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Buenaventura Durruti

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Sons of the People
Sons of the people, your chains oppress you!
This injustice cannot go on!
If your life is a world of grief,
Instead of being a slave, it is better to die!
Workers!
You shall suffer no longer!
The oppressor must succumb!
Arise!
Loyal People at the cry
Of Social Revolution!

Frederica Montseny said that Durruti was a kind man, with a “Herculean body, the eyes of a child in a half-savage face.” He was a man of the people who did not impose himself on others. Liberto Callejas has spoken of his idealism, of his perseverance and his firmness. “Above all, Durruti was a proletarian anarchist,” who moulded himself on the teachings of the anarchist Anselmo Lorenzo. Durruti, he said, was a propagandist who preferred simple words. He insisted on clearness. When he spoke on a platform, his audience well understood what he said. And like Makhno, Durruti was often gay. Emma Goldman, when she met him during the fighting, said that she found him “a veritable beehive of activity.”

Durruti’s Column, like Makhno’s partisan army, was completely plebian in character. One of his comrades wrote of the Column: “The Column is neither militarily or bureaucratically organised. It has grown organically. It is a social revolutionary movement. We represent a union of oppressed proletarians, fighting for freedom for all. The Column is the work of Durruti, who determined its spirit and defended its libertarian principles until his last breath. The foundation of the Column is voluntary self-discipline. And the end of its activity is nothing else than libertarian communism.” Moreover, Durruti also ate and slept with everyone else; and when there was a shortage of anything, such as mattresses or shoes, he went without the same as everybody else.

Of himself, Durruti said to Emma Goldman:

“I have been an anarchist all my life. I hope I have remained one. I should consider it very sad indeed had I to turn to a General and rule men with a military rod... I believe, as I always have, in freedom. The freedom which rests on the sense of responsibility. I consider discipline indispensable, but it must be inner discipline, motivated by a common purpose and a strong feeling of comradeship.

It has often been said, remarked John Hewetson in War Commentary for Anarchism, four years after the end of the Spanish Civil War, that the Spanish Revolution of 1936 threw up into prominence no ‘world figures’ comparable with Lenin and Trotsky in the Russian Revolution. But, says Hewetson, an exception must be made in the case of the anarchist Durruti. He symbolised in his person the struggle of the revolutionary workers and peasants of Spain.

Buenaventura Durruti was born on July 14th 1896 in Leon, a mountainous area in central northern Spain. More prosperous than the south, but far less industrialised than Catalonia, it was not, and never has been, an anarchist stronghold like Catalonia or Andalusia. Buenaventura was one of nine brothers (one was killed in the October 1934 uprising in the Asturias, another died fighting the Fascists on the Madrid front and all the others were murdered by the Fascists). His father was a railway worker in the yard at Leon who described himself as a libertarian socialist.

Durruti had black, straight hair, brown eyes, and was rather stocky and very strong. He did not, however, care for the rough games at school. He left school at fourteen and went to work as a trainee mechanic, like his father, in the railway yard in the city of Leon. He was still working in the yard in 1917 when the ‘socialist’ controlled Union General de Trabajadores (UGT) called an official strike of the Northern Railway Workers. Durruti took an active and prominent part in the strike which, after the government had refused to accept the terms agreed between the employers and the Union, became a general strike throughout the area. The general strike, which began on August 10th, was crushed in three days. The Spanish Government brought in the Army, which behaved with extreme barbarity. They killed 70 and wounded over 500 workers. Moreover, the authorities also jailed 2,000 of the strikers. The Army had, in the words of one observer, ‘saved the nation.’ Durruti managed to escape, but had to flee abroad to France. The brutality of the

Spanish State had a profound and lasting effect on the young Durruti.

From the fall of 1917 until the beginning of 1920, Durruti worked in Paris as a mechanic. He then decided to return to Spain and arrived at San Sebastian just across the border. Here, he was introduced to the local anarchist group. Shortly after Buenasca, the then President of the recently-formed anarchist-controlled Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), persuaded him to go to Barcelona where the anarchist movement, as well as the syndicalists, was being brutally suppressed and most of its members jailed or executed. For some time there had been considerable unrest in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia.

The Terror

In February 1919, the workers of a large electrical factory known as the Canadiense went on strike in support of seven of their workmates who had been dismissed for political reasons, and for an increase in wages for certain categories of workers in the plant. The strike was well organised, this being an important test case for the CNT. The English manager was prepared to compromise — particularly as wages at the factory were below average; but on advice from the local Captain-general, he changed his mind and refused to discuss the stoppage with the Union. Moreover, the Captain-general jailed the officials of the CNT and declared martial law, although as Gerald Brenan noted, the strike was perfectly peaceful and ‘legal.’ Following the refusal of the Barcelona authorities to release the organisers, a general strike throughout the Barcelona area began. It lasted a fortnight and involved over 100,000 workers. The outcome was inconclusive. “However,” remarks Brenan, “the military arrested many thousands of workmen and in the usual Spanish style, gave sentences of imprisonment amounting to

“It had been arranged for 10 o’clock, but hours before it was impossible to enter the Via Layetana... from all directions groups with banners and wreaths arrived. All Barcelona was out to pay their last tribute to their hero. Many groups carried banners with inscriptions. The words ‘We shall avenge him’ were repeated over and over again. Immense masses of people streamed into the square outside the house of the Regional Committee, when Durruti’s comrades carried the coffin out on their shoulders. Armed militiamen accompanied them. The band played the anarchist ‘hymn’: ‘Sons of the People.’ And tens of thousands raised their fists in salute.”

Many important dignitaries were, of course, present, including the ‘anarchist’ Minister of Justice, Garcia Oliver, and the Russian Consul who said he was deeply moved (!). Over 500,000 people attended Durruti’s funeral. Thousands of banners and black and black and red flags flew in Barcelona that day.

What sort of a man was Durruti?

Brenan says that both Ascaso and Durruti were fanatics who, through their feats of daring, made themselves the heroes of the Catalan proletariat; they were the ‘saints of the anarchist cause,’ showing the way by their example. Thomas says that, for some, Durruti was a ‘thug,’ a ‘killer’ and a ‘hooligan’; for others he was the indomitable hero, with a fine “imperious head eclipsing all others, who laughed like a child and wept before human tragedy.” George Woodcock calls him “the celebrated guerrilla leader” and an idealist. Vernon Richards also refers to him as a guerrilla ‘leader,’ but not the kind to ‘direct’ the masses.

others to take their place. And better ones! We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth; there is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.”

Madrid — the End

At the beginning of November 1936, Franco’s four armies, made up mostly of Moroccans and Legionaires, converged on Madrid. The battle began on November 8th. It was basically a struggle between a well-equipped army supported by German and Italian bombers on one side, and an ill-armed mass of urban workers on the other. There were many women fighting on the republican side. Moreover, in Madrid the Communists were relatively stronger and better organised; they were also supported by various International Brigades.

The battle continued unabated. Franco said that he would rather destroy Madrid completely than leave it to the Marxists. German Nazi troops of the Condor Legion planned to set the city on fire, quarter by quarter. From November 16th onwards Madrid was bombed by German planes day and night. In three nights alone over 1,000 people were killed by the bombs. Furthermore, Madrid was cut off from the rest of Spain.

In this situation of desperate crisis, Durruti decided to move 4,000 members of his Column from Aragon across the country to help relieve Madrid. His arrival had a tremendous effect on the besieged workers of the city. It saved Madrid, at least for a while. But on November 20th, just as he was getting out of a car, a stray bullet hit him in the back of the head, and he died immediately. On November 22nd his body was brought back to Barcelona, accompanied by a number of his closest comrades. It lay in state until the following morning. Thousands filed past the open coffin. Karrill describes the funeral thus:

seventeen hundred years — sentences which of course would not be carried out.”

The state’s terror against the workers, the CNT and the anarchist movement had begun in earnest. Driven to desperation by the extreme repression, anarchists such as Durruti and his friend Francisco Ascaso, a bakery worker from Catalonia, met violence with violence, assassination with assassination. Between 1919 and 1922, almost every well-known anarchist or syndicalist was either murdered by pistoleros hired by the employers’ federation, or were shot ‘trying to escape’ from jail — the so-called ley de fugas. Indeed, says Hugh Thomas in his book *The Spanish Civil War*, “a new civil governor, Martinez Anido, and a police chief, Arlegui, fought the anarchists with every weapon they could, including the foundation of a rival, government-favoured Union, the Sindicato Libre, and a special constabulary, the Somaten.” One of the most respected anarchists in the country, the CNT President Salvador Seguí, was shot down in the street by a police gunman.

The main instrument in bringing about the repression and terror was the government of Dato which began in 1920. Ascaso and Durruti decided to assassinate him. He was indeed killed in Madrid in 1921 by, it has been said, anarchists — but not by Ascaso or Durruti. However, a far more sinister figure was near at hand — Cardinal Soldevila of Saragossa. Mention has already been made of the Sindicato Libre, or ‘yellow Unions’ as the anarchists called them. These yellow Unions were mainly financed and supported by this so-called Man of God. Moreover, Soldevila was extremely wealthy, deriving his fortune from various hotels, casinos and lesser gambling houses. In fact, he was one of the largest shareholders in the biggest gaming establishments. He hated both the anarchists and the CNT and supported their suppression. In 1923, Ascaso and Durruti decided to kill him. And they were successful. In the words of H Rudiger: “Ascaso and Durruti made an end of this so-called Holy Man, who in the name of one who had driven the money-

changers from the temple, did not hesitate to act as one himself, and to use his ill-gotten wealth to crush the efforts of the workers for more humane social conditions.”

Durruti did not take this action lightly. Moreover, as George Woodcock has observed, the basic doctrines of anarchism deny retribution and punishment; they are unanarchistic. But, he says, they were typical of Spain at the time. No anarchist favours violence for violence’s sake; but anarchists such as Ascaso and Durruti could see no alternative at that time — except passive acceptance of dictatorship, repression and state violence. And no anarchist would accept that!

The dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, which began in 1923, saw the virtual eclipse of militant anarchist activity in Spain. Anarchist newspapers were banned and all prominent anarchists were either in jail or exile or had been shot. Both Ascaso and Durruti had to flee the country.

Durruti Abroad

Ascaso and Durruti went first to Argentina, here they were received with tremendous enthusiasm by large numbers of workers. However, almost immediately, the police began to hound them. They were driven out of the Argentine. The Spanish authorities had obviously warned all South and Central American Governments in advance. Throughout Latin America, Ascaso and Durruti were given no peace. Often starving, they were hounded from Chile, then Uruguay and Mexico. The Argentine Government condemned them to death as anarchist agitators. Indeed, even the Stalinist hack, Ilya Ehrenburg, later remarked with pride that four capitalist States had condemned Durruti to death.

Whilst Durruti was in South America, numbers of anarchist militants gathered in France and, according to Thomas, directed occasional forays across the border into Spain. In this

government and social revolution despite the fact that his remarks have only been reported in English—and were never actually written down by him in his native Spanish—they are worth repeating here.

“For us,” said Durruti, “it is a matter of crushing Fascism once and for all. Yes; and in spite of the Government.”

“No government in the world fights Fascism to the death. When the bourgeoisie sees power slipping from its grasp, it has recourse to Fascism to maintain itself. The Liberal Government of Spain could have rendered the Fascist elements powerless long ago. Instead it compromised and dallied. Even now at this moment, there are men in this Government who want to go easy on the rebels.”

And here Durruti laughed. “You can never tell, you know, the present Government might yet need these rebellious forces to crush the workers’ movement...”

“We know what we want. To us it means nothing that there is a Soviet Union somewhere in the world, for the sake of whose peace and tranquillity the workers of Germany and China were sacrificed to Fascist barbarians by Stalin. We want revolution here in Spain, right now, not maybe after the next European war. We are giving Hitler and Mussolini far more worry with our revolution than the whole Red Army of Russia. We are setting an example to the German and Italian working class on how to deal with Fascism.”

“I do not expect any help for a libertarian revolution from any Government in the world... We expect no help, not even from our own Government, in the last analysis.”

“But,” interjected van Paasen, “You will be sitting on a pile of ruins.”

Durruti answered: “We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For, you must not forget, we can also build. It is we the workers who built these palaces and cities here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers, can build

desiring to work the land individually were permitted to do so, provided they employed no hired labour... Agricultural production increased in the region from thirty to fifty per cent over the previous year, as a result of collective labour. Enormous surpluses were voluntarily turned over to the government, free of charge, for use at the front." "Altogether," writes Thomas, "there were 450 collectives."

Morrow says that many workers from abroad saw Aragon and praised it. Not only that but anarchism, *Communismo Libertario*, was also more efficient!

Of the situation, Thomas (not always an impartial writer) comments:

"It was the presence of Durruti and the other powerful CNT-FAI columns in Aragon which made possible the establishment in that region at least of a purely Anarchist authority (sic!). This was a most disturbing event from the point of view of the Central Government, the Catalan Government, the Communists, and indeed all groups apart from the CNT and FAI themselves. But there was nothing that they could do about it..." The anarchists and peasants "set up a regional 'Council of Defence,' composed entirely of CNT members and presided over by Joaquin Ascaso, brother of Durruti's famous companion killed in July. This had its seat at Fraga, and from thence exercised supreme power over the whole of Aragon. Deriving power directly from the collectives, this was now the sole real revolutionary power in Spain."

In September, after the liberation of Aragon from Franco's forces, Durruti was interviewed by Pierre van Paasen of the *Toronto Star*. In this interview he gives his views on Fascism,

activity they were, of course, supported by French anarchists. Ascaso and Durruti, therefore, decided to make their way to France, particularly as Durruti knew Paris well. They settled in Paris and Durruti opened a bookshop. And it was there that he first met Nestor Makhno.

Some months later in 1924, the notorious arch-reactionary King Alfonso XIII of Spain visited Paris. Ascaso and Durruti attempted to assassinate him, but were unsuccessful. They were caught and arrested. Both were jailed for a year. On their release, Argentina demanded their extradition so that the sentence of death that awaited them could be carried out. However, the French anarchist movement inaugurated a tremendous libertarian campaign on their behalf, and succeeded in frustrating the Argentine authorities. Finally on June 19th 1925, they were released from jail in France, but had to leave the country within two weeks. Belgium and Luxemburg refused them political asylum; so they went to Germany, which at the time was governed by a Social Democrat (Labour) Government. But the Social Democrats also refused them entry.

Ascaso and Durruti then returned to France illegally. Again, they lived under cover in Paris. But they were not happy living on the charity and solidarity of their French comrades. They wanted to work and earn their own living. So they decided to make their way to Lyon. They both found jobs at Lyon, but were soon discovered by the police — and were sentenced to six months in jail. After that they lived, again illegally, for a time in Belgium. In 1927, Durruti made his way to Berlin to the home of the well known German anarchist, Augustin Souchy. But the Germans would not let him stay. At last, however, the Belgian Government had a change of heart. The Belgian police granted both Ascaso and Durruti permits to stay there.

During all this time of wandering from country to country, Durruti took part in various anarchist activities, and kept in touch with a number of his comrades in Spain itself. During this period, moreover, the Soviet authorities, sensing Durruti's

potential influence in Spain at a later date, offered him and Ascaso refuge in the USSR. But they refused to entertain the idea of going to Russia. Makhno, if no one else, would have warned them against accepting Communist 'hospitality.'

Fall of the Monarchy

In July 1927 at a secret meeting in Valencia, anarchist delegates from all over Spain came together to form the Federacion Anarquista Iberica (the FAI) in order to co-ordinate the efforts and activities of all the various groups and federations of anarchists throughout Spain.

With the fall of the Spanish monarchy in April 1931, Ascaso and Durruti returned to Spain. On arrival they found that certain 'leaders' of the CNT had become increasingly reformist during the period of the Dictatorship, whilst the FAI and most of the rank-and-file members and activists of the CNT remained true to their anarchist principles. In May, a motley collection of liberal-republicans, radicals and 'socialists' were returned to Parliament (the Cortes) in what has been described as the fairest election in Spain's history. Angel Pestana, a leading reformist, argued that the CNT should support the Republican Government. Durruti opposed him. And Durruti, the FAI and the majority of the CNT were soon proved correct.

A Congress of the CNT met in Madrid in July, its object being to reorganise the movement and prepare for future battles. Almost immediately, there was a strike of building workers in Barcelona; many of the strikers were gunned down by the Guardia de Asalto. Then, the telephone operators struck at the Central Telephone Exchange and were locked out of the building. A week later a strike in Seville led to troops killing 30 strikers and wounding 300. Three workers were also shot dead by the military in San Sebastian. So much for the 'liberal,' 'radical,' republican Government of Azana! "The Government,"

posed almost entirely of anarchist militiamen, and was over 1,000 strong. Its number soon increased to between 8,000 and 10,000. It was by far the largest and strongest unit on the anti-Fascist side. They were all volunteers and mostly anarchists, anarchist sympathisers and members of the CNT.

By the beginning of August, Durruti's column was within sight of Saragossa. But a certain Colonel Villalba, Commander of the Barbastro garrison and now in 'official' but rather vague command of the republican forces on the Aragon front, persuaded Durruti to halt his column for fear of being cut off from the other columns. Durruti agreed; but later continued his attack on the city. During the assault the cathedral was burnt to the ground. Durruti never made any secret of his aims. Indeed, he is alleged to have remarked to a Russian reporter just before the assault on the city:

"It is possible that only a hundred of us will survive, but with that hundred we shall enter Saragossa, beat Fascism and proclaim libertarian communism. I will be the first to enter. We shall proclaim the free commune. We shall subordinate ourselves neither to Madrid nor Barcelona, neither to Azana nor Companys... We shall show you Bolsheviks how to make a revolution."

Saragossa was captured and Aragon freed from Fascist control. Moreover, in the words of Hewetson, Durruti "laid the foundations of the great advance into Aragon, which established the front and safeguarded the revolutionary peasant collectives on which the food supply of Catalonia depended." And Souchy observed that "Wherever his column advanced, they socialised, they collectivised, they prepared everything for free socialism." Felix Morrow in his Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, noted that "At least three-fourths of the land was tilled by collectives. Peasants

every one of the windows had concealed a rifle or machine gun and had been raining bullets on hundreds of almost unarmed workers in the surrounding streets. Durruti was among the first few to enter the building. By the evening of the 20th, the rising in Barcelona had been completely crushed. But not elsewhere in Spain.

The following day, President Companys was visited by Garcia Oliva and Durruti. "These formidable men of violence," says Hugh Thomas, "sat before Companys with their rifles between their knees, their clothes still dusty from the fight, their hearts heavy at the death of Ascaso." Companys then made a very skillful, typical politician's speech, admitting that the CNT and the anarchists had never been "accorded their proper treatment," but that the anarchists were now "masters of the city." He appealed to them to accept him as leader of the Catalan Government. Garcia Oliver fell for the 'soft-soap.' He became the world's first (and, it is hoped, last) anarchist Minister; of Justice! However, Durruti had far more important things to do.

The Catalan workers set up an 'Anti-Fascist Militia's Committee,' comprising representatives of the CNT, the FAI, the UGI, the neo-Trotskyists and a number of republican groups. This committee, according to Thomas, was the real 'government' of Barcelona, and indeed the whole of Catalonia. It was, says Thomas, dominated by its anarchist representatives - Oliver, Durruti and Ascaso's brother, Joaquin.

A week later, the committee delegated Durruti to organise an Anti-Fascist Militia. He formed the now-famous 'Durruti Column.'

Aragon and Anarchism

On July 23rd two columns set out from Barcelona to liberate Saragossa on the Aragon front. The first column was com-

observed Brenan in *The Spanish Labyrinth*, "showed that they had no hesitation in employing all the means that they had so much condemned when practised by the reactionary governments of the past." Of course! The 'socialist' controlled UGT, though not supporting the workers in their struggles against the employers and the State, were becoming less influential, whilst the newly-organised CNT were becoming stronger all the time. Indeed, the workers just had to fight back as their standard of living - always very low by European standards - had fallen considerably, and unemployment was increasing. During this period a number of FAI activists, including Ascaso and Durruti, made raids on banks in order to get money for the workers and the movement. Durruti is particularly remembered for his celebrated assault on the Bank of Spain at Gijon. He never kept a centimo for himself. He was now married and his wife was expecting.

In January 1932, the Catalan FAI Federation, which had now adopted *Comunismo Libertario* (Libertarian Communism), together with the new neo-Trotskyist Left Communist Party of Maurine, Nin and Andrade, organised an insurrection throughout Catalonia. The Army soon suppressed the uprising and about 120 prominent anarchists and Left Communists were arrested and deported to Spanish Guinea without trial. Ascaso and Durruti were among them. Durruti's baby was just two months old. For three months the Government kept him in prison in Guinea, but after considerable agitation for his and his comrades' release, they were set free. He returned to Spain on April 15th.

After his return to Spain, things were somewhat quieter for Durruti. It appears that he tried to settle down; but between 1933 and 1935, the two 'black years' as they were called, the reactionary republican Government of Lerroux-Robles made Durruti the object of continual persecution. He was continually hounded by the police. For some while, he worked in a factory in Barcelona and joined the Textile Workers' Syndicate.

He spoke at public meetings and took part in organisational work on behalf of the union and the anarchist movement generally. But again and again he was taken into custody by the police and held without any charges being made against him.

During this period Spain was in a state of near-chaos and in October 1934 there were risings in Barcelona, Madrid and the Asturias. These risings were mainly led by Catalan nationalists, supported by 'socialists' and the numerically-weak Communist Party. Except in the Asturias, they were not well organised. The CNT and FAI stood aloof, except in the Asturias. Here the anarchists, 'socialists,' Stalinists and the neo-Trotskyists worked together. Moreover, many of the workers attacked their old enemy, the Catholic Church, and convents and some churches were burned down; a few nuns said they had been raped and the Bishop's Palace and much of the University of Oviedo was destroyed. Several unpopular priests were shot. However, the Government called on General Franco to put the rising down. There then followed a terrible retribution. The army killed 1,300 workers, mostly miners, and wounded 3,000. During October and November of 1934 the Government jailed over 30,000 workers for political offences alone, the majority of these from the Asturias. In 1934, moreover, a typical Fascist Party began to take form and become active. It was called the Falange, and was made up largely of young, dissatisfied sons of the rich. Its funds came from businessmen and from the aristocracy.

Such was the state of Spain before the rising of the generals in 1936, the revolution and the subsequent civil war. In the middle of July, Durruti entered hospital for a hernia operation.

Revolution and Civil War

In February 1936 a Popular Front (the Stalinists, Harry Gannes and Theodore Repard, in their book *Spain in Revolt*

call it a 'People's Front') Government of various sorts of Republicans and 'socialists' came to power. There were no Communists in the Government or Communist sympathisers; indeed, the Stalinists only won 14 seats out of a total of 470, and their membership was probably under 3,000 or about a tenth of that of the FAI. Whatever else it was, the militarist-Falangist uprising was not an attack on Stalinism.

On July 11th, a group of Falangists seized the broadcasting station at Valencia and issued a proclamation stating: "This is Radio Valencia! The Spanish Falange has seized the broadcasting station by force of arms; tomorrow the same will happen at broadcasting stations throughout Spain!" This was only a beginning. At five o'clock in the afternoon of July 17th, General Franco assumed command of the Moors and Legionaires of Spanish Morocco, and issued a manifesto to the Army and the nation to join him in establishing an Authoritarian State in Spain. In the next three days, all of the fifty Army garrisons, with the support of the Falange, the majority of the landlords, aristocracy, big bourgeoisie and, of course, the Catholic Church (itself a wealthy institution), declared for Fascism. War had been declared on the peasants and workers of Spain. And they took up the challenge.

In Barcelona the militarist rising took place on July 19th. Hearing of the uprising, Durruti — whose wound was still open — immediately left the hospital and joined the workers on the barricades. During the evening of the 18th both anarchists and 'Trotskyists' raided rifles and dynamite. They also commandeered as many vehicles as they could lay hands on. On July 20th both Ascaso and Durruti took part in an anarchist assault on the Ataranzaras Barracks. The pro-Fascist forces, after considerable and prolonged firing, surrendered at half-past one in the afternoon; but not before Durruti's friend and comrade Ascaso had been killed. Following the assault on the barracks the anarchist workers attacked the Fascist-held Hotel Colon. The siege lasted thirty-six hours, during which