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Review: The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939

Alan MacSimoin

1998

The ‘Friends of Durruti’ appear in just about every book on the Spanish Civil War, especially in relation to the 1937 May Days in Barcelona. They get mentioned but we are told very little about their politics or activities. Some organisations, like the Workers Solidarity Movement, see their political stance as important to the tradition of revolutionary anarchism. Other anarchists, most notably sections of the syndicalist movement, condemn them for ‘flirting with Bolshevism/Leninism/Trotskyism’ or for ‘advocating an anarchist dictatorship’. So who were they, where did they come from, what did they say, and what did they do?

This book is probably the most detailed work about them in the English language. Unfortunately, it takes as its starting point that readers will be extremely knowledgeable about both anarchist ideas and the role of the anarchist movement in Spain. Without such knowledge the reader will find it impossible to understand what the author is writing about. Guillamón’s book

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reads as if it is a specialised academic paper, or a chapter which has been extracted from a much bigger work about Spain.

To make matters worse, the author seems unable — despite a familiarity with the historical details — to understand the ideas of anarchism. He criticises the Friends on each occasion when they don't issue “instructions” or “seize power”. His own bias is made clear when he proclaims “anarchism's inadequacy as a revolutionary theory of the proletariat” (p.93).

His own views appear to be of the Marxist ‘council communism’ type which enjoyed a brief popularity, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, in the 1920s. Like all ‘councilists’ Guillamon sees unions as “capitalist State machinery” (page 83). Because of this he sees the entry of CNT members into the government as inevitable. Therefore his biggest criticism of the Friends is that they did not split from the CNT, renounce anarchism and transform themselves into a revolutionary party.

Spain in the 1930s had the biggest anarchist movement in Europe, with almost two million people in its National Confederation of Workers (CNT), it truly was a mass organisation with very deep roots in the working class. The Communist Party, prior to 1936, was a small outfit, the anti-Stalinist POUM probably had no more than a few thousand members and the Trotskyists could be counted on the fingers of a couple of hands.

Because of this the syndicalist notion that the political battle of ideas was not of the utmost importance was widespread. While there were activists and tendencies with varying ideas and strategies within the movement, there was no large and clear-cut opposition when a section of the CNT ‘leadership’ proposed ‘postponing’ the revolution and collaborating with the government to win the war against Franco. The ‘Friends of Durruti’ group had no existence prior to the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936.

On July 19th 1936 workers across most of Spain took to the streets when the military rose up against the centre left Popu-

lar Front government. Arms were seized and the military rising defeated in over half of the country. For many this was the chance to get rid of the capitalist system. Workplaces were seized and put under the control of their workers. In rural areas tens of thousands of peasants collectivised their land. Trade union militias were formed to attack the military rebels. Power was shifted from the government and the rich to local delegate committees.

Although the government still existed it had no real power. The military, economic and political struggle was proceeding independently of the government, and, indeed, in spite of it. The councils and collectives which had emerged were the structures upon which the revolution could have been built and consolidated. They needed to be brought together on a regional and national level so that the power of the workers and peasants could have swept the government aside. This would have meant refusing to share power with the remnants of the ruling class, it would have been a big step in making the social revolution complete.

The CNT's leading committees refused to do this. After July 19th Prime Minister Companys of Catalonia called them to his office and told them that the CNT had the mass support, they controlled the region, and he would be their faithful servant if they took over. They refused. Instead the CNT joined the Catalan government, and later the national government in Madrid.

This collaboration was in direct opposition to all anarchism holds dear about ending the division of people into rulers and ruled. Their reasoning was that the Western democracies would not supply arms to beat Franco's rebels if there was a social revolution. (No arms ever came anyway!). They had decided that winning the war and making the revolution were two different things, and that winning the war came first. This meant collaborating with all the anti-Franco forces.

Over the next year the capitalist state, aided by Stalin's loyal servants in the Communist Party, set about rebuilding itself.

All states demand a monopoly of armed force and October 10th 1936 saw a “militarisation” decree making provision for putting the workers’ militias under government control.

Five days later Jaime Balius wrote in *Solidaridad Obrera*, a CNT daily paper, that the working class should push on and he warned against applying a brake to the revolution. He was a journalist with a record as a hard-line anarchist, which earned him several spells of imprisonment by the Popular Front governments during the 1936–38 period. Balius was later to become secretary of the Friends.

In November, the legendary anarchist militant Buenaventura Durruti told the magazine *Anti-Fascist Spain*,

“This decision by the government has had a deplorable effect. It is absolutely devoid of any sense of reality. There is an irreconcilable contrast between that mentality and that of the militias. We know that one of these attitudes has to vanish in the face of the other one”.

On November 20th Durruti was killed on the Madrid front. Over 500,000 attended his funeral in Barcelona. In December the German volunteers in the Durruti Column’s International Group expressed their opposition to militarisation and listed a number of items they wanted incorporated in any new military code: they wanted the delegate system retained along with egalitarian features; they wanted soldiers’ councils to represent the army as a whole.

The beginning of 1937 saw the government issue an order that no pay and no equipment would be issued to non-militarised combat units. The anarchists and other revolutionaries were viewed by the government as a bigger threat than Franco’s military rebels. The state authorities were even prepared to weaken the front if that was the cost of preserving capitalism.

Friends were an expression of opposition to this thinking. In their paper, the *Friend of the People*, and in numerous local publications of the CNT, the Libertarian Youth – and, indeed, the UGT and POUM you found the same sentiments.

However this was only given a clear expression when it was too late. The Friends did not have enough time to win over the majority to their position. What they have left in their wake are the lessons they had drawn from their experiences in a living revolution. By understanding what went wrong in the past we can prepare ourselves for the future. The lessons they left us were a re-affirmation of the need for political anarchism, for anarchist political organisations which can become a “leadership of ideas” (and certainly not a leadership of personalities or would-be-dictators like the Russian Bolsheviks). The state and political power does not “die” or “wither away”; it has to be smashed.

place. They fought heroically in the militias and the members of the CNT surpassed all others with their bravery.”

The problem for the CNT was that after the workplaces and lands had been seized the state should have died. It didn't. The CNT had great ideas about what the anarchist future would look like, it knew that the working class would have to make a revolution, but it could not make a connection between the existing revolutionary situation and the anarchist objective. The majority ended up behaving like a minority.

The Friends put it this way:

“We (CNT) did not have a concrete programme. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty but when all is said and done we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give effect to the popular effusion.” The anarchists should have “leapt into the drivers' seat in the country, delivering a severe coup de grace to all that is outmoded and archaic”.

The CNT did not see things this way. Garcia Oliver, one of the CNT representatives in the government, said “The CNT and FAI decided on collaboration and democracy, renouncing revolutionary totalitarianism which would lead to the strangulation of the revolution by the anarchist ...dictatorship”. But nobody was suggesting an anarchist dictatorship or the CNT becoming a new government.

The question was whether or not new bodies would be created and co-ordinated through which the working class could assert their power. Syndicalism did not see this, because it holds that the unions are structures upon which the new society is to be built.

When the state did not simply pack its bags and vanish, they felt they had to participate in order to have some control. The

March 5th, Solidaridad Obrera announced the formation of a new grouping: “The Friends of Durruti” is not just another club. We aim to see the Spanish Revolution pervaded by the revolutionary acumen of our Durruti. The FoD remain faithful to the last words uttered by our comrade in the heart of Barcelona in denunciation of the work of the counter revolution. To enrol in our association it is vital that one belong to the CNT and show evidence of a record of struggle, a love of ideas and the revolution.” Applications for membership could be made at the office of the CNT journalists union.

April 1st saw, Ruta, the paper of the Libertarian Youth in Catalonia, print an article by the Friends which says

“We point the finger at no one. We feel a burning love for our precepts and our organisations. But as militants of them, we have an indisputable right to speak out. There is still time for us to rescue the revolution and revitalise our precepts but we must press on with the revolution”.

On May 2nd the Friends held a public meeting in the Goya Theatre in Barcelona at which they warned that an attack upon the workers was imminent. The following day the Stalinists seized the Telephone Exchange. This signalled the start of the May Events which saw the CNT, Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), Iberian Libertarian Youth Federation (FIJL) and the POUM fighting against the Stalinists, republicans and Catalan nationalists, and the official security forces.

The revolutionary forces soon controlled most of the city. The next day, just as the CNT-FAI Defence Committee had resolved to make a final assault on the government building, the police HQ and the Hotel Colon, there came the radio appeals by CNT leaders Garcia Oliver and Marano Vazquez for a ceasefire. The state forces availed of this chance to renew their attacks. The conflict ignited again.

The FoD proclaimed

“we anarchists have arrived at the limit of our concessions... not another step backwards. It is the hour of action. Save the revolution. If we continue to give up our position there is no doubt that in a short time we shall be overwhelmed. It is for this fundamental reason that it is necessary to develop a new orientation for our movement”.

“To beat Franco we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally and there must be installed workers’ power depending on rank & file committees. A-political anarchism has failed.”

They called for the formation of a revolutionary Junta, the disarming of the police, socialisation of the economy, and the dissolution of parties which had turned against the working class. In effect they called for working class power.

The confusion caused by CNT ministers appealing for the barricades to be taken down demoralised the fighters. CNT and POUM militia columns preparing to march on Barcelona were turned back after pleas from their leaders, but thousands of pro-government troops did arrive. The workers were defeated and the repression that followed was severe.

The regional committee of the CNT issued a statement denouncing the Friends as “agents provocateurs” and saying they were expelled from the CNT. The Friends replied that only the local unions had that power, and, interestingly, not a single CNT union was prepared to expel a single member for being in the FoD. But the struggle had been lost, their offices were taken over by the police. The revolution was finished and it was only a matter of time before Franco’s forces won the war.

It sounds disturbing to hear anarchists talking about the need for a “junta”. To most of us in the English speaking world

it conjures up an image of Generals in dark glasses running a dictatorship. However, in Spanish, it means no more than a committee or council. CNT unions each had a junta, as did the Mexican Liberal Party (an anarchist organisation – which shows that labels can be deceptive!).

In their pamphlet ‘Towards A Fresh Revolution’ the Friends spelled out what they meant

“The body will be organised as follows: members of the revolutionary Junta will be elected by democratic vote in the union organisations. Account is to be taken of the number of comrades away at the front. These comrades must have a right to representation. Posts are to come up regularly for re-election so as to prevent anyone growing attached to them. And the trade union assemblies will exercise control over the junta’s activities”.

The task of this junta was to be that of a National Defence Council: to oversee the war, control public order, and deal with international relations. Alongside it the unions were to take control of the economy and the free locality was to be the basic decision-making level of territorial organisation.

The Friends – despite the claims of their detractors – represented no break with anarchism. Their break was with the traditional a-politicism of the CNT. They knew that state power would not disappear just because that was the wish of the majority; it would have to be smashed and replaced with the power of workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ councils.

They saw the defects of syndicalism. Nothing and nobody can take away from the militancy of the CNT. As Eddie Conlon remarked in *Anarchism in Action*:

“The rank and file literally tore down capitalism and put workers’ and peasants’ collectives in its