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Two weeks that shook Spain

60th anniversary of the Spanish Revolution

Andrew Flood

1996

July 18th/19th marked the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War or, as anarchists are more inclined to call it, the Spanish Revolution. Previous articles in this paper have discussed the massive scale of the revolution in Spain, how literally millions of workers took control of their own lives and organised in industrial and agricultural collectives. Andrew Flood looks at the speed at which the revolution spread in the first weeks.

AS SOON AS an elected left- republican government took power in February 1936 it was obvious that Spain was heading towards a military coup. The anarchist press repeatedly warned of its approach, the government responded by accusing the anarchists of trying to undermine the army. On May 1st the anarchist CNT union held a national congress in Zaragoza, partially to draw out the lessons of an uprising two years earlier and partially to prepare for the coming revolution by reuniting the anarchist movement and proposing an alliance to the socialist UGT union.

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On July 11th the Prime Minister was warned of the coming coup to which he replied “By which you mean you are sure the military will rise? Very well then, but for my part I am going to have a lie down”. Likewise when, six days later, the army actually rose in Morocco the government claimed to be in control of the situation. Their inactivity could be explained by two things: on the part of the left there was a naive trust in the loyalty of the army, a belief that it was loyal to the abstract notion of the Spanish state rather than to the wishes of the ruling class.

This is demonstrated by the initial reactions of the Socialist and Communist parties who issued a joint statement accepting the government’s view that it could control the army, and saying if their help was needed then their forces would follow the government’s command. So by the time of the rising in Spain proper on the 19th neither the left parties nor the state had made any preparations besides asking the army for loyalty.

There was also a second explanation. That is that the state was fully aware that large sections of the army were disloyal, but was unwilling to take the step of releasing arms to the unions in order to head off the coup. This should come as no surprise to anarchists. In Germany and Italy the state had already chosen to accept fascism rather than risk popular revolution.

Fortunately in Spain the anarchists were strong in numbers and already had a limited quantity of arms and previous experience of rebellion. So on the night of the 18th/19th when the army was taking up position and the left was urging people to stay at home and rely on the government; the CNT was declaring a general strike, sending militants out to mount raids for arms (from ships in Barcelona harbour) and asking activists to gather at its centres with whatever weapons they had to hand.

This meant that as the rebelling troops took up position on the morning of the 19th instead of the unarmed and passive population they had expected to face they found the working class

districts barricaded off and tens of thousands of workers gathered to resist them. Furious street fighting waged in Barcelona where the anarchists were aided by the Assault Guards and later the Civil Guards. Army strong points were gradually overwhelmed by waves of poorly armed but heroic workers, with the balance shifting decisively in favour of the workers when an artillery column was captured and its guns brought to bear on the army strong points. The anarchists suffered many casualties, including leading militants like Francisco Ascaso, but at the end of 36 hours the workers controlled Barcelona.

Elsewhere in Spain a common pattern was seen over the first few days; in areas of strong anarchist influence where the workers managed to obtain quantities of arms the army was defeated. In areas where the influence of the anarchists was weak and the workers trusted in the left/republican government the army took over and began to round up and execute anarchists, 'reds' and trade union activists. In areas where the anarchists were unable to seize arms, like Zaragoza, despite their greater numbers they were defeated as they waited in vain for the local government to release arms to them. As the army was defeated in the anarchist strongholds workers seized vehicles and formed columns which headed off to wherever the front-line against fascism was, their arrival often tipping the balance and ensuring the defeat of the army in those areas. It is estimated that, in the first two weeks alone, 150,000 workers joined the anarchist militias from Barcelona.

As might be imagined, the organisation of the fighting was initially chaotic, units were composed of whoever happened to be in the union centres at the time of the rising and, later, whoever managed to get a place on one of the vehicles heading for the front. Where breaks in the fighting allowed it these columns began to organise themselves, most commonly in units of about 100 and elected officers to co-ordinate battle strategy.

Alongside the fighting a social revolution was breaking out. Defeating the fascist uprising put the workers in control of the streets and this control rapidly expanded to include their workplaces. This revolution flowed from below and was carried through to varying extents in different regions and in different industries. The first organisations to spring up were the Supply Committees, set up in each of the working class districts. These opened up communal restaurants, serving food expropriated from local shops. Later they obtained supplies and made exchanges by sending teams to the market gardens and local villages. Where there were shortages, a rationing system was introduced and some foods reserved for those with special needs.

On July 28th the Local Federation of Barcelona CNT Unions ended the general strike and asked workers to return to work. No direction was issued as to what form production should now take but as workers returned, often to find the bosses had fled, they spontaneously collectivised their industries. Many industries had already seen a return to work and had been collectivised including railways (21st), busses (25th), water and electricity supply (26th) and metal production (26th). Anarchist historian Jose Peirats describes how industry then functioned “Each confiscated enterprise was administered collectively by workers and the most qualified technicians, subject to the approval of workers in mass meetings”.

The extent of collectivisation was uneven. Foreign multinationals, for instance, were frequently not collectivised but instead just put under workers’ control (where all the bosses’ decisions had to be approved by the workers but the workers did not make the decisions). In other areas the political parties were strong enough to oppose collectivisation or limit its spread, as they wanted to limit the revolution to nationalisation (i.e. state ownership) or prevent it altogether.

In the countryside the revolution was more far reaching. The absolute poverty and harsh oppression most peasants suffered,

about completing the revolution could grow influential, they were crushed in May 1937 by an armed counter-revolution spearheaded by the Spanish Communist Party. Those who saw the film 'Land and Freedom' will be aware of some of the details of this.

The Spanish revolution did, however, leave us the finest example of anarchism in practice. There were the positive achievements of the collectivisations of industry & the land, and the formation of anarchist fighting units under the democratic control of the militiamen and women in them. No less important was the lack of a negative legacy – whereas Leninism destroyed the Russian revolution when it turned on the working class and imposed one-man management, military discipline, and suppressed all democratic discussion; the anarchists in Spain did nothing of the sort. They are the proof that revolution does not have to be dictatorial. In an age when capitalism tries to pretend that there is no possible alternative to it, the example of Spain can continue to inspire us today.

along with years of anarchist propaganda and the practical examples of land take-overs and the founding of short lived independent communes in previous years, resulted in a massive social explosion. In many areas money was abolished within hours of the revolution and mass meetings called to collectivise the land. The extent of the revolution varied from region to region but only a minority chose not to join the collectives (and many of these later changed their minds). By the end of the first couple of weeks of the revolution hundreds of villages were collectivised and arranging distribution of food for the front and the cities.

In fact most commentators agree the first two weeks of the revolution were its high point. A massive wave of working class creativity was released, dealing with a thousand different problems. But these weeks were also the limit of the revolution, after taking most of Spain and controlling practically all of production the revolution stalled.

On July 20th, the day the workers found themselves in control of Barcelona, Louis Companys, President of the Generalitat (regional government) summoned the CNT-FAI to his office in the Presidency. A delegation including leading CNT and FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) militants like Santillan and Garcia Oliver (both of whom later took positions as Ministers in the Generalitat and Central Government respectively) went to meet him. Garcia Oliver put on record the interview that took place:

“Companys received us standing up and was visibly moved by the occasion. He shook hands, and would have embraced us but for the fact that his personal dignity, deeply affected by what he had to say to us, prevented him from so doing. The introductions were brief. We sat down, each of us with his rifle between his knees. In substance what Companys told us was this:

“First of all. I have to say to you that the CNT and the FAI have never been accorded the treatment to which their real im-

portance entitled them. You have always been harshly persecuted, and I with much sorrow, but forced by political realities, I who before was with you, afterwards found myself obliged to oppose you and persecute you. Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalonia because you have defeated the fascist militarists, and I hope that you will not take offence if at this moment I remind you that you did not lack the help of the few or many loyal members of my party and of the guards and mozos...”

He paused for a moment and continued slowly: “But the truth is that, persecuted until the day before yesterday, today you have defeated the military and the fascists. I cannot then, knowing what, and who, you are, speak to you other than with sincerity. You have won, and everything is in your hands- if you do not need me nor wish me to remain as President of Catalonia, tell me now, and I will become one soldier more in the struggle against fascism.

If, on the other hand, you believe that in this position, which only as a dead man would I have abandoned if the fascists had triumphed, I with the men of my party, my name and my prestige, can be of use in this struggle, which has ended so well today in the city [Barcelona] but which will end we know not how in the rest of Spain, you can count on me and on my loyalty as a man and as a politician who is convinced that today a whole past of shame is dead and who desires sincerely that Catalonia should place herself at the head of the most progressive countries in social matters.”

Essentially the CNT agreed with Companys and — instead of completing the revolution by collectivising all industry, abolishing the state and dismantling its repressive apparatus — it called a truce with the state in the name of “anti-fascist unity” and accepted partial collectivisation where the state controlled the top levels of decision making. As anarchists they knew that the state and the revolution could not coexist for long and that the continued survival of the state meant the death of the rev-

olution. But they believed they had no alternative, or rather that the only alternative was an “anarchist dictatorship”.

Anarchists today still argue about this but there is a good case for saying if the CNT had chosen a different path then events would have turned out quite differently. As it was, the state was to destroy the revolution over the next year and in doing so lose the war against fascism anyway. One example of the alternative possibilities was that the CNT had the ability and plans to seize the entire Spanish gold reserve in the first days of the war and if they had done so much of this could have been used to buy arms in the six weeks before the Non-Intervention Pact came into effect. This would have provided the militias with the desperately needed weapons and ammunition to fight a protracted war against dug-in soldiers. Instead the CNT ended up guarding the gold for the state and watching most of it sent to Russia, in return for weapons which were only provided to the regular state army, while its militias on the front were starved of arms and ammunition.

The anarchists were rightly aware that the revolution could not be made by their organisations seizing power on behalf of the working class. Although they had about 1.5 million members, there were many workers in the socialist UGT union also, and others who belonged to no union. Because the dominant variety of anarchism in Spain was anarcho- syndicalism (where the anarchist union is the vehicle for changing society), no other way forward was seen. But necessity is the mother of invention and within a few months new ideas did start to emerge.

An organisation of CNT and Libertarian Youth Federation members called the Friends of Durruti was formed. They pointed out that a third choice existed: abolish the state, socialise all the industries under workers’ control at all levels, and administer the war through elected and recallable delegates from both the CNT and UGT (to which arrangement they gave the rather unfortunate name “junta”). Before these ideas