Collectives in the Spanish revolution

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Many people would agree that the anarchist principle ”from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” is a nice idea. A self managed society with everyone having a real say in how things were run is a lovely ideal. They might nod along to the lyrics of ”Imagine” by John Lennon but then equally shake their heads and tell you that such a thing could never work ”in the real world”. You would probably be told that people are just naturally greedy and self-centred and such a thing would end in chaos.

However throughout the history of the 20th century ordinary working people have succeeded in taking things into their own hands and making a go of it. Nowhere, however, has come closer to a fully self-managed anarchist society then large areas of ”republican” Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

Here, for a short space of a few years, both on the land and in the factories workers and peasants demonstrated that far from chaos anarchism was an efficient, desirable and realisable method of running society.

This account of the enormous social revolution in Spain is mainly taken from Gaston Leval's ”Collectives in the Spanish Civil War”. Leval was a French anarchist exiled for resisting the World War I draft who spent many years in exile in Spain and Latin America.

He returned in 1936 just in time to document the revolution in economic and social organisation as it occurred. Rather then take off for the front he saw the importance of these changes and attempted to make a record of some sort for the future.

The extent of collectivisation on the land was unprecedented. Estimates of the numbers in collectives range as high as 5-7 million directly or indirectly involved (from Leval himself). Certainly millions took part to some degree from periods of weeks to as long as three years as fortunes fluctuated in the war. At the height of collectivisation there were 400 collectives in Aragon, 700 in the Levant and 300 in Castile. Of course many just refuse to believe that so many people (whether landless or with fairly large holdings) would voluntarily collectivise.

FORCED COLLECTIVISATION?

One accusation which is repeated by almost all historians of the Spanish civil war is that the columns of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT union enforced collectivisation at the point of a gun. Ironically enough this was first put about by no less an authority the Spanish Communist Party but it is still accepted as gospel by the majority of historians of the civil war.

Of course this doesn't stand up to even a glance at the facts. The CNT was a mainly industrial union based in Barcelona and Madrid. In many areas such as Castile and Aragon their numbers were extremely low. For example there were only 34,000 members of the CNT in Aragon, Navarre and Rioja all areas where most of the land was collectivised.

The military columns of the CNT moved immediately to the front and mostly took no further part in the collectives. As Leval puts it, they ”lived on the fringes of the task of social transformation being carried out”. Some far sighted militants such as Durutti realising their importance sent some members back to the collectives. But these were skilled organisers not armed troops.

Finally in all the collectivsed areas there were many ”individualists” who were allowed to hang on to their land. Far from been harassed to join they were often allowed to avail of the many free

services of the collectives. Though their numbers declined with time in many cases they remained a significant minority. This couldn't have happened if collectivisation was forced.

ARAGON

Let's take a closer look at one region- Leval's first example: Aragon. An estimated 69.5 % of Aragon's 430,000 inhabitants in the revolutionary zone took part in collectives in total, with up to 400 collectives established. When Leval arrived in February 1937 there were 275 collective villages with 141,430 families organised into 24 cantonal federations holding their first conference in Caspe. Obviously over the seven months since the Fascist coup in July this was a major achievement .

He visited the main collectives of seven of these federations. Collectivisation occurred in a similar way in most of them. After the major landowners had fled the land an assembly was held. It was decided to seize all land and machinery hold it in common . Teams were formed to various jobs, each electing recallable delegates to a village assembly.

A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL

To distribute the common stock of goods rationing or a family wage was brought in. Given the low level of Spanish agriculture and the demands of the war it wasn't possible to jump immediately to communist distribution (i.e. free goods for all) in Aragon (or most other areas) . However there was a major increase in living standards along with a greater say for everyone and a huge range of free social services.

In the village of Graus, for example, the family (which persisted as the main social form) wage meant a 15% increase in money going into households. All services such as electricity and gas were free as well as free and hugely improved medical, educational and entertainment facilities. Overall this meant an increase in living standards of 50-100%.

There were many increases in productivity and efficiency. In several areas huge new projects were made possible by collectivisation. In Esplus there were four new piggeries producing hundreds of animals and the sheep herd increased from 600 to 2,000. In Mas de Las Mantas a huge collective bakery handled all the baking previously the exclusive task of women in the home. In Alcorisa there had been a 50% increase in cultivated land and centralisation of tailor's shops brought a 66% increase in production.

These are just a few examples where the landlord system had held back the efficient use of land while peasants and labours had faced starvation every year.

At the February meeting of the cantonal federations measures were been taken to set aside areas of land for research into better seed production in each canton. It had been suggested, for example, that virus free potatoes could be raised in the mountains of upper Aragon These type of innovations could never have been dreamed up by the landlords who relied entirely on cheap labour (without "wasting" money on machines) to keep them well heeled while the majority starved.

The Federation was also attempting to promote exchanges between collectives with richer ones distributing food and machinery to those in less well off areas. The collectives also supplied the major cities voluntarily (unlike the case in the Russian civil war(1921) where forced grain

seizures by the Bolsheviks killed off any fellow feeling between rural and urban workers). They also sent spare supplies to columns at the front.

INDIVIDUALISTS

The conference also took an interesting attitude towards 'individualist' farmers which contrasted with Stalin's murderous forced collectivisation in the 1930s. The individualists were left to their own devices though the collectives were under no obligation to give them any aid (in practice most did). However they were totally forbidden from employing workers and they lost automatic inheritance rights. Many individualists did eventually go over to the collectives and they were usually won over by example and not forced.

Aragon is only one of the regions covered. In some other areas there was almost a fully communist system in operation. For example in the Naval collective in Huesca a system operated were you just went to the collective store and took what you needed. Contributions and withdrawals were recorded and all was reduced to simple accounting.

In most areas this just wasn't possible and rationing was the order of the day. However the achievements are sill impressive given the miserable state of Spanish agriculture in the first place.

INDUSTRIAL COLLECTIVES

The CNT was a mainly urban anarcho-syndicalist union drawing much of its support from workers in Barcelona and Madrid. For this reason it may seem surprising that industrial collectivisation did not go as far as that on the land. However it must be remembered that many of these industries depended almost totally on countries outside Spain for both markets and raw materials. These were almost immediately cutoff by the European governments on the grounds of "non-interference" in Spain's internal affairs. Also most factories had to retool for the war effort which made huge demands on labour time.

Even allowing for this, however, as Leval points out there was not true socialisation in many cases "but a worker's Neo-Capitalism". By this he meant that the framework of capitalism was maintained with workers running factories, selling goods and sharing the profits.

CNT

His loyalty to the CNT prevents him from pointing the finger here. Their refusal to drive the revolution through to it's logical conclusion, abolishing capitalism and refusing to share power with the bourgeois in government must be singled out as the decisive reason why industry wasn't entirely self-managed. The CNT's syndicalism left them uninterested in politics and political power. They left the parliament and state structure intact which gave the bourgeois a base from which to rebuild. They should have destroyed the government's political power entirely and used the arms and gold reserves seized to further the revolution.

BARCELONA

All things considered, the achievements in industrial collectivisation were still amazing and surprised foreign observers like George Orwell. 3000 enterprises in Barcelona were collectivised. A council was elected by an assembly of all the workers to run each workplace. Each section elected to delegates to liaise with the council on day to day matters. The council sent recallable representatives to a council for each industry which drew up general plans for that industry.

All the major services were greatly improved. Equal wages were paid to all grades and the general wage level was increased for most workers.

For example all the small electricity generators in private hands were linked together and new dams and generators built to give a more efficient system. The water supply which had been erratic was improved with supply going up to 150,000 cubic metres fairly quickly (Leval explains, however that it couldn't be increased much further as most existing natural catchments were been used and, presumably, there wasn't time to build reservoirs).

Perhaps the most dramatic improvement was on the trams, the major method of transport in Barcelona. Five days after the fascists were beaten off the streets the trams were running under workers' control. The fleet had been increased from 600 to 700 by the repair of 100 trams previously discarded as un-fixable. A new safety and signal system was built. Track and roadway repaired and improved, an automatic breakdown warning system installed and many lines re-routed. Passengers carried increase from 183,543,516 to 233,557,506 at a standard class cheap fare. Tell that to anyone who maintains workers are too ignorant to run things themselves!

The Spanish revolution proved conclusively, if only briefly, that given a chance workers and peasants can run things themselves a lot better then the bosses. The elimination of the profit motive and the undistorted application of technology improved life greatly for those involved.

Workers' self-management and the agricultural collectives didn't collapse due to some flaw in human nature. They were smashed by fascist attacks from the front and Communist tanks in the rear (for example a division of tanks under the command of the Communist general Lister was used to destroy most of the Aragon collectives). Anarchism as a method of organising society faced the test of history and passed with flying colours.

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