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The Black Cat Is Awake

Bénédicte Rallu

7 April 2005

The Confédération nationale du Travail (CNT-F)¹ is undergoing a revival, due in particular to disaffection with the larger union federations. Meet the members of this trade union which stands for self-management and direct action.

A black cat with hair standing on end, back arched as a sign of anger... In the March demonstrations, one saw the famous black and red CNT flag waving. One could also notice the significant number demonstrators in its ranks, in particular young people. A significant revival, which delights the old militants and gives weight to their arguments.

“If nobody works in your place, nobody decides in your place” This slogan summarizes the operation of the CNT-F for Étienne Dechamps, militant since 1968 of the revolutionary trade union. No hierarchy, “each member has the same authority”. Self-management and direct democracy are the precepts. The general assembly is sovereign. “It is a form of control of each one for each one, we won’t work for the bosses as individuals”, stated Fabrice Christmas, regional secretary of d’Île-de-France. “All is

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¹ I write the name as “CNT-F” to distinguish it from the Spanish CNT.

open to debate, including subjects which, perhaps, do not deserve it”, analyzes Étienne. Each decision is made by consensus, “And that makes for real militancy! But what can kill the CNT-F, would be to become monolithic ”

To adhere to the CNT-F is not to sit around relaxing. Meetings, brain storming sessions, actions, many activities go on outside the work hours. The CNT-F rejects permanent officials, refuses to professionalize trade unionism and to allow itself to be cut off from the base. Each member adds his contribution. The union helps create militants out of those who are not accustomed to be militant. The CNT-F also helped “to make each individual more autonomous”, adds Paco Munoz, pensioner and member for four decades, after a childhood raised in Spanish anarcho-syndicalism: his parents were opponents of Franco. “In the end, it is the improvement of material conditions and ethics, but also to create areas of emancipation”

Paradoxically, a danger for the future of the CNT-F would be to develop too fast. That would complicate its democratic operation. With 4,000 militants, the confederation remains a number of small groups.² But it is it less and less so. “The more one is numerous, the more consensus is difficult to reach, the more it is difficult to be democratic, because the number of intermediaries increases”, deplores Étienne. However, the CNT-F could attract more and more militants, divorced from the traditional trade-union centrals. “In the ten years to come, there will be a rebirth of class struggle unionism of which the CNT-F could play a part”, predicted Emmanuel Coral, 46, ex-CFDT.³ There are many, like Emmanuel, who criticize “these conglomerates of corrupted notables”. The apparatchiks

² There is some question of the actual number. Wikipedia says 1200. I find it very unlikely that this union would lose three quarters of its membership in a year. Revolutionary unions tend to be much looser than regular ones, and there is no automatic dues check-off, so this figure could refer to paid up dues, but not the actual people who are involved in CNT-F activities

³ CFTD is the Socialist Party trade union central

is inter-union activity sometimes, it is with the rank and file. “That happens often with some people”, explains Éric Derennes. “But that occurs in the field of action.” Except when it is the action of union functionaries. Because the CNT is not recognized by the State in negotiations, like “the great” CFDT, CGT, FO and others. Thus the disputes are permanent. The CNT-F “is very often excluded from the organizing of trade union processions”, indicates Étienne Dechamps. In 2001, it had even been prohibited to march on May 1.

have professionalised the trade unions and care more about their own situation than their members. When Emmanuel was laid off, he felt abandoned by his union. “I did not interest them anymore because I was no longer working, I was unemployed. The CFDT has little involvement in in the struggles of the unemployed ”

The confederal secretary of the CNT-F, Jean-François Grez, felt the same thing in 1988 at the time of the strikes of the postal and telecommunications authorities. Edmond Mayor, secretary-general of CFDT, had treated the members of the CNT-F as a bunch of “black sheep”.

Éric Derennes has been with the CNT-F since January 2002. Political militant for a long time, he was close for a while to the CFTC.⁴ But, when it came time to join, he felt a hostile environment, little open to new comers: “I had the impression I was disturbing them.” All have found with the CNT-F a space of freedom, openness, where militants often meet (because of absence of hierarchy), an antiautoritarian sense especially independent of the political parties. The Anarchist Federation tries hard to gather up members from time to time, but the CNT-F is not defined as anarchist. Only revolutionary, but welcome to the libertarians. “They do not constitute a majority”, specifies Jean-François Grez, to counter this stereotype of anarchistic trade union which has stuck to the CNT-F for years.

There is much confusion about the history of the CNT-F. Heir of the revolutionary French CGT and the anarcho- syndicalism of the Spanish CNT-FAI at the beginning of the XXe century, the confederation shelters the two tendencies since its creation in 1946. The CNT-F “was used as legal cover for the Spanish organization”, explains Étienne Dechamps.⁵ However, on the Spanish side, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) exerted political control of the

⁴ CFTC is the Catholic trade union central

⁵ The Spanish CNT was in exile after Franco’s counter-revolution. Several hundred thousand CNT members were murdered by the Francoist fascists.

trade-union organization, and “the Spanish trade unionism thus maintained itself by developing the project of a libertarian communist society”, explains the Internet site of the CNT-F. By its radical positions (refusal to be involved in the work’s councils, union delegates and coadministration) at the end of the war, the CNT-F fed this anarchistic image.

Late in the 1960s, in spite of some small growth in 1968, the CNT-F came very close to disappearing in 1974. Its existence of little more than groupusculaire also nourishes the stereotype. Its reappearance at the end of 1970 will not put an end to it. More especially another stereotype is associated with anarchistic trade unionism: the CNT-F is seen as violent. The militants, like Étienne Dechamps, are revolted by this generally accepted idea “Where is the violence when 2 000 to 3 000 people die each year at work? “For Éric Derennes,” the CNT-F is not violent, it is accused of generating violence because it has other ideas than the large trade-union centrals. The distribution of leaflets, postering can be perceived as violent activities by the other trade unions because it disturbs their inactivity. But that is not a physical violence “It recognizes however, that, during demonstrations, the forces of law and order are fearful. Certain militants play at it in their relationship with the bosses. “In six years with the CNT-F, I never fought anyone, states Fabrice Christmas. But certain employers think that it is necessary to be on guard against us because we are the violent ones. We let them keep this idea “, he continues mischievously. The principle of direct action (occupation of buildings, mass leafletting etc.) asserted by the CNT-F does not embellish this portrait. Work place action is decided by the employees themselves, in a general assembly. The trade union does not impose a policy on them. It ensures only coherence between the actions, without prejudging the form

of action “We assert the use of sabotage”, Étienne Dechamps, tosses off...⁶

The revival of the confederation has much to do with youth. Since the first university battles in 1986, but especially in 1995 and in the year 2000, many students joined the CNT-F. This encouraged the creation of university sections, the high schools less so. “The existence of a free space, radicalism, its formative role”: are possible explanations to these adhesions, according to Étienne Dechamps.

Perhaps also the search for a revolutionary ideal. If the union refuses the adjectives “anarchist” and “violent”, the CNT-F asserts that of “revolutionary”. Without awaiting the Great Event, the militants speak rather of “transforming the workplace so that everyone can take part, that everyone one is an actor in his-her own life”, specifies Fabrice Christmas “the revolution, is not to impose another system, it is to work with all the elements of the group and to make decisions together”, theorizes Éric Derennes.

The idea is to make decisions together, but without collaborating with the employers. The CNT-F rejects coadministration and refused for a long time to take part in the union delegate elections. The work’s councils are too compromised an institution. Except in exceptional cases, it prefer to remain outside this institution. The debate over works council elections created a scission with the CNT-AIT, an organization much smaller than the CNT-F (known as CNT-F Vignolles after # 33 rue Vignolles in Paris).⁷

Compromising with employers is the reproach the CNT-F has for the other trade unions, which reject this criticism. No relation is possible with the hierarchies of the large union centers. If there

⁶ “Sabotage” has an ominous tone in English, being linked to arson, bombing and machine-wrecking. All it means it reality is working slowly or doing poor work, stopping a machine etc, a way of hitting the boss in the pocket book while still on the job. It does not mean violence or destruction.

⁷ Actually, what happened is a tiny group split off from the CNT-F and also called itself the CNT, but this group probably has no more than 100 members and is just a propaganda group.