

1936 – Rise and Fall of the Spanish Revolution

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The Spanish Revolution occurred in the context of a civil war, but even so for a short period of time social relations changed – bosses were fired; workers practiced direct democracy in the fields and factories; greater gender equality was won; and socialism from below looked like a possibility.

But the Revolution never ran its full course. The situation in Spain during the Revolution and linked Civil War – was complicated. During the height of the Revolution workers in many parts of Spain, like Barcelona, controlled the factories in two thirds of the country – although the state continued to exist and one third of Spain was controlled by fascists. The main reason the Revolution stalled is that the state – controlled by the Stalinists and Socialist Party – was not overthrown by the working class.

The achievements

Prior to July 1936 Spain was tense. Members of the country's largest trade union, the anarchist National Confederation of Labour (CNT), had been holding general strikes as part of their intention to carry out a revolution. For the CNT the revolution involved smashing capitalism and the state and replacing these with federated worker, peasant and community councils.

Fascists had also been preparing and on 19 July 1936 they launched a coup under the leadership of General Franco to stop the expected revolution.

The state – then headed up by the Socialist Party and later Stalinists – failed to prevent the coup. Members of the CNT, however, were prepared. In one of the CNT's strongholds, Barcelona, they expropriated 30 000 rifles from a military base and distributed them to workers. With the arrival of the coup in Barcelona, the CNT fought the fascist troops; defeating them.

With news that the coup had been defeated in Barcelona workers and peasants across Spain rose up and the fascists could only gain control of one third of the country. In the other areas workers began seizing factories and collectivising them. In Barcelona over 3000 factories were seized and workers began operating them on the basis of direct democracy and worker self-management.

In the countryside farm workers collectivised land with over 15 million acres being expropriated from rural capitalists. Over 2000 self-managed rural collectives were established, in which 7 million people participated. These proved that there was, and is, an alternative – based on the libertarian socialist (also known as anarchist) principles of federated direct democracy – to centralised bureaucratised state planning.

During the Revolution, women achieved more freedom. Marriage was replaced by relationships based on free consent. For the first time abortion and contraception became available. Women entered the workplace on a massive scale and many were involved in the workers' militias that fought the fascists.

The failings

Before 1936, libertarian socialists (anarchists), mainly through the 1.8 million strong CNT, had been preparing for a revolution. Two months before the Revolution, in May 1936, the CNT held a congress in Zaragoza. There, plans were made to smash capitalism and replace it with self-

management, socialism and working class self-governance – instead of a state – using federated workers’ and community councils.

When the Revolution broke out the plan of the CNT Zaragoza Congress was unbelievably not put into practice – and this eventually saw the Revolution defeated.

Indeed, following July 19, the state in some provinces collapsed. The CNT held power on the streets of cities like Barcelona, but the fragments of the state remained in other parts of Spain. The state’s representatives contacted the CNT and proposed that a joint Anti-fascist Militia Committee (AMC) – made up of representatives of the Liberal, Stalinist and Socialist parties along with delegates from the CNT – be established to take charge of the military effort to defeat the remaining fascist forces. Importantly, as part of this proposal, the existing state would be left untouched and would supposedly lead the fight against the fascists.

Within the CNT a debate took place regarding the proposal. A section of the CNT, along with the Anarchist Youth Movement, argued the CNT should reject the proposal and that the Revolution must be carried out according to the plans of the Zaragoza Congress. Countering this was a group that argued a Popular Front with Socialists, Liberals and Stalinists was needed to defeat fascism before even thinking about completing the Revolution. Consequently they argued the CNT should enter the AMC, saying that if the CNT smashed the state the war effort against the fascists would collapse. Ultimately the group arguing for the Popular Front won the majority of votes and the CNT joined the AMC. A large minority, however, remained opposed to this.

In fact, the decision to join the AMC had very bad consequences for the CNT and the Revolution. With the state left intact the Communists and Socialists used it as a base to build their power (they were not interested in socialism but wanted to use the state to increase their own power and gain control over the economy through nationalisation). The Stalinists and Socialist Party, when powerful enough, used the state and its power against the CNT and the Revolution. In choosing to align with the state, the CNT ceased to be anarchist or libertarian socialist. Eventually two members of the CNT even became Ministers in the state. The consequences were that these Ministers began identifying with the state’s positions. The libertarian socialist/anarchist analysis that entering into state power changed the nature of parties/unions – and not the other way round – proved correct.

By 1937, the Socialists and Stalinists had used their control of the state to increase their power. These two parties feared stateless socialism far more than they did the fascists. By May 1937, the Socialists and Stalinists felt comfortable enough to openly attack the anarchists and wider working class. The confrontation came in Barcelona when the military was sent against CNT/anarchist workers. In the fighting that followed the CNT and workers beat the Stalinists and Socialists. Sickeningly, the two CNT Ministers appealed to the CNT militants and workers to lay down their weapons. Again a majority, with reluctance, listened. In the aftermath the Communists arrested and tortured thousands of anarchist workers and sympathetic leftists. With this the power of the CNT was broken. The self-managed factories and fields were confiscated from workers by the state and run by bureaucrats or the former owners.

Following the events of May 1937, the Stalinist-led state lost battle after battle against the fascists. In early 1939, the state surrendered and Franco was installed as fascist dictator. By then, the revolution was long dead – killed by the Stalinists, Socialist Party and the tactical blunders of the CNT in July 1936.

Conclusion

The Spanish Revolution, although incomplete, showed socialism could be built from below. But it also proved that in a revolution the working class can't just take over production; it also needs to get rid of the state and replace it with a new system based on federated workers' and community councils. If this does not happen, Spain shows politicians in the state will smother the revolution in their own interests.

But the Revolution never ran its full course. The situation in Spain during the Revolution and linked Civil War – was complicated. During the height of the Revolution workers in many parts of Spain, like Barcelona, controlled the factories in two thirds of the country – although the state continued to exist and one third of Spain was controlled by fascists. The main reason the Revolution stalled is that the state – controlled by the Stalinists and Socialist Party – was not overthrown by the working class.

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