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A Cry in the Dark

May Day in Unredeemed Spain

CNT

16 April 1947

The rapid passage of time has brought us once again to the symbolic, evocative date of 1 May. Again we come to the evocation of the selfless sacrifices of the Chicago martyrs, as thousands and millions of Spanish workers serenely defy death itself from behind bars in the jails jam-packed with antifascists or in the streets of cities where the hundred-eyed fascist reaction is on the lookout for proletarian flesh into which to plunge its leaden talons. Around the globe, this will be a day of joyous celebration now that the dismal memories of Hitlerite repression have dissipated and the road is wide open to the better world of which we all dream. In Spain it will be a day of memories and sadness when, thoughts turning to our fallen comrades and ears cocked for the firing squads' volleys, we forge yet again a solid determination to win back, whenever and however we can, even should it cost us a lot of blood, the freedom wrested from us through violence and treachery.

But when the workers of the world joyously celebrate their day, and massive victory parades wend their way through the streets of Paris, London, Brussels, Rome, New York, Moscow, etc., we should like them to pause for a moment in their riotous

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celebrations and think of those condemned to the slow agony of a living death, and remember that in various places around Spain, the feast of labour may well be marked by volleys of gunfire and the earth watered again by the blood of revolutionary workers.

Prior to 1936, before German aircraft and Italian divisions briefly put paid to our freedom as the world looked on in indifference, the whole of Spain was a cry of triumph on May Day. For a day, the workers quit the factories and left their labours in the fields, the fishermen left behind the grey waters of the Cantabrian Sea, of the blue waters of the Mediterranean and everywhere, from the tiniest hamlet in remotest Andalusia through to the great cities like Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Bilbao or Zaragoza, the producers showed off their potential and resolve, their might and their expectation that through their own exertions they might gather in the harvest whose seed had been watered by the blood of the five anarchists lynched in Chicago.

Since 1939 and the fascist victory, the working class feast of 1 May has continued to be marked. But marked in two different ways, two ways utterly different from the style of celebration throughout the entire civilised world. On the workers' part, in defiance of the wrath of the police and the Falangists, with a few minutes of downed tools and silence in factory and workshop, with the distribution of underground manifestos, with posters and graffiti boldly daubed everywhere, reiterating that the spirit that moved Spies, Engels, Fichte [sic] and other comrades neither has perished nor will it perish in us. On our enemies' part, in the bloodthirsty, brutal manner of which their German Gestapo teachers were so fond, in strict obedience to the guidelines laid down for them on his frequent visits to Spain by the monstrous Himmler, the inventor of the most refined tortures, gas chambers and mass extermination camps.

From the moment of its victory, Spanish fascism has been careful to mark every feast day, Its own, ours and other people's. During the World War it also marked Germany's successes. And even the Allied successes, in order to mar our delight at these and hammer the point home that, regardless of the victories scored by freedom's armies, they were still in charge in our country. Because inevitably the means of commemoration was always the same: firing squads.

Not a 1 May, 14 April [Proclamation of the Spanish Republic, 1931], 18 July [military rising, 1936] or 7 November – the last being the date of the glorious defence of Madrid – went by without the firing squads springing into action in Madrid, Barcelona, Seville or some other Spanish village or city. Fascism still takes care to ensure that its jails are stocked with thousands of liberal-minded men under sentence of death from one of those sham courts martial where the accused is denied any defence and the basic norms of due process are ignored. They languish under a death sentence for days, weeks, months, years on end. Whole years with nerves eroded by the uncertainty of an execution that could be carried out at any moment: subjected to the most refined torture, to which the Spanish Inquisition owed its ghastliness: the torture of hope. They are victims stockpiled for the commemoration of feast days: hostages to serve as burnt offerings to the greater glory of their ideals.

The condemned know when a date draws near what their fate will be. As do those on the outside familiar with the bestial methods of Spanish fascism. As that day breaks and the light of dawn joins battle against the shades of night, a number of volleys break through the silent dawn – and lead silences cries of 'Long live freedom!' forever.

This is how the Spanish regime has marked May Day since 1936: and how it will mark it this year. In our memory and in our hearts we hold the cherished names of the hundreds of comrades sacrificed on that date in preceding years: and there will be a number of others to add in 1947.

On this day of triumph for workers around the world, we should like free men everywhere to remember the dramatic reality in Spain. We should like them not to think of it as some dim and distant past, but as a current reality, as a tragedy replayed daily and claiming fresh, pained victims.

And reflect too that none of this is enough to break our morale or shake our determination. The blood of martyrs is a seed that blossoms in a harvest of heroism for those who are left behind. If our resolve was unbreakable in 1936, it is a hundred times more so now in 1947. The firing squads may keep up their efforts and water the generous soil of Spain with blood. Calmly, determinedly, vigorously, we embrace as our own the words uttered by Spies on the scaffold and, with him, we say:

‘A day is coming when the words that you seek to silence through death will ring out louder than any shout.’

In Spain that day draws close. Because, like Seneca, we can look the killer in the eye and on this May Day spit with contempt into his face: Go on, kill. But no matter how much you kill, you will never kill that which will see you dead.

Spain, 16 April 1947

The National Committee of the CNT