comradeship and solidarity that abounded in revolutionary Barcelona.

But if you want to go beyond Orwell and other similar accounts of what it was like to be in Spain at that time, and find some of the detail of the revolution that was taking place then you will find it is a more difficult task. This is not to say there isn't a lot of information on the political infighting within the republican zone &ndash; there's actually quite a lot on that. But if you are interested in what the revolution was about, how practically speaking did it affect and change the lives of ordinary Spaniards &ndash; then you will have a more difficult search. Largely you will have to go to the small publishing houses of the anarchist movement. A number of books: *Collectives In the Spanish Civil War* by Laval; *With The Peasant of Aragon* by Soucy Bauer being two of the most important. *Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution* by Sam Dolgoff is an important and very useful gathering together of various accounts available from the anarchist press.

## Period Before The Civil War

We know that the Spanish Civil War broke out because of the army rebellion led by Franco, but in as much as this tells us the spark that set the war in train, it tells us little about the conditions in Spain prior to 1936.

Between the election in February and the fascist revolt in July there were 113 general strikes and 228 partial general strikes. And I know this will be particularly interesting to Irish aficionados of Spain - 160 churches were burned down.

On June 13th, 30,000 Asturian miners struck; on June 19th 90,000 miners throughout the country withdrew their labour. Every city of importance had at least one general strike during the June period and on the first day of July over a million was out on strike.

This necessarily brief account gives some indication of the level of struggle and confrontation that was present in Spain in 1936. But to further understand the transformation that was soon to take place we also need to realise the radical nature of Spanish working class.

Principally there were two major unions organising Spanish workers at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War - the UGT linked to the Socialist Party and the CNT linked to the Iberian Anarchist Federations. Of the two the CNT was the most radical and in the long run the most important given that it was strongest in the industrial heartland of Spain, in Catalonia. In almost all ways it was an untypical union. As mentioned it was practically and philosophically aligned to the Iberian Anarchist Federation, though importantly there were other active tendencies within it, though almost all of a libertarian socialist bent.

Practically speaking what did it mean to be in a union strongly influenced by anarchist ideas? Apart from being a militant union the CNT had a very strong democratic tradition at its core. Decisions on all local and immediate matters such as wages and conditions were in the hands of the local membership who met regularly in general assembly. Mutual aid and solidarity between workers was encouraged and posed as the central way of winning strikes. The CNT being an

industrial union organised all workers irrespective of skill. In other words, to take the example of a hospital, workers were encouraged to form one health union, in which all hospital staff could be involved in, rather than separating off into a nurses union, a general workers union, and a doctors union. This industrial form of organisation was to play a vital part in the subsequent revolution.

Two other aspects of the CNT were also important and were to account for the strength of the revolution. Firstly, the CNT had always advocated 'direct action by workers themselves' as a means of solving disputes. This policy encouraged self-reliance and self-confidence within the union and membership - there was a prevailing culture of 'if we want something sorted out, we have to do it ourselves'.

Secondly, the CNT while a national organisation was federal in structure. In other words, affiliation and participation was on the basis of local autonomy, giving the organisation a stable but highly decentralised form. When for example the union was banned between 1923 and 1930 under the Primo De Rivera dictatorship the CNT emerged at the end largely intact and as strong as ever. Again the federal structure encouraged self-reliance and initiative - qualities that are indispensable in the long run.

From the date of its formation in 1911 in Seville, the CNT experienced rapid growth in its membership. By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 it had almost two million members and its strongholds apart from Catalonia were in Andalusia and Aragon. It also had large followings in Galicia, Asturias, Levant and Madrid.

## **The Revolution**

The Civil War began in mid-July 1936 when army contingents under orders from Franco attempted to take control in all the main cities and towns in Spain. Despite having the element of surprise on their side the only significant cities that fell into army hands during the 'July days' were those of Seville, Pamplona, Saragossa and Granada. The army faced massive popular resistance in all areas outside the Catholic heartland of Extremadura, Castile and parts of the Basque country. Most importantly the industrially significant Northeast as well as Madrid and the entire land area between Barcelona and Malaga, including large parts of Andalusia, went over to the workers.

I say 'went over to the workers' because in fact that is what happened. In the weeks preceding the military revolt, there was considerable evidence that the Army was preparing to intervene in Spanish politics. In scenes almost identical to those that were to happen in Chile years later, popular organisations implored the Government to arm the workers in defence of the constitution. But the Popular Front Government was as much afraid of the workers organisations as it was of Franco. It refused to act, and when army did revolt the Government and its various echelons melted away leaving the unarmed workers to face Franco on their own.

## **The Revolution In the Cities**

In any areas where the army was defeated the workers were in effective control once the fighting had died down. In Catalonia, to take one example, this resulted in a massive and immediate sweep of collectivisation with some 3,000 enterprises being taken over. This included

all public transportation services, shipping, electric and power companies, gas and water works, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines, cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries.

What is meant by the term 'taken over'? Essentially, it meant that the owners no longer controlled or managed the enterprise; and that the owner's share holding was declared null and void. Instead, in each work place, a democratic form of management was put in the place of the previous authoritarian one. Workers met regularly in general assemblies to discuss broad matter of concern to the company, levels of production, wage and conditions. At these assemblies workers also elected delegate committee of workers and technicians to look after day-to-day issues in their enterprise. Usually special committees were set up to look after particular areas of importance, such as raw materials acquisition, machinery maintenance or distribution of products. To summarise, the most important decision making body in the company was no longer the boardroom but the general assembly of workers.

Level and Dolgoff document the operation of the industrial collectives in a number of area, such as in the Health industry, in metal and munitions industry, and in some of the public utility industries such as gas, water and electricity. For the purposes of tonight's discussion I'll briefly go through the example of the Barcelona Trams:

At the outbreak of the revolution Barcelona had a population of 1.5 million. The tramways were the mainstay of the transportation system serving Barcelona and the suburbs with 69 routes. Out of the 7,000 workers on the tramways at the time of the Revolution, some 6,500 were members of the CNT.

Because of the street battles the system had been severely damaged and all transport had been brought to a halt. A special commission with delegates from all the key areas of the system (drivers, electric cable operators, rolling stocks, general operatives' etc) was quickly elected. This was charged with estimating the damages and specifying repairs, and getting these done. Five days after fighting had ended the tramway system was fully up and running again with 700 trams on the roll. This was regarded as a great achievement at the time and was put down to the fact that the new form of organisation instituted by the revolution gave actual practical power to those that knew and operated the system. In the past under private ownership, changes or decisions on stock improvements had to be approved by the owner's management. Invariable the owners were careful not to let work and improvements eat into profits, with the result that a lot of good ideas were either ignored or abandoned. With the profit motive gone and workers in control, problems and needs in the system were more easily identified; as important the resources needed to address problems were also at hand.

The first objective had been to get the Tramway back up and running. But soon other longer-term improvements were made. The system carried over 183 million passengers in 1936 and nearly 233 million in 1937. Fares came down over the period of operation, as did the number of accidents and disruptions to the service. Again much of this has less to do with the atmosphere of revolution and a lot more to do with the rational nature of how workplaces were now organised. Not only were workers more involved and more empowered by the fact that had a direct say in the running of their place of work, but also the were working alongside the very technicians and engineers whose job it was to design and introduce improvements. The new form of democratic organisation allowed for a lot of cross-fertilisation of jobs and idea, whereas in the past any liaison of this sort had been frowned upon (if not outrightly opposed by the employer!)

Another important benefit of course was that money that was previously lost to the system as profits was now ploughed back in giving both workers and customers a better service.

## **Other Achievements:**

Dolgoff in his book *Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution* lists a wide number of other achievements. To list just a couple:

An extensive reorganisation was carried out in a good number of industries in the immediate aftermath of July 1936. Small uneconomic plants were closed down and production was concentrated in those plants with the best equipment. In Catalonia 70 steel foundries were closed down. The number of tanning plants was reduced from 71 to 40 and the entire wood and industry was reorganised by the CNT Woodworkers Union.

Another area where important changes occurred was in the area of distribution. Many parasitic 'middlemen' were cut out of distribution, mainly in the wholesale side of business - in fish, eggs and in the fruit and vegetable markets. The milk trade in Barcelona was collectivised and subsequently reorganised with over 70 unhygienic pasteurising plants closed down.

## **Land and Freedom**

Most of the observers who passed through the collectivised rural areas of Spain between 1936/37 point out that the revolution on the land was more extensive and more radical than that in the urban areas. It is probably worth noting that much of what happened on the land happened against a backdrop of intense class conflict in the period prior to the revolution. Not only were Spain landowners rich and powerful but they were also notoriously conservative and authoritarian. They had opposed reform in every way, and had over the decades had financed and paid for violent suppression of both the CNT and the UGT.

To give some details then: collectivisation of the land was extensive covering almost two thirds of all the land in the Republican zone. In all, between five and seven million peasants were involved, the major areas being Aragon where there were 450 collectives, the Levant (the area around Valencia) with 900 collectives and Castile (the area surrounding Madrid) with 300 collectives. Not only was the land collectivised but also in the villages workshops were set up where the local trades-people could produce tools, furniture, etc. Bakers, butchers, barbers and so on also decided to collectivise.

## **The Achievements of the Rural Collectives**

In an extensive study of the rural collective system, Gaston Leval points to the following main characteristics:

1. Collectives usually began with the expropriation of the large landowners of the region. This land and any other land in the area that was available was then put together into one

large parcel and worked as a single economic unit. If labourers or peasant wished to remain outside of the collective this wish was respected. Two things are worth noting here:

Firstly, there was a strong belief that collectivisation should be voluntary. This is not to say that those who remained outside were given access to the benefits of the collective – it is probably true to say that they weren't – but in general there was respect for the individual and for individual choices; it was felt that it was wrong to force people against their will into a system of collectives, apart at all from the fact that the use of force would've been counterproductive

Secondly the collectivisation instituted by the landless labourers ran counter to the land reforms that had been begun by the Popular Front (prior to the Revolution). By this I mean, whereas Popular Front land reforms aimed at giving each person or family a small plot of land to work on their own, the revolutionary collectivisation sought not to operate many small plots, but to gather all land into one large unit where it could be worked by joint effort. Not only was this the preferred option, but it also made the more economic sense.

2. The collectives were essential libertarian communist communities. According to Leval they practised the social ethos 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.' In a good number of collectives money was abolished, individuals being guaranteed a certain proportion of produce from the common supply; in other cases money was retained or a sort of mix and match was used where generally available goods were free and a type of voucher system operated for less available goods. Points worth noting here:

The general ethos of libertarian communism meant that the collective worked to promote egalitarian and non-hierarchical relations in the collective. In particular women were guaranteed their own income, equal to that of men. Because of the particular position of women, a libertarian organisation called *Mujeres Libres* operated in the republican zone. While contraception and abortion rights had been legalised by the revolution there was still considerable work to be done, to defend and extend the role of women, and to change attitudes among men.

It is also worth mentioning that the term collective, as is used extensively to describe what happened in Spain during the war is not used with the intention of suggesting that all life had become public property. The Spanish collectives, while varying in style and content, retained a strong sense of individual and family autonomy within the collective. Being part of a collective didn't mean that one's private life and private possessions had to come into the public domain. Collectivity was to a large extent an economic arrangement.

3. The work in a particular collective was generally divided out between teams of workers. These teams elected delegates who together with the collective's delegates for agriculture planned and organised the work on the land.

4. Leval and Souchy Bauer both point out that the collective's system of administration was via general assembly. Usually the collective as a whole met weekly, biweekly or monthly - all members could take part and vote. This meeting looked after all general issues to do with the collective, both economic and social. It also elected delegate committees to look after specific area of life - organisation of agricultural work, public service maintenance - electricity and gas; education for the collectives.
5. Collectives were generally viewed and saw themselves as autonomous and independent units. However a high degree of solidarity with other collectives was the order of the day. Mutual aid was an important element and it was recognised early on that wealthier collectives should assist areas less favoured by nature.
6. Immediately after establishment and running, the collectives sought a wider network of co-ordination: This co-ordination began at district level, then extended to region and lastly went to national level. Undoubtedly the most advanced example of this was the Council of Aragon, linking almost all of the 400 or so collectives in that region. The Council of Aragon instituted an arrangement of common trade between all the communes of the region and also a system of mutual aid. The Council of Aragon abolished all money within its area, operating on the basis of a Producer's Card and a Consumer's Card. Surpluses were generally used to improve the poorer members of the region.
7. Apart at all from administrative and economic issues the collectives instituted major social advances. Schools and libraries were favourites and there was a particular penchant for setting up both of these in former churches. Children's rights were recognised and education was provided as a priority even in the smallest collectives. The ideas of the anarchist educationalist, Francisco Ferrer were very influential in the educational movement in Spain. His writing on child centred education and on education aim to raising questioning and independent minds were well know and widely used. Almost all the collectives built at least one school in the 36/37 time span.
8. Collectives, while financially debilitated by the war effort, were none the less far seeing in their plans. Mechanisation and new agricultural methods were sought out and brought into use. As with their urban counterparts, the rural collectives suffered from one major limitations in terms of being able to plan and invest for the future - this was the fact that they were starved of funds and resources from the very outset, (because they were seen as a threat by the Republican Government).

## Conclusions

In concluding I'd to make a small few points that I feel are as pertinent to the Ireland of today as they surely were in Spain in 1936.

First and foremost, the workers' movement in Spain gives us a real idea of how an alternative society could operate. Despite the war conditions and the climate of fear and internal division that faced this movement, it made enormous strides. From an economic and social point of view the collectives were a success, their eventual fate

sealed not by any productive or economic limitations but rather by the wider war and defeat suffered at Franco's hands.

Secondly, the revolution was principally a democratic movement in which people were empowered and liberated by their own efforts. Those who participated in the collectives regained control over a significant part of their lives, and for once also they had a clear input into what was happening to the wealth they produced.

Thirdly the extent of the democracy in Spain during the revolution was far more thorough going than anything ever achieved anywhere else in the world at any time in know history. This might seem like a grand claim but I challenge anyone to disprove it.

Perhaps most important of all, the Spanish workers intervened democratically into economic life. This, of course, is something that is abhorrent to all elitist thinking, but it is, nevertheless, crucial if we are ever to regain control over our economic well being. Not only did the Spanish workers show that it could be done, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that it might be a far superior way to organise and run things.

Next the culture of the Spanish revolution was libertarian through and through. Not only was the purpose of the revolution seen to be to free the individual, but the individual as an entity was respected and valued. Crucially, also, the culture of the revolution was not one where debate and division was seen as problematic or a threat. Ideas, discussion and difference were seen as healthy and necessary to the revolution.

Lastly the revolution and the strength of the democracy movement was a credit to the CNT and its form of internal organisation. The CNT had always stressed that the type of way we organise in the here and now will condition what we achieve in a revolution. The years of democratic practice that were at the core of the CNT's practice paid off handsomely when the revolution swept aside the old order.

I hope in this short trawl through some of the material on the Spanish revolution that I've been able to go beyond some of the better-known accounts, and indicate to you what revolutions can and should be about. Sometimes, in looking at the drama of the event and the political issues that were there in abundance, we forget that people lived their lives in these collectives. They fought for radical improvements and for liberty (against great odds, it should be said). In the case of the Spanish Revolution they achieved an enormous amount. But perhaps most of all, as I see it anyway, they've left us with something that is tremendously important in this day and age - a model of what an alternative society might look like, as well as concrete evidence that such a model can work.

Thank you.

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**Text of a talk delivered to Socialist Society in February, 99, to mark the annisversy of the Spanish Revolution.. As such it represents the authors opinion alone and may be deliberately provocative in order to encourage discussion.**

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