

# **The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action**

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Make a search of all the history books you can obtain. You will find little, if any, mention of Captain Jack White after 1914. It is as if the man who had proposed the formation of the Irish Citizen Army had literally disappeared from the face of the earth when the Dublin Lockout came to an end. In fact he lived on and remained active in the socialist movement until 1940. When James Connolly was sentenced to death it was White who rushed to South Wales and tried to bring the miners out on strike in protest. For that he served three months imprisonment. In England he worked for a time with Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers Socialist Federation, and during the General Strike of 1926 he wanted to organise a Citizen Army to protect the picket lines as he had done in Dublin.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War saw White enlist with the Irish International Brigadiers who went to fight fascism. A comrade of his from the 1930's, Albert Meltzer, described White's experience "He was thrilled with the collectivisation in Spain, and also with the volunteer militias. He learned with amazement that this was the work of the Anarchists. In addition to his work with the Irish brigade at the front, he showed Spanish volunteer militia how to use firearms, and also trained women in the villages on the way to Saragossa in the use of small arms for defence. What, however, he could not stomach was the fact that the Irish, like the rest of the International Brigade, were being increasingly manipulated by the Communist Party. He had never accepted the CP; he had just not seen an alternative. Now he saw an alternative".

White offered his services to the CNT, giving up his International Brigade membership. The CNT did not need foreign volunteers as they had enough support at that time but they did need arms. They needed people working for them outside Spain. He was asked to work for the CNT in London, to raise badly needed funds and solidarity. During his time in Spain he became a convinced Anarchist and shortly afterwards wrote a pamphlet simply entitled *The Meaning of Anarchism*.

That this is new information to the reader indicates how history can be falsified or even have whole episodes completely written out of the history books. Much has been written to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary to the Spanish Civil War but the contribution of the Anarchists has been either totally ignored or reduced to a few footnotes which were often composed of blatant lies or generalised slander referring to 'wreckers'. To set the record straight this pamphlet was produced. It is not a history of the Civil War, that would require many hundreds of pages to do justice to the subject. It is an uncovering of the "hidden history" of the Anarchist participation in Spain's anti-fascist struggle.

It has not been written because of some academic interest but because Anarchism is still as relevant now as it was fifty years ago. We have seen the results of social democracy and it's Labour Parties, we have seen what the Stalinists have done in Russia, China, Albania and their satellites, we have seen how their left critics in the Trotskyist movement have been unable to come to grips with the real problem. And that real problem is the authoritarian idea that the world can be changed over the heads of the workers. It can, but it won't be much better.

Only Anarchism with its concept 'of socialism based on individual freedom and the power of workers' councils stands apart from all this. That is why, despite four decades of repression, the CNT reappeared as a real union after the death of Franco. That is why a group of Irish workers seeking a genuine socialism formed the Workers Solidarity Movement in 1984. We believe that Anarchism is not just another choice for those who want a better world, the history of all other 'left' movements shows that Anarchism is a necessity.

# Rebellion and Resistance

In the 1930's Europe was experiencing one of its' worst ever slumps. The Wall Street crash came in 1929 and its repercussions were felt far and wide. Spain was no exception

By 1936 unemployment had gone over 30% in many of the towns and cities Out of a total workforce of three million, one million were out of work. There was no dole and as prices rose by 80% in the five years up to 1936, many encountered severe hardship.

## Land

By European standards Spain was a particularly backward country. There had been little industrial development and 70% of the people still lived on the land. 52% of the workforce was employed in agriculture which accounted for between one half and two thirds of Spain's exports.

The division of land was the worst in Europe. A massive 67% was in the hands of just 2% of all landowners. In 1936, 10,000 proprietors owned half of the national territory. The remaining land was owned by "middle owners" and peasants. The "middle owners" were more numerous than the big landowners but they also had large estates worked by sharecroppers and landless labourers.

The rest of the land was owned by peasants, of whom there were five million Because most of them had insufficient land they hired themselves out as day labourers. Others took to sharecropping.

## Boom

Spain's boom period had been during World War I when it had remained neutral. Agriculture thrived due to the large foreign markets for its exports. At the same time some industrialisation took place. After the war, though, this boom came to an end, especially when tariff barriers were thrown up by Britain and France against Spanish exports.

While the boom lasted the landowners reaped the benefits but when the slump arrived it was the peasants who suffered. conditions in the Spain of the 1930's were comparable with the Orient. Starvation was *norma* between the harvests. The press of the time carried reports of whole districts living on roots and boiled greens. The industrialisation that had taken place was mainly confined to one area — Catalonia. Situated in the Northeast bordering on France, Catalonia, especially its capital Barcelona, became the industrial centre of Spain, with 70% of all industry and 50% of industrial workers. Many peasants left the land to seek work in Barcelona, which added to the already existing unemployment.

Other forces at the time were the Catholic church and the army. While there were 25,000 parish priests there were a further 70,000 in religious orders. The Jesuits alone owned 30% of the country's wealth. The numbers in the orders actually outnumbered the total of secondary school students. While millions were kept illiterate (40% could neither read nor write) the church preached superstitious reports of incredible incidents such as statues seen weeping and crucifixes exuding blood.

The Church was renowned for siding with the bosses and while the priests were living in luxury the peasants around them often starved. It is little wonder the Church was hated.

The army was famous for its number of officers. There was one for every six soldiers! This officer caste had been developed under the monarchy (which was ended in 1931) and was re-

sponsible for the whole colonial administration along with much of that in the country itself. Drawn from the upper classes they were tied by kinship, friendship and social position to the industrialists and reactionary landowners.

## The Republic

The Spanish Republic was born in 1931. The workers and peasants, having gone through years of dictatorship, believed that maybe now the country would be modernised and their living standards would begin to improve.

It was not to be so. One example will suffice. The republican government set up the Institute for Agrarian Reform to look into the redistribution of land. By its own admission its programme would have taken a whole century to implement.

The republican/social-democratic coalition which came to power in 1931 did little to improve living conditions for the vast majority of workers. Unemployment remained high and the working class organisations, especially the CNT, suffered repression with many members being imprisoned. By June 1933 there were 9,000 political prisoners.

The government refused to take on the industrialists, landowners, army officers and bishops. It would not stand up to that minority which owned all the wealth and had all the real power. In the election of 1933 they fell and a right-wing coalition came to power.

This marked the beginning of what became known as the “bienno negro” the two black years. The right went on the offensive. The coalition of the wealthy and powerful now had state power and were determined to use it to smash working class and peasant resistance. Their privileges were to be maintained at the expense of the workers.

## Asturia

Of course this was not taken lightly. The CNT organised as best it could against the government. A rising took place in Catalonia in December, shortly after the change of government. It was crushed after ten days. The following year the workers of the CNT joined with their fellow workers in the UGT (General Union of Workers, controlled by the Socialist Party) in a revolt in the Asturias region. The workplaces were taken over and the union members took up arms against the state. Unfortunately they were isolated from the rest of the country. The massacre that followed their defeat was unprecedented with at least 3,000 being executed.

By the time this government was forced to resign and call elections for February 1936 there were 30,000 political prisoners. The election was won by the Popular Front, a coalition of republicans, social-democrats and the Stalinists of the Communist Party. Their victory was mainly due to the CNT not running a campaign calling on the workers to abstain from voting. In previous elections they had done so because they believed that the ballot box was a con as you could only choose who would rule over you, not whether you wanted to be ruled or not. Instead they said workers should rely on their industrial muscle to change things.

This time the CNT took no position, leaving it to individual members to decide. The results made it obvious they had voted, mainly because the Popular Front had promised an amnesty for the prisoners.

The workers, though, did not wait for the government to act. They opened the prisons themselves and released their comrades. It did not stop there. The election result was seen as an impetus to go on the offensive. They had voted for change and if the government was not going to deliver they would get results themselves.

## Strikes

Between the election in February and the fascist revolt in July there were 113 general strikes, 228 partial general strikes, 145 bomb explosions, 269 deaths, 1287 wounded, 215 assaults and 160 churches burned. Of course all this was not part of the Popular Front programme which was watery and essentially aimed at maintaining anti-fascist unity. It was not aimed at smashing capitalism and the power of the Spanish elite. Sections of the Socialist Party, however, went beyond the Popular Front programme and many of them in the UGT again joined with their comrades in the CNT to fight the passivity of the government.

On June 13<sup>th</sup>, 30,000 Asturian miners struck; on June 19<sup>th</sup> 90,000 miners throughout the country were on strike. Every city of importance had at least one general strike. Over one million were out in the first days of July. Strikers were not only fighting for economic demands, political demands were also made. On July 14<sup>th</sup> there was a large demonstration outside a ball at the Brazilian embassy. The workers carried placards saying "Republican Ministers amuse themselves while workers die".

While the Republican government did all it could to get the situation under control, the Communist Party condemned the strikes for bringing workers into collision with the government. The government duly filled the jails and closed down the offices of the CNT.

## Coup

As with all ruling classes that become desperate, they decided that parliamentary democracy was to be disposed of and the workers' organisation smashed. Bosses don't always oppose fascism because they know they sometimes have to resort to it. Their wealth and privileges come before all other considerations. As in Germany and Italy they decided the organised working class had to be put down so they could hang onto their wealth and continue to make profits. While some will initially oppose fascism, and in Spain some did, it is nevertheless a call of last resort and they will go along with it if they see it as necessary to maintain their power. In the Basque Country the nationalists initially opposed the fascists. But when the choice of fascism or social revolution became clear, they offered little resistance to Franco.

The coup was to be launched on July 17<sup>th</sup>. The initial step was taken when Franco seized Morocco and issued a "radical manifesto". This was picked up by a loyal radio operator who passed it on to the Minister for the Navy. The news of the coup was kept secret until 7pm on the 18<sup>th</sup>. The government assured the country it was in control. By this it meant it was trying to come to terms with the fascists. The cabinet resigned on the 18<sup>th</sup> and Borrios, a right wing republican, was made prime minister.

## Masses

This plan to come to a deal was only smashed by the activity of the organised working class. The fascists made some headway in parts of the country where little opposition was offered as a result of government hesitation. But in Catalonia, and especially in Barcelona, the workers of the CNT showed how to fight. They declared a general strike and took to the streets looking for arms which the government refused to give them. In the end they stormed the barracks, and took what they needed. They were aided by soldiers who had remained loyal, some of whom turned their guns on their officers.

The workers immediately set up barricades and within hours the rising had been defeated. Arms were siezed and given to groups of workers who were dispatched to other areas to prevent risings occurring. Madrid was also saved because of the heroism and initiative of the workers. Hearing of what had happened in Barcelona they had stormed the Montana Barracks, the main army base in the city.

In Valencia they surrounded the barracks, a situation which lasted for two weeks. Still the government refused to arm the workers and it was only after arms were sent from Barcelona and Madrid that the barracks was successfully taken. In Asturias the rebels were beaten after prolonged fighting leading to many deaths. Then the miners outfitted a column of 5,000 dynamiters who marched to Madrid.

Throughout the country the initiative taken by workers and peasants was stopping the fascists in their tracks. This was the story in three quarters of the country. Elsewhere valuable time was lost due to the indecision of government officials. In Saragossa the workers failed to put down the rising. Juan Iopez, a leading CNT militant, put this down to the fact that they "lost too much time having interviews with the civil governor, we even believed in his promises".

Thus by the action of the rank and file was "the Spanish Republic saved". Not just the CNT but members of the UGT and the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unity) joined in the fighting. For these workers this was not just a war to defeat the fascists but the beginning of a revolution. Workers militias were established independently of the state. Workplaces which had been abandoned by the former bosses were taken over and in the rural areas the peasants seized the land. For the anarchists this was the chance to put their ideas into practice.



# **Anarchism in Action**

Anarchism is a most misunderstood set of ideas. It is constantly portrayed as meaning chaos and violence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Anarchists believe in creating a classless society. They oppose capitalism as a system that puts the profits of a small minority of bosses before the needs of the vast majority. It is a system based on the exploitation of workers, a system that inevitably causes poverty starvation and war. Anarchists oppose authority in the sense of opposing the 'right' of any small minority to have power over everyone else. They oppose the State (meaning government, army, police, courts) as an institution whose purpose is to enforce the will of a minority on the majority.

Anarchists believe in class struggle, that the bosses and workers have no common interest and that the workers must organise to take over the running of society Ordinary workers are quite capable of running society. It would be done through a system of workers' councils with mass democracy which would be far more rational democratic and efficient than the existing set-up. Anarchists stand up for the freedom of the individual and oppose all oppression on the basis of race, sex or sexual orientation. The only limit on individual freedom should be that it does not interfere with the freedom of others.

From early on the anarchists opposed the building of bureaucratic State Capitalism in Russia. Initially they supported the revolution but were against the attempts of the Bolsheviks to take power into their own hands and create the seeds of the "dictatorship of the party". Anarchists hold that how you organise will reflect the type of society you want. Small minorities can not liberate the working class, the working class will have to emancipate itself. Democracy and accountability are the cornerstone of anarchist organisation. Direct action is the method. Rather than relying on small groups they say workers do have the power and strength to change society. That strength lies in their ability to organise at the place of work, a strength that should be used not only to win immediate reforms from the bosses but eventually to overthrow the whole system of capitalism. This belief is central to anarchism Anarchists do not only want workers' control of industry, they want a society where all relationships of authority are abolished and people do not look to others to run their lives.

## **Bakunin**

Anarchism had, and still has, a long tradition in Spain. In the middle of the last century anarchist ideas were brought to Spain by Fanelli, an Italian supporter of Michael Bakunin who was one of the founders of modern anarchism. A Spanish section of the First International was set up and the majority within it took the side of the anarchists in the International.

Anarchism developed rapidly due to the harsh economic conditions that workers and peasants had to suffer. Workers increasingly took up the ideas of syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism, which were developed at the turn of the century. 1911 saw the formation of the CNT. Syndicalism developed as a response to the reformism of the existing trade unions and to the growing isolation of anarchist revolutionaries from the mass of workers. This had happened as a result of a small number of anarchists turning to terrorism and 'propaganda by the deed', the belief that they could incite the masses to revolution by committing outrages.

Syndicalism was an attempt to provide a link between the anarchist movement and the workers on the shopfloor. Its basic ideas revolved around all the workers being in one big union. All the employees in a workplace would join. They would link up with those in other jobs in the same

area and an area federation would be formed. Delegates from these would go forward to regional federations who were united in a national federation. All the delegates were elected and recallable. They were given a clear mandate and if they broke it they could be replaced with new delegates.

## **Bureaucracy**

Every effort was made to prevent the growth of a bureaucracy of unaccountable full-time officials. There was only one full-time official in all of the CNT. Union work was done during working hours where possible, otherwise after work. This ensured the officials of the union stayed in contact with the shopfloor. The fear of bureaucracy was such that Industrial Federations that would have linked together all the workplaces of particular industries were hotly opposed. They were eventually conceded in 1931 but never fully built.

Syndicalists distinguished themselves from the other unions by their belief that the unions could be used not only to gain reforms from the bosses but also to overthrow the capitalist system. They believed the Syndicalist union would become the battering ram that would bring capitalism to its knees. They believed that the reason most workers were not revolutionaries was that their unions were reformist and dominated by a bureaucracy that took the initiative away from the rank and file members. Their alternative was to organise all workers into one union in preparation for the revolutionary general strike.

The CNT experienced rapid growth from the time of its formation and by the outbreak of the civil war it had almost two million members. Its strongholds were in Catalonia and Andalusia. It also had large followings in Galicia, Asturias, Levant, Saragossa and Madrid. Its main strength was among textile, building and wood workers as well as amongst agricultural labourers. As it preached social revolution it was subject to vicious repression not only under the semi-dictatorship which ruled until 1931 but also the 'reforming' governments which followed. The Popular Front, with its social democratic and Stalinist supporters, joined this list by showing it no mercy.

## **A-Politicism**

The CNT was not a revolutionary political organisation. It was an industrial union. Indeed it constantly played up its a-politicism and argued that all that was necessary to make a revolution was for the workers to seize the factories and land. After that the State and all other political institutions would come toppling down. It did not believe the working class must take political power for them all power had to be immediately abolished.

Because it was a union it organised all workers regardless of their politics. Many joined, not because they were anarchists, but because it was the most militant union and actually got results. In fact during the civil war its membership more than doubled (this happened to the UGT too) at least partly due to workers being obliged to join one or other union.

So obviously the CNT was open to those who were not anarchists. There were many internal disputes, and tendencies did arise that were reformist. Because of this the Federation of Iberian Anarchists (FAI) was set up in 1927. It was based on local affinity groups and was not a political organisation as such. It was there to ensure that the CNT remained 'pure' in anarchist (FAI) terms. It succeeded in this and many of its members became the leading lights of the CNT. Other

anarchist organisations that existed when the civil war broke out were the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth (FIJL) and Mujeres Libres (Free Women).

There is absolutely no doubt that the initial response to Franco's coup was determined by the fact that the CNT and its anarchist ideas held sway among large sections of the working class. There was no waiting around for government ministers to act, the workers took control. Anarchist influence could be seen in the formation of the militias, the expropriation and reorganisation of the land, and the seizures in industry.

## Militias

The government found itself in a peculiar situation when the dust had settled after July 19<sup>th</sup>. While it remained the government it had no way of exercising its authority. Most of the army had openly rebelled against it. Where the rebellion had been defeated the army was disbanded and the workers now had the arms. The trade unions and left-wing organisations immediately set about organising these armed workers. Militias were formed and these became the units of the revolutionary army. Ten days after the coup there were 18,000 workers organised in the militias of Catalonia. The vast majority of these were members of the CNT. Overall there were 150,000 volunteers willing to fight whenever they were needed.

This was no ordinary army. There were no uniforms (neck scarves usually indicated what organisation a militia member belonged to) or officers who enjoyed privileges over the ordinary soldiers. This was a revolutionary army and reflected the revolutionary principles of those in its ranks. Democracy was control. The basic unit was the group, composed generally of ten, which elected a delegate. Ten groups formed a century which also elected a delegate. Any number of centuries formed a column, which had a war committee responsible for the overall activities of the column. This was elected and accountable to the workers. Columns generally had ex-officers and artillery experts to advise them – but these were not given any power.

Workers joined the columns because they wanted to. They understood the need to fight and the necessity of creating a “popular army”. They accepted discipline not because they were told to but because they understood the need to act in a co-ordinated manner. Members accepted orders because they trusted those who gave them. They had been elected from their own ranks. Militias were aligned with different organisations and often had their own newspapers. These were political organisations that understood the link between revolutionary politics and the war. The militias formed in Barcelona lost no time in marching on Aragon where the capital, Saragossa, had been taken by the fascists. The Durruti Column, named after one of the leading CNT militants, led this march and gradually liberated village after village. The aim was to free Saragossa which linked Catalonia with the second industrial region – the Basque Country, which as well as being a source of raw materials had heavy industries and arms manufacturing plants.

The Durruti column showed how to fight fascism. They understood that a civil war is a political battle, not just a military conflict. As they gained victory after victory they encouraged peasants to take over the land and collectivise. The Column provided the defence that allowed this to be done. The peasants rallied to them. They fed the worker-soldiers and many of them joined. Indeed Durutti had to plead with some of them not to join so that the land would not be depopulated and the task of collectivisation could be carried through.

As the anarchist militias achieved success after success ground was being lost on other fronts. Saragossa, though, was not taken and a long front developed. The militia system was blamed for this. The Stalinists said the workers were undisciplined and would not obey orders. They accused the anarchists of being unwilling to work with others to defeat the fascists.

Of course this was nonsense. The anarchists continually called for a united war effort and even for a single command. What they did demand, though, was that control of the army stayed with the working class. They did not believe that establishing a united command necessitated re-establishing the old militarist regime the officer caste.

The major problem facing the militias was a lack of arms. The munitions industry had been cut off and the workers in Barcelona went to great lengths to improvise. Arms were made and transported to the front but there were still not enough of them. George Orwell (who fought in one of the POUM militias) described the arms situation on the Aragon front. The infantry “were far worse armed than an English public school Officers Training Corps, with worn out Mauser rifles which usually jammed after five shots; approximately one machine gun to fifty men (sic) and one pistol or revolver to about thirty men (sic). These weapons, so necessary in trench warfare, were not issued by the government... A government which sends boys of fifteen to the front with rifles forty years old and keeps its biggest men and newest weapons in the rear is manifestly more afraid of the revolution than the fascists”.

And how right he was. An arms embargo was imposed by Britain preventing the sale of arms to either side, but not until mid-August. The government which had 600,000,000 dollars in gold, could have brought arms. Eventually this gold was sent to Moscow in exchange for arms but when they arrived there was a systematic refusal to supply the anarchist-controlled Aragon front. The arms that did arrive were sent only to Stalinist-controlled centres. A member of the war ministry referring to the arms which arrived in September commented “I noticed that these were not being given out in equal quantities, but there was a marked preference for the units which made up the Fifth Regiment”. This was controlled by the Stalinists. The Catalan munitions plants, which depended on the central government for finance were compelled to surrender their product to such destinations as the government chose. This withholding of arms was fundamental to the strategy of the Stalinists and their allies in government for breaking down the power and prestige of the CNT. The communists wanted to undermine the militias in their efforts to have the regular army restarted. But more of this later.

This lack of arms did not only affect the Aragon front. Irun fell because of the shortage of weapons. One reporter described it. “They fought to the last cartridge (the workers of Irun. When they had no more ammunition they hurled packs of dynamite. When the dynamite was gone they rushed forward barehanded while the sixty times stronger enemy butchered them with their bayonets’. In Asturia the workers were bogged down trying to take Oviedo armed with little more than rifles and crude dynamite bombs. Although a few planes and artillery pieces were begged for, the workers were turned down. Again the government’s fear of revolutionary workers took precedence over defeating the fascists.

It is a common lie that the militias, supposedly undisciplined and uncontrollable, were responsible for Franco’s advance. All who saw the militias in action had nothing but praise for the heroism they witnessed. The government made a deliberate choice. It chose to starve the revolutionary workers of arms, it decided that defeating the revolution was more important than defeating fascism.

## The Land

The peasants did not have to be told by Durruti to take over the land. They had been attempting to do so since the foundation of the Republic. Indeed the first government of the Republic had sent troops to murder peasants who had taken land. In the Republic's first two years, 109 peasants were murdered. It was in the countryside that the Spanish revolution was most far reaching. The anarchist philosophy had been absorbed by large layers of the downtrodden peasants. Indeed at its 1936 Congress the CNT had gone into great detail as to how the anarchist society of the future would look. The peasantry took the opportunity to put these ideas into practice. Their efforts showed what could be done by working people (many of whom were illiterate) given the right conditions. They made a nonsense of the argument that anarchism is not possible because society would collapse without bosses, government and authority.

Collectivisation of the land was extensive. Close on two thirds of all land in the Republican zone (that area controlled by the anti-fascist forces) was taken over. In all between five and seven million peasants were involved. The major areas were Aragon where there were 450 collectives, the Levant (the area around Valencia) with 900 collectives and Castille (the area surrounding Madrid) with 300 collectives. Not only was the land collectivised but in the villages workshops were set up where the local tradespeople could produce tools, furniture, etc. Bakers, butchers, barbers and so on also decided to collectivise.

Collectivisation was voluntary and thus quite different from the forced "collectivisation" presided over by Stalin in Russia. Usually a meeting was called in the village, most collectives were centred on a particular village, and all present would agree to pool together whatever land, tools and animals they had. This would be added to what had already been taken from the big landowners. The land was divided into rational units and groups of workers were assigned to work them. Each group had its delegate who represented their views at meetings of the collective. A management committee was also elected and was responsible for the overall running of the collective. They would look after the buying of materials, exchanges with other areas, distributing the produce and necessary public works such as the building of schools. Each collective held regular general meetings of all its participants.

If you didn't want to join the collective you were given some land but only as much as you could work yourself. You were not allowed to employ workers. Not only production was affected, distribution was on the basis of what people needed. In many areas money was abolished. People came to the collective store (often churches which had been turned into warehouses) and got what was available. If there were shortages rationing would be introduced to ensure that everyone got their fair share. But it was usually the case that increased production under the new system eliminated shortages.

In agricultural terms the revolution occurred at a good time. Harvests that were gathered in and being sold off to make big profits for a few landowners were instead distributed to those in need. Doctors, bakers, barbers, etc. were given what they needed in return for their services. Where money was not abolished a 'family wage' was introduced so that payment was on the basis of need and not the number of hours worked.

Production greatly increased. Technicians and agronomists helped the peasants to make better use of the land. Modern scientific methods were introduced and in some areas yields increased by as much as 50%. There was enough to feed the collectivists and the militias in their areas. Often

there was enough for exchange with other collectives in the cities for machinery. In addition food was handed over to the supply committees who looked after distribution in the urban areas.

As with the militias, slander was also thrown at the collectives. It was claimed that each one only looked after itself and did not care about the others. This was rubbish as in many areas equalisation funds were set up to redistribute wealth from the better off areas to the poorer ones. It was ensured that machinery and expertise were shifted to the areas most in need of it. Indeed one indicator of the feeling of solidarity is the fact that 1,000 collectivists from the Levant, which was quite advanced, moved to Castille to help out.

Federations of collectives were established, the most successful being in Aragon. In June 1937 a plenum of Regional Federations of Peasants was held. Its aim was the formation of a national federation “for the co-ordination and extension of the collectivist movement and also to ensure an equitable distribution of the produce of the land, not only between the collectives but for the whole country”. Unfortunately many collectives were smashed, not by Franco’s army but by the soldiers of the Stalinist General Lister, before this could be done.

The collectivists were not only concerned with their material well being. They had a deep commitment to education and as a result of their efforts many children received an education for the first time. This was not the usual schooling either. The methods of Francisco Ferrer, the world famous anarchist educationalist, were employed. Children were given basic literacy skills and after that inquisitive skills were encouraged. Old people were also looked after and where necessary special homes for them were built. Refugees from the fascist controlled areas were looked after too.

## Industry

Although the revolution didn’t go as far in the cities as it did in the country, many achievements are worth noting. It was in Catalonia, the industrial heartland and stronghold of the CNT, that most was gained. In Barcelona over 3,000 enterprises were collectivised. All the public services, not only in Catalonia but throughout the Republican zone, were taken over and run by committees of workers.

To give some idea of the extent of the collectivisation here is a list provided by one observer (Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage* by no means an anarchist book). He says “railways, traincars and buses, taxicabs and shipping, electric light and power companies, gasworks and waterworks, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines and cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries were confiscated and controlled by workmens’ (sic) committees, either term possessing for the owners almost equal significance”. He goes on “motion picture theatres and legitimate theatres, newspapers and printing, shops, department stores and hotels, de-lux restaurants and bars were likewise sequestered”.

This shows clearly that the portrayal of anarchism as being something to do with quaint small workshops is untrue. Large factories, some of them employing thousands of workers, were taken over and run by workers’ committees.

Often the workplaces were siezed because the owners had fled or had stopped production to sabotage the revolution. But the workers did not stop with these workplaces all major places of work were taken over. Some were run and controlled by the workers. In others “control com-

mittees” were established to ensure that production was maintained (these existed to exercise a power of veto on the decisions of the boss in cases where the workers had not taken over the power of management).

In each workplace the assembly of all the workers was the basic unit. Within the factory workers would elect delegates to represent them on day-to-day issues. Anything of overall importance had to go to the assembly. This would elect a committee of between five and fifteen worker, which would elect a manager to oversee the day-to-day running of the workplace – within each industry there was an Industrial Council which had representatives of the two main unions (CNT and UGT) and representatives from the committees. Technicians were also on these committees to provide technical advice. The job of the Industrial Council was to set out an overall plan for the industry.

Within workplaces wages were equalised and conditions greatly improved. Let us see how collectivisation actually made things better. Take for example the tramways. Out of the 7,000 workers, 6,500 were members of the CNT. Because of the street battles all transport had been brought to a halt. The transport syndicate (as unions of the CNT were known) appointed a commission of seven to occupy the administrative offices while others inspected the tracks and drew up a plan of repair work that needed to be done. Five days after the fighting stopped 700 tramcars, instead of the usual 600, all painted in the black and red colours of the CNT, were operating on the streets of Barcelona.

With the profit motive gone, safety became more important and the number of accidents was reduced. Fares were lowered and services improved. In 1936, 183,543, 516 passengers were carried. In 1937 this had gone up by 50 million. The trams were running so efficiently that the workers were able to give money to other sections of urban transport. Wages were equalised for all workers and increased over the previous rates. For the first time free medical care was provided for the work force.

As well as giving a more efficient service the workers found time to produce rockets and howitzers for the war effort. They worked overtime and Sundays to do their share for the anti-fascist struggle. To further underline the fact that getting rid of the bosses and rulers would not lead to a breakdown of order it can be pointed out that in the two years of collectivisation there were only six cases of workers stealing from the workshops.

Extensive reorganisation took place to make industry more efficient. Many uneconomic small plants, which were usually unhealthy, were closed down and production was concentrated in those plants with the best equipment. In Catalonia 70 foundries were closed down. The number of tanning plants was reduced from 71 to 40 and the whole wood industry was reorganised by the CNT Woodworkers Union.

In 1937 the central government admitted that the war industry of Catalonia produced ten times more than the rest of Spanish industry put together and that this output could have been quadrupled if Catalonia had the access to necessary means of purchasing raw materials.

It was not only production that was taken over. Many parasitic ‘middlemen’ were cut out of distribution. The wholesale business in fish and eggs was taken over as were the principal fruit and vegetable markets. The milk trade in Barcelona was collectivised which saw over 70 unhygienic pasteurising plants closed down. Every where supply committees were set up. All of this made the middle classes very unhappy. To them, with their notions of becoming bigger bosses, the revolution was a step back.



Again equalisation funds were established to help out the poorer collectives. Indeed there were many problems. Many markets were cut off in the fascist zone and some foreign markets were also temporarily lost. Raw materials were short as sources of supply were cut off, and when they could be obtained funds were held back by the central government. This was one short-coming of the collectivisation.

The banks had not been seized and the gold reserve already referred to stayed in the hands of the government. (The CNT did hatch a plan to seize it but backed down at the last moment).

Despite all this production was increased and living standards for many working class people improved. In October 1936 the government was forced to recognise the collectivisation by passing a decree that recognised the *fait accompli*. It was also an attempt to control future collectivisation.

## Social Revolution

This is only a very brief look at the collectivisation that happened. In keeping with anarchist beliefs the revolution did not stop there. For the first time in Spain many workers had the benefit of a health service – organised by the CNT Federation of Health Workers. The Federation consisted of 40,000 health workers – nurses, doctors, administrators and orderlies. Once again the major success was in Catalonia where it ensured that all of the 2.5 million inhabitants had adequate health care.

Not only were traditional services provided but victims of the Civil War were also treated. A programme of preventive medicine was also established based on local community health centres. At their 1937 Congress these workers developed a health plan for a future anarchist Spain which could have been implemented if the revolution had been successful.

The role of women also changed. Many gains were made by them. In relation to their role during the Civil war observers have pointed out that they played a full part in the anti-fascist resistance. They were present everywhere – on committees, in the militias, in the front line. In the early battles of the war women fought alongside the men as a matter of course. It was not merely a case of women filling in for men who were away at the front. (Which is usually the case in wartime. When the war is over and women are no longer needed in the labour force, they are pushed back into the home).

They were in the militias and fought alongside the men as equals. They were organising the collectives and taking up the fight against the sexist attitudes of the past which have no place in any real revolution.

The Anarchist women's organisation, *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women), had 30,000 members. It had been active before the Civil War organising women workers and distributing information on contraception. During the war abortion was legalised in the 'republican zone'. Centres were opened for women, including unmarried mothers and prostitutes.

From all accounts there truly were changes in attitudes to women. One woman participant in the Civil War has said "it was like being brothers and sisters. It had always annoyed me that men in this country didn't consider women as beings with human rights. But now there was this big change. I believe it arose spontaneously out of the revolutionary movement..." Margorita Balaguer quoted in *Blood of Spain* ed. Ronald Fraser, page 287.

Everywhere change was apparent. The whole character of Barcelona changed. Posh restaurants no longer existed. Collective eating houses took their place. A spirit of comradeship was in the air.

Everywhere councils of workers and peasants had taken over administration. The Defence Council of Aragon was one of the highest expressions of this. It ran the province and co-ordinated the work of the collectives and militias. All the anti-fascist forces were represented on it but the anarchists were in the majority. In Catalonia a Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias was set up on July 21<sup>st</sup>. Of its fifteen members five were anarchists, three were UGT, POUM had one, the Communist Party had one and the republicans had four. Although the anarchists were supreme in this province they hoped by sharing power that similar committees would be formed where the CNT was weaker.

This was the situation in 1936. Although the Popular Front government still existed it had no power. It was shorn of the repressive organs of the state. Power was split into countless fragments and scattered in a thousand towns and villages among the revolutionary committees that had taken control of the land and factories, means of transport and communication, the police and the army. The military, economic and political struggle was proceeding independently of the government, and, indeed, in spite of it.

Such a situation is known as one of "dual power". The power of the government was too weak to challenge the power of the workers and peasants. And that power was not conscious enough of the need to dispense with the existence of the government. Failure to do this allowed it to restore its authority and become master of the situation. In trying to understand how this happened it is necessary to look at the role of the Communist Party and that of the CNT leadership.

# **The Counter-Revolution**

The behaviour of the Spanish Communist Party and the United Socialist Party of a Catalonia (PSUC) had more to do with what was in the best interests of Stalin than what was in the best interests of the Spanish working class. They went out of their way to deny that a revolution had taken place. Then they did all they could to repress this revolution they pretended had not happened. As far as they were concerned the Civil War was only about restoring democracy to Spain. To see why they took this attitude we have to look outside Spain.

## **Stalin**

Stalin believed that above all else “socialism” in the USSR had to be defended. The interests of the European (and indeed the world) working class had to take second place to the strategic interests of the ruling bureaucracy in Russia. And they felt very threatened in the 1930s. Hitler had come to power in 1933 and despite the fact that Stalin was seeking no quarrel with Germany (three months after the nazi take-over Stalin had signed an extension to the 1926 German-Soviet Pact) relations between the two countries soon cooled.

Stalin’s fear was that the British and French would do a deal with Hitler and thus leave Russia open to attack. He believed they would be content to sit back and watch Germany and Russia slog it out. When both had exhausted themselves Britain and France would move in as masters of Europe.

Because of this Stalin signed a Mutual Assistance Pact with France in 1935. There was no commitment to mutual military assistance in this. For the French it was a way of removing any remaining links between Germany and Russia while at the same time getting the French Communist Party to drop its opposition to their government’s defence programme.

So to prevent the British and French settling their differences with Hitler at the expense of the Soviets, in order to guarantee that the Franco-Soviet Pact would not fall by the wayside and in order to conclude similar pacts with the governments of other countries, notably Britain, it was essential that governments hostile to German aims in Eastern Europe should be brought to power. It was to this end that the Popular Front line was adopted at the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Comintern in August 1935. This body, also known as the Third International, collected together all the Communist Parties under Russian leadership

## **Popular Front**

The immediate aim of this policy was to bring the middle classes and sections of the bosses into a wide anti-fascist peoples front. To do this Communist Parties were to play down revolutionary politics. This was to be a struggle to preserve bourgeois democracy; and to attract middle class republican and liberal parties extreme positions were never adopted.

The Popular Front policy was quite successful. Early in 1936 Popular Front governments were elected in France and Spain. The programmes of these governments were very moderate. In Spain a socialist proposal that the land be nationalised was dropped because of republican opposition. There the Popular Front consisted of the Republican Party, the Republican Union, the Socialist Party, the POUM, the Syndicalist Party, Basque and Catalan nationalists (who saw their autonomy under threat from the right) and of course the Communist Party.

When the Civil War broke out Stalin's instructions were clear. All of the Communists' efforts were to be directed to one end – winning the support of Britain and France and persuading them to drop their neutrality. A non-intervention agreement had been signed in August 1936 with the hope of preventing the extension of the conflict. Stalin believed that if Britain and France were to drop this policy the Civil War could ultimately develop into a much larger conflict (Germany and Italy were already giving military aid to the fascists). This conflict, from which Russia would remain aloof would bring the warring parties to the point of mutual exhaustion and the Russian bosses would then emerge as the new masters of Europe. Thus the revolutionary aspects of the Civil War were to be denied and, the struggle was to be portrayed (and was to become), a struggle that went no further than basic democratic demands. Initially the Stalinists had felt a need to talk of making a revolution after the fascists were defeated. Even this empty talk soon stopped.

Of course the Stalinist (and Leninist) Conception of socialism, is quite different from that of the anarchists. It is central to anarchism that the masses take control and run society through a system of councils. For the Stalinists socialism entails nationalising everything and turning over the running of society to the State, which will be dominated by the Party. Control passes into the hands of professionals, technicians and bureaucrats who begin to develop their own class interests. Even if the Stalinists had decided to fight for 'socialism' they would still have had to undermine the anarchists.

This policy of wooing the British and French ruling classes was from the beginning doomed to failure – not only because of their military unpreparedness but because of their belief that if they became involved at this stage in a war with Hitler, both they and the Nazis would be weakened and thus the position of Russia would be enhanced. At all times right up to the outbreak of W.W.II the British sought to come to terms with Hitler which would leave him free to attack Russia in the East.

## Navy

The activities of the Navy, which had remained loyal to the Republic, were severely curtailed so as not to upset Anglo-French interests in the Strait of Gibraltar. The navy had been very successful in harassing Franco's base in Morocco but their activities were halted to keep the two foreign powers happy. In line with this the Republican government refused to give Morocco its independence and thus deprive Franco of his base – to do this would have upset British and French colonial interests in North Africa. The example of Spanish Morocco could have given other subject nations ideas. Indeed at one stage the government offered to give Britain and France interests in Spanish Morocco in exchange for their intervention.

The revolution that had broken out was of supreme embarrassment to the Communists. Whatever chance they had of winning over Britain and France was lessened by the fact that a social revolution had started. There was no way the British and French governments would intervene on the side of revolutionaries. Thus the revolution was to be hidden and eventually suppressed. The power of the collectives and militias was to be smashed.

At the outbreak of the Civil War there were 40,000 members of the Spanish Communist Party. The question naturally arises as to how such a small organisation could so decisively influence the course of events and in time become the dominant group in the Popular Front camp.

In building their Party the Communists placed a lot of emphasis on Catalonia as this was the heartland of the revolution. The collectivisation movement seriously upset the middle classes. Small businesses were closed and everywhere 'middle-men' found their role abolished as the workers committees took over distribution. The middle classes would have turned to their traditional parties but viewed them as incapable of stemming the collectivisation movement. The Communist Party seemed the only party serious about protecting their property or getting it back from the workers. One former Communist commented "In Murcia and elsewhere I saw that our placards and leaflets appealed for shopkeepers' membership with the promise of absolute support for private property".

## Leaps and Bounds

Membership of the Communist Party grew in leaps and bounds. Within a few months of the outbreak of the war 76,700 peasant proprietors and tenant farmers along with 15,485 members of the urban middle classes had joined up. Its influence among these layers went far beyond these figures as thousands of members of the intermediate classes, without actually joining the Party, placed themselves under its wing. As a means of protecting the interests of the urban middle classes in Catalonia the Communists organised 18,000 tradesmen, handicraftmen and small manufacturers into an organisation called the C.E.P.C.I Solidaridad Obrero (Workers Solidarity) the paper of the CNT commented that some of those in this body were "intransigent employers, ferociously anti-labour". By March 1937 the Communist Party had 250,000 members.

Other measures were also taken to extend its influence. Only four days after the military uprising, the Communists merged with the Catalan Socialists to form the PSUC. The local UGT came under PSUC dominion. Leading members of both the Socialist Party and the UGT in other areas defected to the Communists, some secretly. Many members of the Socialist Party could see little difference between their line and that of the Communists winning the war came before the revolution, conciliatory attitudes towards foreign powers, etc. But because the Communists had the stronger Party apparatus (reinforced as it was by Moscow) it was able to recruit at the expense of the Socialists. Many joined because of its "proselytising zeal, immensely skillful propaganda, its vigour, its organising capacity and the prestige it derived from Soviet arms".

The Communists gained control of the JSU (United Socialist Youth). This grouping resulted from a merger of the Communists and Socialist youth organisations. It had 50,000 members and was formed shortly before the war began. Most of the leading members of the Socialist Youth defected to the Communists with the merger and thus ensured Communist control of the new organisation.

It would be wrong to suggest that the counter-revolution that came was only as a result of the line and activities of the Communists. The Republicans and Socialists agreed with them. The Republicans, who lacked any real base among the masses, retired to the background and ceded to the Communists the delicate job of opposing the social revolution and defending the middle classes. Even Largo Caballero, who became Prime Minister in August, the one time left wing Socialist and leader of the UGT, declared on forming the government that it was "necessary to sacrifice revolutionary language to win the friendship of the democratic powers" and the "Spanish government is not fighting for socialism but for democracy and constitutional rule". Although

Caballero did not go all the way with the Communists there were many in his party, even his closest allies, who worked for the Communist line against the social revolution.

It must also be stated that the participation of members of the CNT in the government helped the growing counter-revolution. They entered the Catalan government in September (it must be remembered that Catalonia was semi-autonomous) and the national government in November 1936. This will be dealt with in more detail in the final chapter, suffice to say their participation lent the government a certain credibility with the masses. The key element in proving to the world that the fight in Spain was simply to restore democracy, to rebuild the shattered state machine and return to the government the authority and power that was in the hands of the armed workers. CNT participation served to put a check on the masses and make them believe they had a stake in the government and should defend it.

## **Russian Arms**

The point about the Communist Party is that they directed the counter-revolution. They called the shots. They were the only people who were clear about the ‘necessity’ for the counter-revolution and had the determination to carry it through. Their ability to do this was derived from the prestige that came with the fact that Russia was the only country supplying major quantities of arms to the Republic. (Mexico was the only other country to help, supplying a small quantity). The Russians not only supplied arms but also military advisors and technicians who gradually took over the running of the war.

Stalinists will tell you that Russia provided arms right from the beginning. This is a lie — Stalin at first agreed to the non-intervention pact for fear of antagonising the West. The first arms did not arrive until October and then it was out of fear that German and Italian arms would give a decisive edge to the fascists. Aid was given “covertly and in order to limit the possibility of involving Russia in a war” (Krivitsky In Stalin’s Secret Service p. 81 — Krivitsky was Stalin’s Chief of Intelligence in Western Europe). Because of this fear of involvement in war with Germany and Italy, aid was limited to bolstering the resistance until such time as Britain and France might intervene. This aid had to be paid for — the Spanish gold reserve was moved to Moscow.

The Communists knew that if a far reaching counter-revolution was to be enforced the State, with their support, would have to regain control of the army and the police. There was no point in telling workers to drop collectivisation and give up their arms if this order could not be imposed. All States rest on this use of force and that is why a successful revolution can only be made when the people are armed.

Because of Soviet aid it was easy for the Communists to gain control of the armed forces. It was not because of the amount of arms sent but the fact that the Soviets were the major purveyors of war materials. The Navy and Air Minister, Prieto, often made fun of his office declaring that he “was neither a Minister or anything else because he received no obedience from the air force. The real Air Minister was the Russian General Duglas”.

## **Militarization**

Because of this control of arms the Communists, supported by the others, enforced militarisation. The militia system was broken up. A regular army was rebuilt with officers, regimentation,

saluting and differential rates of pay. The militias who refused to come under the command of the War Ministry (and many CNT and POUM militias did refuse) were starved of arms. They were left with no choice.

The new army was built under Communist control. They knew that without control of the army they could not hope to control the anti-fascist camp. Because the Fifth Regiment (the major Stalinist controlled unit) took a lead in disbanding, the Communists gained control of five of the six brigades of the new army. They also gained control of the General Commissariat of War which was set up for the purpose of exercising political control of the army through the medium of political commissars. As most of these were Stalinists they controlled the flow of political papers to the front. Invariably the anarchist papers were held up. All the soldiers read were the lies of the Communist Party.

Not only the army was rebuilt but also the police, especially the hated Civil Guards who had been a bulwark of repression against the CNT. They were now to be called the National Republican Guard. The Assault Guards were re-established and had 28,000 recruits by the beginning of December. The Carabineros, who were the border police in charge of customs and under the control of Minister of Finance Negrin (a known Communist sympathiser) grew to 40,000 members. Before the War there were only 16000 of them and that was in the whole of Spain. Negrin's under-secretary made it clear what their role was "You are the guardians of the state and those visionaries who believe that a chaotic situation of social indiscipline and licentiousness is permissible are utterly mistaken because the army of the people, as well as you Carabineros, will know how to prevent it".

The state was giving itself a monopoly of force. The workers' patrols which had sprung up in July were disbanded. Workers were ordered to hand in their arms and those who declined to do so were considered 'fascists'. It was said that these arms were needed at the front. While it is true that arms were needed at the front this argument was only put forward as a means of disarming revolutionary workers. There were plenty of arms under the control of the police. George Orwell observed after the May Days in Barcelona "the Anarchists were well aware that even if they surrendered their arms, the PSUC would retain theirs, and this is in fact what happened after the fighting was over. Meanwhile actually visible on the streets, there were quantities of arms which would have been very welcome at the front, but which were being retained for the 'non-political' police forces in the rear". (Homage to Catalonia p.151).

The counter-revolution now moved against the Collectives. On January 7<sup>th</sup> 1937 the dissolution of the workers supply committees was declared. Distribution of food was handed over to the G.E.P.C.I. This led to shortages and hoarding to inflate prices. For the first time in the war Barcelona experienced hunger yet there was plenty of food. The collectives were blamed but it was well known that if you joined the PSUC you could be guaranteed food.

## Nationalization

Credit was withheld from those workplaces who refused to come under government control. As said earlier the banks had not been taken over so the government had a huge lever against the workers. Nationalisation of major industries was declared thus bringing them under government control. They claimed this was necessary for the war effort. They claimed the collectives were inefficient and that each workplace was only concerned with its own profits. It cannot be denied



there were problems with some better off collectives. But the CNT was aiming at co-ordination through socialisation under the control of the workers. To do this all private ownership of the means of production would have to end. Of course the Communists would not allow this as it threatened their cherished middle classes.

On the land collectivisation was allowed only for the lands of fascists, the estates of those who supported the Republic were to be handed back. How far the Communists were prepared to go was illustrated by the invasion of Aragon. The Defence Council of Aragon was declared illegal in August 1937. This declaration was followed by the invasion led by General Lister's (a PSUC member) 11<sup>th</sup> Division. According to the CNT the land, farm implements, cattle and horses which had been confiscated from supporters of the right wing were returned to their former owners.

In some villages farms were deprived of the seed needed for sowing while 600 CNT members were arrested. In all, 30% of the collectives were destroyed and the sowing of crops was disrupted. As can be imagined nothing but hatred, resentment and disillusionment resulted from this invasion and the repression that followed. The peasants began to wonder what they were fighting for. The resultant disillusionment no doubt contributed to the collapse of the front a few months later. Similar attacks were made on the collectives in Levant and Castille.

This showed how far the 'socialists' of the Communist Party were prepared to go to follow Stalin's instructions. A more sinister aspect of this was the existence in Spain of prisons belonging to the Soviet secret police, the GPU (forerunners of the KGB). Their existence has been established beyond all doubt. In December 1936 Pravda declared "As for, Catalonia, the purging of the Trotskyists and the Anarcho-Syndicalists has begun, it will be conducted with the same energy with which it was conducted in the USSR".

Here is what Krivitsky had to say about the activities of the GPU in Spain, the decision to establish it having been taken at an emergency conference in Moscow on September 14<sup>th</sup>. "The GPU had its own special prisons. Its units carried out assassinations and kidnappings. It killed in hidden dungeons and made flying raids. The Ministry of Justice had no authority over the GPU. It was a power before which even some of the highest officers in the Cabellero government trembled. The Soviet Union seemed to have a grip on loyalist Spain, as if it was already a Soviet possession". (In Stalin's Secret Service p. 102).

The aim was to eliminate revolutionaries. Anybody who dared to speak out against what they were doing could be the next to suffer. Nin, the leader of the POUM, was murdered by the GPU as was Camillo Berneri, an Italian anarchist who was critical of the CNT leadership. He published a paper, Guerra di Classe, which argued for a revolutionary war against fascism. He was murdered by so called 'socialists' for his principled revolutionary position. In July 1937 60 members of the CNT 'disappeared', a term used then as now for those killed by the secret police, though today it applies to the dictatorships of Latin America.

## Two Roads

Thus two mutually exclusive ways of fighting fascism emerged. Firstly you could view it as the Stalinists and their supporters did. Go out of your way to placate the bosses in England and France and hope against hope they would intervene. So fight it as a Civil War a war over who were the legitimate rulers of Spain. Relegate politics to a secondary role. Put revolutionary politics on the back burner. Tie up thousands of arms in the rear repressing the workers' movement. Smash

collectivisation and sacrifice the gains of the workers and peasants to the international interests of Stalin.

Opposed to this was the view that a revolutionary war should be fought. Make revolutionary politics your central weapon. Give the land and factories to those who work them. Make propaganda behind the fascist lines. Give the peasants a real reason to fight Franco. Make it clear that collectivisation would benefit them. As it was many lived in fear of the Stalinists smashing their collectives. Giving the land to the peasants and making that a central plank of the fight would have deprived Franco of many soldiers who were the sons and daughters of peasants.

Give freedom to Morocco. Organising an uprising there against Franco would have deprived him of a central source of supplies and arms. Appeal directly to the European working class (whose governments had no interests in supporting — the Spanish Revolution. Appeal to the French workers, who in 1937 were entering the second year of an upsurge which had begun with mass strikes the previous year. Their action could have prevented intervention against the revolution by France, and indeed Britain.

Seize the gold reserves and expropriate the banks. Use this money to buy arms and make sure arms went to the fronts where they were needed. These were the sort of things that should have been done. They were no guarantee of victory but could have lit a spark which could have ignited right throughout Europe and broken the isolation of the Spanish Revolution. It could have marked a turning point for the whole of Europe. Instead Spain was to be yet another victim of fascism — and the Civil War a prelude to a bloody world war. The Popular Front could not have carried out these actions because it was based on an alliance of classes. The workers needed to take complete control. This was possible, especially in Catalonia where a regional congress of workers councils should have been called to establish a Workers Republic. This example would have been followed throughout Spain and a revolutionary war could then have been fought. Not a war to put the Communists, Socialists and Republicans back in government but a war to liberate the toiling masses.

But the working class did not take power. The CNT, which was in a central position to do this, refused. It opted for collaboration and supported decree after decree undermining the revolution. Objectively the leaders of the CNT and FAT became counter-revolutionary. In a dual power situation either the workers overthrow the ruling class and take power or the ruling class regains control. There is no middle way. The CNT in collaborating could go only one way. Revolutions cannot be half made. The working class must assert itself or the revolution is doomed. So why didn't the anarchists take power? We will now turn to this.

# **A Fresh Revolution**

As said earlier Anarchists are against the state — all states, whether they be liberal democratic, monarchist or totalitarian. Anarchists view the state (the standing army, police, government, bureaucracy) as the organ through which the ruling class maintains its control over the majority of the population. Central to anarchism is the belief that the state must be smashed and replaced by a system based on workers' and community councils. Delegates from each workplace and community would go to regional councils which would then send delegates to a national and, eventually, international council. Delegates would be clearly mandated and all major decisions would be made at assemblies of workers.

Often these councils spring up spontaneously or as organs of defence like the Soviets during the Russian revolution. Initially they started out as strike committees but quickly developed into bodies on which the new society could be built. This idea is central to anarchism. A free society cannot be built on the old structures, new ones have to be built through which the producers can be directly represented. Revolutions do not happen through parliaments or governments, or trying to take over the already existing state machine.

The councils and collectives that emerged during the Civil War, were the organs on which the revolution could have been built. But they needed to be brought together at a regional and national level so the power of the workers and peasants could assert itself and push the regional and central governments aside. This would have meant refusing to share power with the remaining elements of the ruling class, it would have been a major step in making the revolution complete.

## C.N.T

The CNT refused to do this. After July 9<sup>th</sup> its leaders in Catalonia were called into the office of Companys, the Prime Minister of Catalonia. Basically he told them they were in control of the region and he would be their faithful servant if they took over. They refused. Instead they called for the formation of the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias. This was the first step in collaboration. All parties including Republicans were represented on this body. It existed side by side with the Catalan government. The Central Committee was displaced in September 1936 when the CNT entered that government. In November four members of the CNT entered the national government in Madrid. Two of them were also in the FAI.

This is a far cry from what was stated in the CNT-FAI Information Bulletin of September 1936. In an article entitled *The Futility of Government* it said that the expropriations that were taking place would lead ipso facto to the "liquidation of the bourgeois state which would die of asphyxiation". Their members were now joining the government of this very same state.

A number of reasons were put forward for this. Essentially they amounted to swallowing the argument about Britain and France. It was said that if a social revolution was made it would be crushed and no arms would be forthcoming from the western powers (they never came anyway!). They had decided that winning the war and making the revolution were two different things and that winning the war came first. That meant collaborating in the broad anti-fascist front "... in order to win the war and save our people and the world, it (the CNT) is ready to collaborate with anyone in a directive organ, whether this organ be called a council or a government" (CNT, paper of the CNT in the Madrid region, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936.)

Another reason put forward was that by entering the government they could consolidate the gains that had been made. They could "regulate the political life of Spain by giving legal validity

to the revolutionary committees” (Juan Lopez, Anarchist Minister of Commerce). There was even an argument put around that entry into government was only for international consumption, the revolution would still go on under the veil of legal government.

For these reasons anti-fascist unity was maintained and anything that threatened to split this unity was repressed. The government knew it was very useful to have CNT representation, it was an additional means of controlling the masses. However it must be pointed out that the decision to enter the government was taken by the National Committee without any consultation with the rank and file membership. This was a real break from tradition, the necessity of acting with a minimum of delay was the reason given by the leadership.

## May Days

The role of the CNT played in government was clearly illustrated by what became known as the May Days. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1937, three lorry loads of police led by the Stalinist Salas, Commissar of Public Order, attempted to take over the telephone exchange in Barcelona which had been controlled by a joint CNT-UGT committee since the outbreak of the war. The aim of this was to wrest control of the building from the workers and to remove control of the telephone system from them. The telephonists had been able to keep tabs on what was going on by listening in on the calls of government ministers. It was also the beginning of an effort by the government to occupy strategic points in the city in preparation for an all-out attack.

The police captured the first floor because of the surprise nature of their attack but got no further. Firing started. Word spread like wildfire and within hours the local defence committees of the CNT-FAI went into action arming themselves and building barricades. The POUM supported them and soon the workers were in control of most of the city. The government had control of only the central area, which could very easily have been taken.

In other areas of Catalonia action was also taken. Civil Guards were disarmed and offices of the PSUC were seized as a “preventive measure”. There was no firing on the first night and by the second day the workers were spreading the barricades further into the suburbs. Also involved were the Libertarian Youth (FIJL). Being in control the workers could have taken over but an order from Casa CNT (the H.Q.) forbade all action and ordered workers to leave the barricades.

The leaders of the CNT entered into negotiations with the government, which had the effect of giving the government forces more time to fortify buildings and to occupy the Cathedral towers. All day Tuesday (May 4<sup>th</sup>) the Regional Committee of the CNT appealed again and again over loudspeakers for the barricades to be dismantled and for a return to work. As these appeals were made negotiations went on and appeals came into Casa CNT from other workers centres who were now coming under attack. The CNT government ministers were recalled from Valencia (where the central government was now situated) to make further appeals to the workers.

The negotiations which went on, led to nothing as regards control of the telephone exchange. The workers were ordered off the barricades and unfortunately they went. On Thursday (May 6<sup>th</sup>) the building was vacated and the PSUC took it over. On the same day the railway station was taken over by the PSUC. The CNT had also controlled that. This happened throughout Catalonia.

On Friday 5,000 Assault Guards arrived from Valencia. The repression that followed was severe. The May days left 500 dead and 1,100 wounded. Hundreds more were killed during the “mopping up” of the next few weeks.

It was in May that control over public order in Catalonia passed to Valencia and in effect Catalan autonomy ceased to exist. After May the CNT ministers along with Cabellero were disposed of. The new government was clearly under Stalinist control. The CNT ministers had served their function and were no longer necessary. The counter-revolution broke out in earnest after May with decree after decree undermining the revolutionary committees. This was now possible as the backbone of the revolution – the Catalan workers had been crushed.

## **Friends of Durruti**

During the May Days an alternative to the policies of the CNT National Committee emerged in the form of the Friends of Durruti (FoD). This group, formed in March 1937, consisted of CNT militants opposed to the policy of militarising the militias. They took the name of Durruti who had led the Aragon militias and had defended the social revolution to the hilt. When it was suggested to him that the CNT should enter the government to legalise the gains of the revolution, he responded “When the workers expropriate the bourgeoisie, when one attacks foreign property, when public order is in the hands of the workers, when the militia is controlled by the unions, when, in fact, one is in the process of making a revolution from the bottom up, how is it possible to give this a legal basis?”.

In March Jaime Balius, one of the leading militants of the FoD, had said that “We anarchists have arrived at the limits of our concessions... not another step back. It is the hour of action. Save the revolution. If we continue to give up our position there is no doubt that in a short time we shall be overwhelmed. It is for this fundamental reason that it is necessary to develop a new orientation in our movement”.

By this new direction was meant an end to a-political anarchism. “To beat Franco – we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally and there must be installed workers’ power depending on rank and file workers’ committees. A political anarchism has failed”. During the May Days they called for the setting up of a Revolutionary Junta. They called for the disarming of the police, the socialisation of the economy, the dissolving of the political parties that had turned against the working class. In effect they called for workers’ power. They called on the workers to stay at the barricades until they had control of Catalonia. On Tuesday May 6<sup>th</sup> the Regional Committee of the CNT issued a statement disowning the FoD as ‘agents provocateurs’. The same day the FoD containing a blistering attack on the CNT leadership and saying a revolutionary opportunity had been wasted. The FoD were expelled from the CNT at the end of May. Their offices were taken over by the police and their organisation was outlawed.

## **Junta**

You may be surprised by the idea of anarchists calling for a ‘junta’, but what was meant by it? In their pamphlet *Towards a Fresh Revolution* issued in mid-1938, the FoD explained what the junta would be. They described it as a slight variation in anarchism. “The body will be organised

as follows: members of the revolutionary Junta will be elected by democratic vote in the union organisations. Account is to be taken of the number of comrades away at the front. These comrades must have a right to representation ... Posts are to come for re-election so as to prevent anyone growing attached to them. And the trade union assemblies will exercise control over the junta's activities."

These were no self-appointed group of leaders, but a democratic organ through which workers could run society and complete the revolution. There was no representation for non-working class organisations or political parties. This was a far cry from Lenin's idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat (read Party) which had such disastrous consequences in Russia.

The FoD was a break with the traditional a-politicism of the CNT. They recognised that state power would not just disappear but would have to be smashed and replaced with the power of workers' councils. They accepted that revolutions were totalitarian in so far as "What happens is that the various aspects of the revolution are progressively dealt with, but with the proviso that the class which represents the new order of things is the one with the most responsibility."

They understood the defects of syndicalism. Nothing can be taken away from the militancy of the CNT. The rank and file literally tore down capitalism and put workers' and peasants' collectives in its place. They fought heroically in the militias and the members of the CNT surpassed all others with their bravery.

But because of the CNT's a-politicism after the factories and lands had been seized they did not know what to do next. For them the state should have died a 'natural death'. But it didn't. Although the CNT had great ideas of what the anarchist future would look like and on the need for the working class itself to make the revolution, it could not make a link between the revolutionary situation and the goal of libertarian communism. As the FoD stated "We (CNT) did not have a concrete programme. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty but when all is said and done we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give effect to the popular effusion". They held that the CNT ought to have "leapt into the driver's seat in the country, delivering a severe coup de grace to all that is outmoded and archaic".

The CNT did not understand this. They posed the question as one of democratic collaboration – or an 'anarchist dictatorship'. Garcia Oliver, one of the CNT Ministers and an FAI member, said "The CNT and FAI decided on collaboration and democracy, renouncing revolutionary totalitarianism which would lead to the strangulation of the revolution by the anarchist and confederal dictatorship". They were afraid of taking the reins. But it was not a question of imposing an 'anarchist dictatorship' but of creating new organs through which the revolutionary masses could assert their power. Syndicalism could not see this as it believes the unions (i.e. the CNT) are the bodies upon which the new society would be built.

Because the state did not die the CNT felt they had to participate in it to have some control. They ended up concluding this was the only way they could have some say. They went even further and some of the drivel they came out with was a direct result of their need to justify their participation. Take for example "At the present time, the government, as the instrument that controls the organs of the state no longer represents a body that divides society into classes. And both will oppress the people even less now that members of the CNT have intervened". (Solidaridad Obrero, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1936).

## Alternative

The FoD was an expression of opposition to this kind of thought. Not only in their paper, The Friends of the People, but in countless local publications of the CNT, and indeed of the UGT, POUM and Libertarian Youth you can find such opposition. However it must be said this was only given a clear expression when it was too late. The FoD did not have enough time to win the masses to their position. They understood the need for a regroupment to take on the leadership of the CNT. “The vanguard i.e. the revolutionary militants and Friends of Durruti, POUM and the Youth must regroup to elaborate a programme of proletarian revolutionaries”.

Here we see a recognition of the need for a revolutionary minority to organise itself to provide leadership to the masses. Not a ‘we know it all’ leadership but a leadership of ideas. An understanding of what has gone wrong and what needs to be done. That the FoD did not set themselves up as “all-knowing leaders” is clear In their proposal for a Junta.

The Spanish Revolution does not negate anarchism. If anything, long before Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary it showed the bankruptcy of Stalinism and the State Capitalism of Russia. The activities of the Stalinists were far from what real socialists would have done.

On the other hand the anarchist masses threw themselves into a fight against fascism, and its cause, capitalism. Unfortunately the revolution was not complete, the CNT leaders held it back. Indeed their behaviour highlights the effect that power can have on even those who lay claim to anarchism. Spain provided important lessons for anarchists. It showed the inadequacy of syndicalism, the need for political anarchism and the need for an anarchist political organisation. We have to understand that the state and political power does not ‘die’; it has to be smashed.

Above all. Spain showed what ordinary people can do given the right conditions. The next time somebody says workers are stupid and could not take over the running of society, point to Spain. Show them what the workers and peasants (most of whom were illiterate) did. Tell them Anarchism is possible.



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The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action

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