

Catalonia: “It is Not Just a Question of Redrawing a Border”

Interview with Miguel Pérez, Secretary of External Relations of CNT (Spain)

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In the middle of a hectic week of the crisis between the central government in Madrid and the Catalan government, Anarkismo spoke with the Foreign Secretary of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), Miguel Pérez. In this interview, he discusses the position that has been maintained by the anarcho-syndicalist organization in Catalonia and the scenarios that the current situation opens for the class, libertarian and revolutionary sectors, throughout the Spanish state. “It is not just a question of redrawing a border, but of reformulating the structures and state system.”

1. What characterization do you, as CNT, have of the crisis in Catalonia and the Spanish state? What is really at stake? At CNT we are not mistaken about the origin of the current situation. Obviously, it responds to a conflict between elites to ensure their survival and ensure control of the territory for their own benefit. However the development of the situation, with the massive mobilization of a large part of the population in Catalonia, opens a series of social and economic intervention spaces that weren't there a year ago, or at least not in the same way.

The case of the Catalan government is very clear. The Generalitat (Catalan local government) has been largely controlled for 40 years by moderate right-wing nationalist parties. As a result of the economic crisis in the last years, its management has been heavily criticized, especially since the 15M eruption in 2011. The cuts to social services, corruption scandals, the unstoppable increase in debt, indignation about the repression against popular mobilizations ... everything seemed to be against the Generalitat. Precisely from that moment on, the most questioned politicians pulled the independence card, initiating a process that leads to the current situation. That is not to say that there was not an important section of independence in Catalan society before, but the political maneuver is evident.

For its part, in the case of the central government, it is the representative of a model of state and society that arose after the death of Franco, a process known as Transition. Since 1978, when the current constitution came into effect, the state has been based on a series of principles, such as monarchy, largely bipartisan parliamentary democracy, union representation through elections, unity of Spain with limited self-government for the regions, etc. Anyone who opposed any of these principles was immediately confronted with state apparatuses. This has been the case with

the CNT, we have always refused (and we still refuse) to accept the current union model, based on majority unions pacts that function as control valves for the discontent of working people. This “regime of 78” has also been widely questioned since 2011, for reasons similar to those in the Catalan case. In fact, it is worth remembering that some of the politicians at the head of the independence process have been and are the local representatives of the very same regime in Catalonia. Therefore, it is possible to speak of a confrontation between elites, political, economic and unions, concerned with safeguarding their control of a certain territory. The challenge to the unity of Spain, launched by the Catalan independence initiative, is only one of the most evident factors in this questioning of the regime. But there are also other elements. It is not just that a considerable part of the population in Catalonia wants to be independent, but they want to be part of this state model. In many cases it is not just a question of redrawing a border, but of reformulating the structures and state system. As a Catalan colleague told me recently, “let’s not fool ourselves, we are at the threshold of a second transition”. That is a process that will fundamentally alter the structures of the whole Spanish state. For example, the Madrid government is already talking about reforming the constitution, etc.

Of course, the purpose of these reforms and the changes that are taking place are not decided in advance. A very real possibility is that they will result in an even more authoritarian model, as a reaction to the threat to the system, taking advantage of the Spanish nationalist feeling that is experiencing a boom in reaction to Catalan independence. This nationalism, brewed by the media and encouraged by the central government, has a clear component of the far right (Spain’s unity has always been a favorite subject of the right), which can result in a normalization of fascism. In this sense, we at the CNT think that it is essential to take to the streets, participate in the mobilizations and promote the elements of criticism to the system that are already present in the current demands. Both to curb this right-wing drift and to contribute to the extent of our possibilities, so, the restructuring of the Spanish state model will result in the working class gaining positions at the heads of the official bodies, not the other way around. We also see it as an opportunity to include elements of social and economic vindication in a context in which they would otherwise be absent.

2. Why, as a trade union organization, for an issue that at first sight would seem eminently political, did the CNT decide to call for a general strike?

The evident intention of nationalisms, both Spanish and Catalan, has been to use the population as a joker in this process. On the other hand that’s something they always do. But in the case of the independence referendum on October 1, the Spanish state answered with police and repression that left hundreds of people injured. To a large extent, the general strike was called against this repression. The organizing unions, as workers’ organizations, resorted to their own tool, which is the strike.

Anyway, it was expected that this would be the central state’s response to the referendum, since in the weeks before the referendum the police presence in Catalonia was significantly increased. It was also to be expected that from that date an intense period of mobilization would open up throughout the region and we understood that a general strike call, in this context, was the most coherent action on our part. As I said at the beginning, the attitude of some sectors of nationalism towards the strike makes clear its intention to use the population as a shield. In some of the pre-convocation meetings, representatives of pro-independence parties tried to convince the unions that the strike should be held on the same day as the referendum so that the pickets

could come to defend the referendum against the police action. Clearly we refused to be dragged into their game this way.

It is also worth commenting on the action of the majority unions, the regime, on the occasion of this strike. Before the scenes of police violence on October 1, that same night their Catalan sections joined the call to strike. But the following morning they withdrew, no doubt after receiving orders from its central executives in Madrid. Instead of a strike, they defended a call for a civic strike, in which the workers asked permission from their bosses to leave for a while. Speechless.... Evidently, their central leaders were worried about the destabilizing effect that a workers' and combative strike could have on a regime of which they are part of themselves. In any case, the strike went ahead and it is the first time in 40 years that minority unions have been conducting a successful general strike in a territory, despite the boycott of the major central trade unions of the regime. The paradigm shift is evident.

One last point regarding the strike. During these last weeks there have been many demonstrations, gatherings, actions, etc. in defense of independence or other similar motivations within the nationalist agenda. CNT has not participated or supported any of them, because they have a strictly political intention and it is not something that we are going to participate in. On the contrary, our colleagues and comrades in Catalonia have been lavished with assemblies, meetings, colloquia, the media, etc. (apart from the strike itself), where our position has always been clear, the need to overflow the purely nationalist process to include economic and social elements. We are aware that sometimes it is difficult to make a difference, especially facing the exterior, but we hope we can make a contribution in this regard.

3. This call was made jointly with other unions and organizations with a libertarian tendency. In what sense is this moment pushing, and why, at higher levels of unity? What contribution do you think libertarians can make to this movement that we are experiencing?

CNT has long abandoned the isolationist attitude that made it refuse to collaborate closer with other union organizations. In that sense, calls or joint announcements are nothing new. The case of the strike is one more example. However, we are also aware of the limitations of this cooperation. During the last few years, the CNT has worked hard to develop the model of trade union sections (the assembly of workers of a union in a company or workplace) and to exploit its potential to carry out an effective union work without the necessity to participate in trade union elections. This operation makes a clear difference in the way the CNT acts and makes decisions regarding other unions. Our union models are clearly different and in some cases this is a limitation when it comes to working together. Concerning the situation in Catalonia and in the rest of the state, it seems to us that there is a wide space of collaboration in denouncing repression and in opposing the right wing drift of the state and some sectors of society. But this is again conditioned by the local reality of each organization, which could be very different.

With regard to the contribution of libertarians, it is curious to note that, while some groups and organizations hold similar positions as ours (and in fact the propaganda for the October 3 strike included their signatures), others clearly support independence, from anarcho-nationalist positions. Others, however, are opposing any form of participation, considering that it is an exclusively nationalist process, although this is more common in groups outside Catalonia. I think we all have clear that the main motive of the mobilizations is nationalist and independentista. That is something we can't change, we don't have the ability to change that. From there, some understand that it opens up a space of action, as I have already mentioned before, which is where

we want to focus on. As far as I know, within all the nuances that can be in this position, that is also the position of organizations like Embat, who are very active in this field.

4. What are the major threats and possibilities for the people that are opening up at the current juncture?

The main threat, and its not small, is the rise of Spanish fascism, as a reaction against the possibility of breaking the unity of Spain. In fact, there has already been an increase in the activity of extreme right-wing groups, with aggression and attacks in broad daylight. So far Spain had not seen the rise of the populist and xenophobic nationalism that is rampant in other countries of Europe or the United States. On the contrary, the popular response to the crisis was of a radically contrary sense, with the emergence of the 15M movement. At this moment that might start to change. Although some fascist groups had achieved a certain implantation imitating the tactics of Golden Dawn, like distributing social aid only to their own national population etc., until now this had been a minority. However, the current situation, together with an anti-immigration and Islamophobic discourse, can form an explosive cocktail that turns them into a real danger in the streets. On the other hand, the CNT's own history shows that the best way to stop this boom is the mobilization of the people in the street, with a clear revolutionary push. Obviously, we are very far from the levels of mobilization and political radicalism of the 30s or 70s, but the lesson remains valid. When what has been put on the table is little more than a refoundation of the regime, a redistribution of the balance of power within the Spanish state, it is evident that a wide spectrum of possibilities and of course opportunities are open. It is necessary to conquer new spaces of action, to change the paradigms and to break the monopolies in the control of the territory that have been maintained until today. And that can only be done from the street. In the 1970s, when they designing this regime and this democratic framework, the role of recuperating and integrating leftist political parties that participated in the institutions already became clear. At present we have other similar actors, emerged in the heat of 15M, who will end up playing a similar role, consciously or unconsciously. The pressure that tilts the balance in one direction or another must come from the mobilization.

5. What is the current situation of CNT on the Iberian peninsula and what is the main role that its fulfilling in the current conjuncture? To what extent is this related to the debates and progress made at the XI Congress?

The CNT has been undergoing an important process of growth and consolidation for some years now. Not only in an obvious numerical sense, although we are still small, but in the development of more ambitious initiatives, settlement and implementation of our union model, etc. This has allowed, above all, a greater presence in the workplace and at the social level. We can say that the general perception of the CNT, among other social movements and the population in general, is much better today than a decade ago. This is noticeable and important when intervening in situations such as Catalonia. Your speech has more credibility if it comes from people known and respected in the locality that if you have demonstrated a sectarian attitude in the past and no one trusts you.

However, this consolidation process has been uneven and presents a number of challenges. To begin with, although most local unions have chosen to implement and develop our recent agreements, in line with the last congresses, others did not wanted to or have not been able to do so. In general, this has led to loss of membership and loss of the ability of these unions to act. As a consequence, a regional map is given with notable inequalities between localities, which is a problem in itself. This also happens in Catalonia, where unions have been in a situation of

strength and have been able to carry out an intense activity in the face of the recent situation, while others have not been able to have any influence on the events. What is worth all this is to know how those local unions that were well-positioned beforehand when a critical situation has arisen, both in terms of number of activists and in terms of performance, have been able to respond to the crisis, while the others do not. The same thing would happen in any remotely revolutionary situation. The advantages of building organization for years are obvious.

In addition, any organization that grows (especially if it has revolutionary goals, like ours) has to face a series of concrete problems. These are very different from those that harass a stagnant organization, but they are not less real. For example, it is good to have many new affiliations, but it is necessary to integrate all those people into the organization's own functioning and culture, from affiliations to militancy, etc. No one denies these challenges, but of course these are problems that would not arise if there are no new affiliations. No one said that building a revolutionary organization was easy. One option is, of course, to remain forever a group of friends in a pub or a social center, but that is palmarily contrary to any revolutionary project. We can not accept that solution.

Regarding the XI Congress, although it may seem curious now, the fact is that at no time the current scenario in Catalonia was under consideration. Although the independence process has been forging many years, many organizations that are not involved or didn't participate, were not present enough. We knew it was there, but we did not see this potential overflow. In that sense, the last congress reaffirmed our agreements on support for self-determination of the Palestinian, Kurdish or Saharan people, but Catalonia was not explicitly mentioned. However, it must be said that we do not see the need to make any exceptions in this case. Therefore the CNT supports the self-determination of the Catalan people, understood not in a statist way, as nationalist politicians would like, but as self-organization of a class in a given territory.

Perhaps this lack of concreteness is one of the reasons why some local unions have expressed their doubts or their disagreement with the approach of the Catalan colleagues. Of course, it is normal that in complex issues and in crisis situations, doubts arise what is the most appropriate strategy. In fact, as it could not be otherwise in an organization as plural as CNT, the debate is constant about the most appropriate approach or the action to each new development of the situation. We have no interest in projecting the image of a monolithic organization, because we are not, nor do we pretend to be. Everything is part of the continuous debate of ideas and strategies that is given in CNT and in this complex case, it was expected that there would be a diversity of opinions.

Finally, as you probably know, the XI Congress of CNT launched a global proposal to create a new international. This process has already paid off in many parts of the world, even if only with the establishment of dense networks of contacts between anarcho-syndicalist organizations and revolutionary syndicalists. This has allowed us to maintain a constant flow of information with these organizations (limited only by our own ability to work), which have played a fundamental role in helping us to explain our positions in a situation that is obviously not easy. More importantly, the solidarity of these organizations was demonstrated in a series of calls for support to the general strike in Catalonia, since there were up to 60 acts in various countries around the world. We can not repeat enough how grateful we are to all of them.

6. How do you think that the mobilization in Catalonia can build bridges with the movements and organizations in the rest of Spain?

As I said before, a lot of mobilization and a great effort will be necessary to redirect this process of “retransition” and take it to approaches that are minimally advantageous for the working class. Of course, CNT can not face it alone, we are not even clear that doing so would be the best thing, even if we could. In that sense, the collaboration will be forced and necessary.

But it is also true that each group, movement or organization is going to resort to this convergence with its own objectives and agendas. It can not be otherwise and in the CNT we will not fall into the infantilism of thinking that suddenly it is going to give a proletarian brotherhood without restrictions.

Neither are we going to give up our revolutionary goals, which are not, of course, shared by everyone that can add to this attempt to overflow the current situation. However, there are a number of important points on which we can start building this convergence, such as the rejection of repression and fascist Spanishism. On this basis, steps are already being taken to work together, with meetings, debates, communications, etc. It is to be hoped that this collaboration will go further, as the situation unfolds. It may be that sometimes this joint work generates conflicts and doubts about the way forward, as it is already doing on the Catalan stage. But we played a lot as a class at this juncture as if we were looking the other way.

As a revolutionary organization, CNT understands that it has to be always present in the great conflicts of our class, when there is an opportunity to project our message, explain our position, radicalize the conflict, etc. We have the internal tools necessary to advance this process collectively, discussing strategies and expressing doubts or disagreements. We await years of conflict, struggle and mobilization. It will not be easy, but I am sure that the whole CNT will live up to the circumstances.

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