

Revolution in the Australian Cane Fields

Book review

Barbara Hart

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a review of

Robert Mason, *The Spanish Anarchists of Northern Australia: Revolution in the Sugar Cane Fields*. University of Wales Press, 2018. 208 pages, £45, paper.

By writing this book, Queensland academic Robert Mason aims “to reinstate a diversity of voice in the Australian labour movement, to show the political and ethical convictions of the Spanish migrants in northern Australia and how these were maintained by connections to a Libertarian world through contacts in Europe and Latin America.”

Much of Mason’s information comes from the archives of Salvador Torrents, a Catalan anarchist, which are held at James Cook University in Queensland. He also used the oral histories of surviving Spanish people and their descendants. Torrents was a native of Mataro who fled to France after being involved in anarchist activities. While there he was influenced by the rational education ideas of Francisco Ferrer which influenced him to educate himself and led him to believe in the role that education could have in transforming individuals. Briefly returning to Mataro he set up a rational school before he had to flee again, this time to Lyon. Here he heard Sebastian Faure, another educator, speak and was influenced by Faure’s idea of the importance of a healthy physical and social environment for leading a healthy life. Maybe Torrents saw Australia as a chance to set up a utopia which would be free from the corruption of the old world.

The first group of Catalans arrived in 1907 to replace the Pacific Islanders who had been working under contracts in the sugar fields in slave-like conditions and subject to the Master and Servants Acts. With the Federation of Australia they were repatriated after the passing of the infamous “White Australia” Immigration Act. Employers needed labor however and so turned to Catalans because being “northern” Spanish they were seen as closer to Northern Europeans. Therefore the Spanish migrants were coming to an outpost of the British Empire where strong racist attitudes would be one of the social forces they would have to fight against.

At the time Australian unions were trying to replace the Master and Servants Acts under which workers were controlled by contracts which gave power to the employers. The Catalans clashed immediately with the farmers over their contracts. As Mason says, “They armed themselves in the fields, formed local associations” and four men travelled from gang to gang to coordinate their actions. Employing their experience of industrial agitation in Spain they went on “go slows,” walked off the job and “when arrested, they disrupted court proceedings.”

These direct actions were in contrast to the methods of the hierarchically organized Australian Workers' Union which worked through the Arbitration System and its laws. For example, during a strike in 1927 over pay and conditions at the sugar mills owned by the corporate Colonial Sugar Refinery, the migrants refused to obey the direction of the AWU to return to work, instead insisting on only following the direction of their local strike committee. They armed themselves and had plans to seize the mills and return them to cooperative ownership. The AWU sold out to the bosses in 1930 in return for a British preference clause which gave 75% of jobs in the mills to British citizens, excluding migrants even if they had become naturalized Australian citizens.

The Spanish realized that they were considered inferior in the racist view of Anglo society and certainly when Torrents tried to speak at union meetings his English was ridiculed. This was part of a pervasive racism which Torrents saw was based on the conquest of the indigenous people. While Mason quotes passages that show Torrents' sympathy for the indigenous people, he does not follow up on this point to talk about how the farming practices of settlers impacted the indigenous way of life. Many Catalans including Torrents pooled their resources and bought farms which they worked together.

However, there were individuals and groups who shared the Spanish outlook on industrial action. For example, despite state repression, individual Wobblies had survived in the north. There were Spanish migrants who had arrived from Argentina where they had come under the influence of anarchist and syndicalist ideas while working on the railways. There were also Italian anarchists who took the lead in the Weil's Disease strike of 1934 who the Spanish worked with carrying out wildcat strikes.

The author describes the social structures that the Spanish migrants set up in the small sugar towns. Despite the back-breaking work and the extreme climate, a number of Spanish (and Italian) clubs were set up. Women such as Teresa Mendiola were prominent in running boarding houses which were centers for news from the Spanish diaspora. Torrents, Gabriel Soli and Juan Casanova wrote articles for *Cultura Proletaria* newspaper in the U.S.A. and passed around copies in the local area. Torrents often wrote about political/industrial disputes in Australia, interpreting them for a wider Spanish audience. There was an advantage in being so isolated geographically from the state capital. Here the large number of ethnic groups were able to forge a strong working class culture.

This culture was displayed with the advent of the Spanish Civil War. Spanish anarchists like Trini Garcia turned to overseas sources of information like *Nueva España Antifascista* for news. Relative to their small population, the sugar towns raised the most money for and sent the largest numbers of volunteers to Spain. At first this money was given to the Spanish Relief Committees which were run by the Sydney branch of the Communist Party. However, after the C.P.A. tried to establish a hierarchical system of leadership and wrote articles in their paper calling the anarchists in Spain "uncontrollable," the Northern anarchists set up their own branch of the International Anti-Fascist Solidarity headed by Francisco Martinez (from Argentina). Trini Garcia travelled around the north speaking at union meetings and collecting money which was sent to I.A.F.S.

In the immediate post-war period the Spanish anarchists were ageing (Torrents died in 1951) and were soon outnumbered by new groups of migrants from Spain who had grown up under Franco and were not radical. The Cold War saw the growing power of the Communist Party in the north.

Robert Mason has written a book that is accessible and free of academic language and which achieves his aim of bringing the Spanish anarchists' contribution to a wider audience.

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