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The anarchists in government in Spain

Open letter to comrade Federica Montseny

Camillo Berneri

14th April 1937

Dear Comrade,

It was my intention to address myself to all you comrade ministers, but once the pen was in my hand, I addressed myself spontaneously to you alone and I did not wish to go against this instinctive impulse.

The fact that I am not always in agreement with you neither astonishes you nor irritates you, and you have shown yourself cordially oblivious to criticisms which it would almost always have been fair, because it is human, to consider as unjust and excessive. This is not a minor quality in my eyes, and it bears witness to the anarchist nature of our mind. It is a certainty that effectively compensates, as far as my natural friendship is concerned for the ideological peculiarities which you have often revealed in your articles in your very personal style and in your speeches of admirable eloquence.

I could not sit back and accept the identity that you claimed between Bakunist anarchism and the federalist Republicanism of Pi

y Margall. I cannot pardon you for having written “that in Russia it was not Lenin the true builder of Russia, but Stalin in fact, the effective spirit, etc.” And I applauded Voline’s reply in ‘Terre Libre’ to your entirely false claims about the Russian anarchist movement.

But it is not about that that I wish to talk with you. On these matters, and indeed on others, I hope one day or another to talk to you personally. If I address you in public, it is about matters that are infinitely more serious, to remind you of the enormous responsibilities, of which you are perhaps not aware because of your modesty

In your speech of 3rd January, you said,

“The anarchists have come into the Government in order to prevent the Revolution from deviating from its course and in order to pursue it beyond the war, and also in order to oppose all possibility of dictatorial endeavours, wherever they should come from.”

Well then, comrade, in April, after three months of collaborationist experience, we find ourselves face to face with a situation in the course of which serious actions are taking place, while other, worse ones are taking shape.

Where, as in the Basque country, in the Levant and in Castille, our movement is not imposed by grass-roots strength, in other words by vast ranks of unionists and by the preponderant adherence of the masses, the counter-revolution is oppressing people and threatens to crush everything. The Government is at Valencia and it is from there that assault guards are setting out, destined to disarm the revolutionary cells formed for defence. One calls to mind Casas-Viejas while thinking of Vilanesa¹. It is the civil guards and the assault guards who are retaining their arms; it is they too who

¹ Vilanesa, small Spanish village where many CNT militants were massacred after their union premises had been looted.

in the rear must control the 'uncontrollable,' in other words disarm the revolutionary cells equipped with a few rifles and a few revolvers. This happens while the internal front has not been liquidated. This happens during the course of a civil war in which every surprise is possible and in regions where the front is very close and extremely jagged is not mathematically certain. This, while a political distribution of arms appears clearly, tending to arm only in strict necessity (strict necessity, which we hope will appear adequate) the Aragon Front, the armed guard of agrarian collectivisation in Aragon and buttress of Catalonia, that Iberian Ukraine. You are in a government that has offered France and Britain advantages in Morocco, whereas, since July 1936, it would have been necessary to proclaim officially the political autonomy of Morocco. I can imagine what you, anarchist, must think of this affair which is as disgraceful as it is stupid; but I believe that the time has come to make it known that you and the other anarchist ministers are not in agreement as regards the nature and the purport of such propositions.

24th October 1936, I wrote in 'Guerra di Classe':

"The operational base of the Fascist army is Morocco. We must intensify our propaganda in favour of Moroccan autonomy throughout the pan-Islamic area of influence. We must dictate to Madrid unambiguous declarations announcing the abandonment of Morocco and the protection of Moroccan autonomy. France would anxiously envisage the possibility of insurrectionary repercussions in North Africa and Syria; Great Britain would see the movements for self-rule in Egypt and among Arabs in Palestine growing stronger. We must exploit such anxieties by means of a policy which threatens to unleash revolt throughout the Arab world.

"For such a policy we need money and we need urgently to send agitators and organisers as emissaries

to all the centres of Arab migration, into all the frontier zones of French Morocco. On the fronts in Aragon, the Centre, the Asturias and Andalusia a few Moroccans would be enough to fulfil the role of propagandists (through the radio, tracts, etc.)”

It follows that one cannot simultaneously guarantee British and French interests in Morocco and carry on with insurrectionary work. Valencia is continuing the policies of Madrid. This must change. And to change it, one must state all one's own thoughts clearly and strongly, because in Valencia there are influences acting which tends towards treating with Franco.

Jean Zyromski wrote in 'Populaire' of 3rd March:

“The manoeuvres are visible and they are aiming at the conclusion of a peace which, in reality, would signify not only the halting of the Spanish Revolution, but also the annulment of the social conquests already achieved.

“Neither Caballero nor Franco, such would be the formula which would express briefly a conception which exists, and I am not sure that it does not have the favour of certain political, diplomatic and even governmental circles in Britain and also in France.”

These influences, these manoeuvres explain different obscure points: for example the inactivity of the loyalist fleet. The concentration of troops coming from Morocco, the acts of piracy against 'Canaries' and 'Balearics,' the capture of Malaga are the consequences of this inactivity. And the war is not finished! If Prieto is incapable and indolent, why tolerate him? If Prieto is bound-by a policy that makes him paralyse the fleet, why not denounce this policy?

point of going out, or even if they are there from now on to serve as a 'Phrygian cap'⁴ for politicians flirting with the enemy or with the forces for the restoration of the 'Republic of all classes.' The problem is set by the clear evidence of a crisis which is outstripping the men who are the personages who embody it.

The dilemma: war or revolution no longer has any meaning. The only dilemma is this one: either victory over Franco thanks to the revolutionary war, or defeat.

The problem for you and the other comrades is to choose between the Versailles of Thiers and the Paris of the Commune, before Thiers and Bismarck form the holy alliance. It is up to you to reply, for you are the 'light under the bushel.

⁴ Phrygian cap, emblem of liberty SCB.

I believe that you must pose yourself the problem of knowing if you are better defending the Revolution, if you are making a greater contribution to the struggle against Fascism by participating in the government, or if you would not be infinitely more useful carrying the flame of your magnificent skill with words among the combatants and to the rear.

The time has also come to clarify the significance for unification that our participation in the Government could have. We must speak to the masses, appeal to them to judge whether Marcel Cachin is right when he states in 'Humanite' of 23rd March.

"The responsible anarchists are multiplying their efforts towards unification, and their appeals are ever more sensible."

... Or whether 'Pravda' and 'Izvestia' are right when they slander the Spanish anarchists calling them saboteurs of unity. To appeal to the masses to judge the moral complicity and policy of silence of the Spanish anarchist press as regards the dictatorial offences of Stalin, the persecution of Russian anarchists, the monstrous case against the Leninist and Trotskyist opposition, a silence deservedly rewarded by 'Izvestia's' libelling of 'Solidaridad Obrera'.

To appeal to the masses to judge whether certain acts of sabotage of provisioning do not fall within the plan announced on 17th December 1936 by 'Pravda:'

*"As for Catalonia, the purging of Trotskyist and anarcho-syndicalist elements has begun; this work will be carried out with the same energy with which it was done in the USSR."*³

The time has come to find out whether the anarchists are in the Government to be the vestal virgins tending a fire that is on the

³ The translation is incorrect, but the sense is similar; see Mintz 'Self-management in Revolutionary Spain.'

You anarchist ministers, you make eloquent speeches and you write brilliant articles, but it is not with speeches and articles that one wins the war and defends the Revolution. The former can be won and the latter can be defended by allowing us to pass from the defensive to the offensive. The strategy of holding our position cannot last for ever. The problem cannot be resolved by throwing out orders: general mobilisation, arms to the Front, sole command, popular army etc. etc. The problem can be resolved by achieving immediately what can be achieved.

The 'Toulouse Dispatch' of 17th January wrote,

"The main preoccupation of the Minister of the Interior is with re-establishing the authority of the State over that of the groups and over that of the uncontrollable whatever their origin."

It follows that when for months they try to annihilate the 'uncontrollables', they cannot resolve the problem of the liquidation of the 'Fifth Column'². The suppression of the internal front has as its primary condition activity aimed at investigation and repression which can only be accomplished by tried and tested revolutionaries. An internal policy of collaboration between the classes and of flattery towards the middle classes leads inevitably to tolerance towards politically ambiguous elements. The Fifth Column is composed not only of elements belonging to Fascist bodies, but also of all the malcontents who desire a moderate republic. Now, it is these latter elements who profit from the tolerance of the hunters of the 'uncontrollables'.

The liquidation of the internal front was a condition of full and radical activity by the Defence Committees set up by the CNT and the UGT.

² Fifth Column, name given in Spanish press to the grouping of Fascist organisations existing behind the Republican Front.'

We are assisting in the infiltration into the controlling ranks of the popular army of ambiguous elements without offering guarantees of political and union organisation. The committees and political delegates of the militias were exercising a beneficial control, which, today, is weakened by the predominance of strictly military systems of advancement and promotion. We must strengthen these committees and these delegates.

We are assisting the new situation which could have disastrous consequences, a situation in which whole battalions are commanded by officers who do not enjoy the esteem and affection of the soldiers. This situation is grave because the value of the Spanish militia-men is directly proportional to the confidence enjoyed by their own commander. It is therefore necessary to re-establish the system of direct election and the right of dismissal by those below.

A grave error has been committed by accepting authoritarian formulae, not because they are such from the point of view of their form; but because they contain tremendous errors and political aims that have nothing to do with the necessities of the war.

I had the chance to talk to senior Italian French and Belgian officers and I ascertained that they give a clear indication of knowing the real necessities of discipline, a much more modern and rational conception than certain neo-generals who claim to be realists.

I believe that the hour has come to form the confederal army, in the same way as the Socialist Party has set up its own company: the 5th regiment of the popular militias. I believe that the hour has come to resolve the problem of sole command by effectively achieving unity of command which allows us to move onto the offensive on the Aragon Front. I believe that the hour has come to finish with the thousands of civil guards and assault guards who do not go to the Front because their job is to control the 'uncontrollables.' I believe that the hour has come to create a war industry in earnest. And I believe that the hour has come to finish with certain flagrant extravagances: like those of respect for Sunday as a day of rest and

of certain 'rights for the workers' sabotaging the defence of the Revolution.

We must, above all, keep up the morale of the combatants. Louis Bertoni, interpreting the sentiments expressed by various Italian comrades fighting on the Huesca Front, wrote not so long ago:

"The war in Spain, thus stripped of all new faith, of all ideas of social change, of all revolutionary greatness, of all universal meaning, is no more than a common war of national independence, which must be earned out to avoid the extermination which the world plutocracy has in mind. There remains the terrible question of life or death, but it is no longer a war to assure a new regime and a new humanity. People will say that all is not yet lost; but in reality, everything is threatened and beleaguered; our side use the language of renunciation, the same as was used by Italian Socialism at the advance of Fascism: Beware of provocation! Calm and serenity! Order and discipline! All the things that in practice boil down to doing nothing. And as in Italy Fascism finished up by triumphing, in Spain, anti-socialism in republican garb cannot but win, unless anything that we have not foreseen should come to pass. It is useless to add that we are simply setting it down, without condemning those on our side; we could not say how the behaviour of these people could be different and efficacious, as long as the Italo-German pressure grows at the Front and that of the Bolshevik bourgeois grows in our rear."

I do not have Louis Bertoni's modesty. I have the pretension to assert that the Spanish anarchists could have a political line different from the prevailing one; I claim to be able by capitalising on what I know of experiences in various great revolutions of recent years and on what I read in the Spanish libertarian press itself, to advise certain lines of conduct.