

Free Women of Spain

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“It was like being brothers and sisters. It had always annoyed me that men in this country didn’t consider women as beings with full human rights. But now there was this big change. I believe it arose spontaneously out of the revolutionary movement.”

Margarita Balagar quoted in ‘The Blood of Spain’ by Ronald Frazer, p.287

The position of workers and peasants in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s was bad. If you were female it was appalling. Conditions for Spanish women were oppressive and repressive in the extreme. The position of women in Spain in the 1930’s was similar to that in many Muslim countries today. They had no independence, could be “given away” in arranged marriages and single women were not allowed out without chaperones.

The average daily wage of a male agricultural labourer was 3 pesetas, a woman got half this (1.5 pesetas) for working from dawn to dusk. Reforms often did little to benefit women workers. For example, when the republican government of 1931 bought in the eight hour day this just meant that women could be home at 5pm to cook and clean.

The 1931 government had introduced limited divorce, given women the vote and some limited maternity leave. There was a small movement for women’s’ rights but it was reformist and based on middle class and professional women. Within the anarchist movement there was little discussion of women’s issues. However just before the military coup in May 1936 two small groups of anarchist women from Madrid and Barcelona merged to form the Mujeres Libres (Free Women) organisation.

The revolution in Spain began as a reaction to the military coup (see Workers Solidarity no.47). Workers organised by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT union and, to a lesser extent, the socialist UGT union federations took to the streets. The response was spontaneous and courageous, heavily influenced by anarchist ideas which had a deep implantation among Spanish workers and peasants.

Women were everywhere in the initial resistance and fought as full and equal members of the anti-fascist militias up until November 1936, when the republican government ordered women away from the frontline. Many were killed in the battle for Madrid. There were changes in work, leisure and in attitudes towards women.

Women were involved at all levels in the collectivisation of industry and land. Piece-work in the home was abandoned as women flooded into the factories. It was a time of tremendous ex-

citement as a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm swept over the republican zone. As one woman, Pepetia Carpena of the Catalan regional committee of Mujeres Libres, put it “even if I had died I wouldn’t have wanted not to have had that experience.”

Revolutions bring about dramatic social changes. Old expectations, assumptions and ways of behaving begin to be questioned. But change doesn’t occur overnight. Rather, change starts with a discussion. It’s though the often long and messy process of debate and disagreement that the way in which we see the world is radically altered. So, as we can see in Spain, no revolution is cut and dry.

In areas where they were well organised, such as Terrasa where anarchist women in the textile industry had a group since 1931, they gained maternity leave and full equality of pay. In many cases, though, the CNT was unable or unwilling to make real it’s goal of full equality. In textiles, in general, where women formed the overwhelming majority of the workforce they still had the lowest wages.

On the land there was further to go as attitudes lagged even further behind. However, in the collectives women found that for the first time ever they did have a real say, although sometimes not an equal say or vote to the men. In some collectives such as Mazon and Miramel in Aragon women and men were paid the same. In many, though, this was not the case.

These collectives did assume that a woman deserved an income in her own right, which was an advance. Most collectives, though, had a “family wage”. This, of course, was almost always paid to the man who would be assumed to be the head of the household. The social division of labour remained. “Women’s work” was “women’s work” and when women did “men’s work” they still got women’s wages !

The CNT was committed, at least in theory, to full and absolute equality. They declared, at their 1936 Saragosa conference, that after the revolution “the two sexes will be equal, both in rights and obligations.”

In practice, up to 1936, the CNT was failing to draw in women. Women in the union often found that they were not being taken seriously and that sexism was not uncommon. To combat this the Mujeres Libres group was founded in May 1936.

They aimed to empower women, giving them the confidence to become involved in anarchist politics. They saw it as crucial to involve women directly in the struggle for their own liberation. They did not see themselves as feminists, in fact according to one member, Soledad Estorach, most of them had never even heard of feminism. They believed that ending the domination of women by men was part of a larger struggle to abolish all forms of domination.

Unlike the feminists who narrowly focused on the individual liberation of individual women, they believed that the struggle for emancipation was a collective one for anarchism and freedom as a whole. None the less a major part of this fight was against the undervaluing of women within the anarchist movement.

Achievements

During it’s short two year existence Mujeres Libres came to number 30,000 women and achieved much throughout republican Spain. A major focus was on education. In Barcelona they set up the Casa de La Dona, a major women’s college, in 1937. By December 1938 the Casa was taking in 600–800 women per day. They ran numerous schools and courses to train women to enter industry in both Madrid and Barcelona. As well as technical training they urged trainees to fight for full equality within the workplace.

They also undertook military training, setting up a shooting range in Madrid. They opened maternity hospitals in Terrasa and Barcelona, and many schools for young children. These schools based themselves on the anarchist idea of education as a process of development and exploration rather than one of factual brainwashing.

They also fought for and won legalised abortion, contraception and divorce and, locally, some rights to child care for women workers. As the war went on many members became increasingly involved in the housing and education of refugees.

This article only allows for a short summary. Above all else, Mujeres Libres stuck to their original agenda of emancipation for women through their own struggle. As the war progressed the socialists, communists and POUM (anti-Stalinist Leninists) all set up “women’s sections”. All wished to draw women into the struggle against fascism, and into their own organisations. None, however, took seriously the idea of women’s emancipation as a goal in itself. Mujeres Libres was the only group which did so.

The fate of women in Spain was closely tied to that of the overall revolution. As this was pushed back by the Communist Party and the government of the day, so were they. As the militias and collectives were destroyed their first brief taste of freedom was snatched away. The victory of Franco only served to copper-fasten this process.

It is clear that the revolution did bring some real gains for women. It is also clear from the events of the Spanish revolution that women’s freedom cannot be ignored or side-lined by revolutionaries. It cannot be left until after the revolution or to “the women’s section.” A struggle which does not, from the beginning, aim to win freedom and equality for all does not deserve the name revolution.

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