Open letter to the CNT

Alexander Schapiro

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Note from Robert Graham

In June 1937, following the May Events in Spain, when anarchists battled Communist and Republican forces in the streets of Barcelona, and many prominent anarchists were arrested, murdered (Camillo Berneri) or simply disappeared, the CNT adopted a "minimal program" to submit to the Republican government and the forces now in control of it, including the Stalinist Communist Party which was itself embarking on a concerted campaign to suppress the anarchist movement and other opposition groups, such as the dissident Marxist group, the POUM (one of whose leaders, Andres Nin, was notoriously "disappeared" and accused by the Communists of being a Francoist fifth columnist). The "minimal program" was not accepted by the government, and the anarchists continued to be marginalized and persecuted by government and Communist-backed forces. Alexander Schapiro wrote the following Open Letter to the CNT criticizing them for their continuing and disastrous policy of collaboration and accommodation with these counter-revolutionary forces. Translated by Joseph Wagner and published in the One Big Union monthly, August 1937.

Open letter to the CNT

We read with more surprise than interest the minimal program of the CNT "for the realization of a real war policy." The reading of the program raised an entire series of questions and problems, some of which should be called to your attention.

Certainly none of us was simple enough to believe that a war can be carried on with resolutions and by anti-militarist theories. Many of us believed, long before July 19 (1936) that the anti-militarist propaganda, so dear to our Dutch comrades of the International Anti-militarist Bureau and which found, in the past, a sympathetic enough echo in the columns of your press in Spain, was in contradiction with the organization of the revolution.

Many of us knew that the putsches, that were so dear to our Spanish comrades, such as those of December 8 and January 8, 1934, were far from helping this organization of the revolution, it helped rather to disorganize it.

July 19 opened your eyes. It made you realize the mistake you had committed in the past, when, in a revolutionary period, you neglected Seriously organizing the necessary frame-work for the struggle that you knew would be inevitable on the day of the settlement of accounts. Yet, today you are shutting your eyes on another important fact. You seem to think that a civil war brought about by the circumstance of a fascist putsch does not necessarily obligate you to examine the possibilities of modifying and altering the character of that civil war.

A "minimal" program is not something to startle us ; but a particular minimal program (such as yours) cannot have any value unless it creates the opportunity for the preparation of a maximal program.

But, your "real war policy," after all, is nothing but a program for entering the Council of Ministry (government) ; with it you act merely as a political party desirous of participation in an existing government ; setting forth your conditions of participation, and these conditions are so bureaucratic in character that they are far from weakening in the least the bourgeois capitalist regime, on the contrary they are tending to strengthen capitalism and stabilize it.

The surprising part of your program is that you do not consider it as a means for the attainment of some well defined goal, but consider your "real war policy" program as an aim in itself. That is the main danger in your program. It presupposes a permanent participation in the government—not merely circumstantial—which is to extend over a number of years, even if the war itself, with its brutal, daily manifestations would cease in the meanwhile. A monopoly of the Foreign Commerce (have the communists whispered this to you ?), customs policy, new legislations, a new penal code—all of this takes a long time. In order to realize these tasks, your program proposes a very close collaboration on all fields with the bourgeoisie (republican block) and with the communists (marxist block), while almost at the same time you state in your appeal of June 14 that you are sure of triumphing not only against Franco, but also against a stupidly backward bourgeoisie ("the republican block") and against the tricky and dishonest politicians ("marxist block").

You see, therefore, that even your minimal program is beset with flagrant contradictions; its realization is dependent on the aid of the very sectors against which that program is aimed. Even the freedom with which you state these two mutually excluding programs : collaboration with the bourgeoisie and "marxism" on the one hand and fight to finish against this same bourgeoisie and "marxism" on the other, situates your minimal program as the aim, and your declaration of June 14 becomes a mere verbiage. We would have, naturally, liked to see things the other way.

The problem of Spain's economic reconstruction does not form a part of your program. And yet, you cannot help but know that a civil war, like the one you are going through, cannot bring the people to its aid unless the victories on the fronts will assure at the same time their own victories in the rear.

It is true—and many of us outside of Spain have known it long before July 19—the Social Revolution cannot be attained in 24 hours, and that a libertarian regime cannot be erected by the turn of the hand. Nevertheless, neither the CNT nor the F.A.I. cared anything about pre-revolutionary organization and about preparing in advance the framework for the social and economic reconstruction. We claim that there is a bridge leading from the downfall of the old regime to the erection of the new regime erected on the ashes and the ruins of the old regime. This bridge is all the more full of dangerous traps and pitfalls as the new regime differs from the old. And it was precisely this period of transition that you have misunderstood in the past and that you continue to misunderstand today. For if you had recognized that the social and economic reconstruction on a libertarian basis is the indispensable condition to victory over fascism, you would have elaborated (having in view the aim to be attained) a minimal revolutionary program that would have given the city and country proletariat of Spain the necessary will and enthusiasm to continue the war to its logical conclusion.

But such a program you failed to proclaim. The few timid allusions contained in your "war program" are far from having a revolutionary character : the elaboration of a plan for the economic reconstruction that would be accepted by the three blocks could only be a naive illusion, if it would not be so dangerous ; the municipalization of land is an anti-revolutionary project since it legalizes something that a coming revolution will have to abolish, since the municipalities are, after all, but cogs in the wheel of the State as long as the State will exist.

Naturally, the elaboration of an economic program for the transition period presupposes a final aim. Does the CNT consider that libertarian communism is an unattainable "Utopia" that should be relegated to the museum ?

If you still think (as you did before July 19) that libertarian communism forms part of the program of the CNT it is your duty—it was really your duty since July 1936—to elaborate your economic program of transition, without regard to the bourgeois and marxist blocks, who can but sabotage any program of libertarian tendency and inspiration.

To be sure, such a program will place you in conflict with these blocks, but on the other hand, it will unite with you the large majority of the workers, who want but one thing, the victory of the Revolution. It is necessary, therefore to choose between these two eventualities.

Such a program will, naturally, nullify your "war program" which is nothing but the expression of a "true" desire for a permanent cabinet collaboration. But this proposition, this "war program" of yours is diametrically contrary to the traditionally revolutionary attitude of the CNT, which this organization has not denied yet. It is therefore necessary to choose.

The CNT should not allow—as it has unfortunately done since July 19—the acceptance of the tactics of the "line of least resistance," which cannot but lead to a slow but sure liquidation of the libertarian revolution.

The ministerial collaboration policy has certainly pushed back to the rear the program of revolutionary economy. You are on the wrong track and you can see that yourselves.

Do you not think that you should stop following this road, that leads you to certain downfall ?

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