

# **European Alternative Unions Meet**

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*The following report is based on Jacques Toubles' article, "Recontre europeene des syndicats alternatifs," published in January in Le Monde Libertaire.*

A "Meeting of European Alternative Trade Unions" was held in Barcelona, Spain, Nov. 29 through Dec. 1, 1991, sponsored by the Spanish General Confederation of Workers (CGT). Attending the three day conference were delegations from union confederations such as the Swedish Workers Central (SAC) and the Romande Confederation of Labor; autonomous workers' groups such as the Italian base committees (Cobas) and an Irish anarcho-syndicalist group; local trade unions or federations affiliated with "official" union centers, for example a delegation of railway workers from the French Confederation of Democratic Unions (CFDT) and the Proof Readers Union of the French General Confederation of Workers (CGT); some organizations formed by fellow workers excluded from the main confederations such as the SUD Postal Federation; and, finally, a delegation from the Moscow section of the Russian Confederation of Anarcho-syndicalists (KAS) and some militants from the Russian Solidarity trade union.

## **The New European Order**

In discussing the developing political/economic landscape in Europe, the Spanish CGT delegates noted that the new order being constructed in the various Ministerial cabinets, in Brussels, and in the board rooms of the multi-national corporations will undoubtedly mean an increase in inequality and poverty within nations and in different regions of the continent, as well as reduction of trade union rights and restrictions on the right to strike. It was estimated that two million people would be added to the fifteen million already unemployed. In addition, there are at least six million workers toiling under temporary or part-time work contracts, and fifty million people living in poverty. The drive towards the privatization of public services is going ahead, and will most likely result in a further increase in part-time and temporary contract labor. Underneath all of this is developing a parallel society made up of 20 million immigrants.

The Swedish delegation made special note of the changing division of labor being constructed and the greater stratification of the labor force that this will engender. They see the working class being sub-divided into three groupings: 1) a highly skilled stratum of technical workers with secure employment organized within corporatist trade unions whose only function will be to protect their status; 2) a less skilled and more precariously employed group; and 3) a totally marginalized group without skills and without employment. Such a development would make achieving political and economic unity among the three groups very difficult, which would be to the advantage of the capitalists and the State.

## **Rank and File Action**

The fellow workers from the Italian Cobas discussed the growing importance of the base committees, which are primarily found in the public services but are also present in the metal industry. In the past few years the committees have proven their ability to successfully mobilize workers within local branches of industry and even within entire industries both on a regional and on a national level, thus making them a force to be reckoned with. Thanks to this type of organization (the base committee) a number of trades — teachers, rail workers — have been able to successfully resist employers' plans to reduce their standard of living and working. On the railroads, for

example, Italy is the only nation in Western Europe where the practice of operating locomotives with two crew members is still in force, thanks largely to the efforts of the base committees in mobilizing resistance to the attempts to introduce one-person operation. This hard struggle has twice resulted in the conscription of the entire rail workforce by the government, something that hadn't been seen since the fascist era.

## **From the Ex-USSR**

Of particular interest at the conference was the report of the Russian delegates of the KAS. The KAS comrade acknowledged that the organization was going through a difficult period with a number of fellow workers leaving the organization. These defections can be explained by the fact that when the KAS was formed there were no other libertarian groupings in the USSR and some joined the group without really understanding what the KAS was all about. When the organization defined itself, in its congress, as an organization made up of anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists engaged within the workers movement, those who disagreed drew the proper conclusion and withdrew from the organization, not without first accusing the KAS of being bureaucrats, etc.

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