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Why the Anarchists Lost the Spanish Revolution

Response to “The Revolutionary Anarchist
Tradition”

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1996

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as becoming new states. Anarchism (or anti-authoritarian socialism), for all its many faults, is unique in placing the self-organization of the oppressed at the center of its program — the center of both its ultimate goal and of the means to reach that goal.

In the course of a revolution, a certain amount of centralization and repression (of open counter-revolutionaries) will be necessary, the point of Chris's article. But anti-authoritarians should consciously use just as much centralization and repression as is necessary and should deliberately work to keep the communal organization as decentralized and radically democratic as possible. Exactly how to maintain this balance is a matter of political judgment, but we must have no ambiguity on our opposition to party-states.

Friends of Durruti

Chris repeats his error when discussing the Friends of Durruti. This was a regrouping of truly revolutionary anarchists in opposition to the FAI-CNT leadership. Chris summarizes their position: “The Friends of Durruti also proposed the creation of a Revolutionary Junta to be made up of themselves and other groups that opposed participation in the Republican government.” That is, he claims that they advocated rule by their organization. Not at all.

Actually, they proposed a national council elected by workers from their mass unions. Their program, “Towards a Fresh Revolution” states: “Establishment of a Revolutionary Junta or National Defense Council... Members of the Revolutionary Junta will be elected by democratic vote in union organizations.” This is similar to the program for workers’ and peasants’ councils (although not quite as good since it required working through the existing union structures). Of course, they wanted themselves and other of like mind to be elected to the national council, but what they were proposing was a popular democratic structure, not a party-state. Unfortunately, it was too late to save the Spanish Revolution.

Lessons for Anarchists

... Time and again revolutions have thrown up popular councils and similar structures, only to be destroyed by the revolutionary “leaders.” Today’s radicals are divided between the reform socialists (who believe that “democracy” requires them to support the existing bureaucratic-military states and Western imperialism), and the “revolutionaries” (mostly Maoists, Castroites, or nationalists), who genuinely desire to overthrow the existing states — in order to replace them with totalitarian party-states. They see their respective parties

Chris Day’s article, “The Revolutionary Anarchist Tradition” (*Love and Rage* Vol. 7 No. 4) points to the pro-organizational current in the history of revolutionary anarchism. He notes that there have been anarchists who have advocated greater organizational coherence and serious theoretical and strategic thinking by the anarchist movement. In general, I agree with him (although he rather brushes off Malatesta, the great pro-organizational revolutionary anarchist; a great deal can be learned from Malatesta). This is a much better position than, for example, one calling for the abandonment of anarchism in favor of a new synthesis dominated by Marxism. However, when pushing for more organizational structure and theory, it is possible to go off the rails and end up advocating an authoritarian and dictatorial program. The danger of this appears in Chris’s discussion of the failure of the anarchists in the Spanish Revolution/Civil War of 1936–39.

The Spanish Revolution

As Chris notes, in 1936 the Spanish armed forces and fascists, led by Franco, attempted to seize power in a well-planned coup. They sought to overthrow the Popular Front government, a coalition administration of bourgeois-liberals and reform-socialists. With almost no help from the Popular Front, the workers organized themselves and threw back the military in two-thirds of Spain. At this time, the anarchists (organized in the FAI) led a union federation (the CNT) with half the working class of Spain and most of the workers in Catalonia — the most industrialized region of Spain — and they had much support among the peasantry. Under anarchist inspiration, workers took over factories and other enterprises and ran them democratically. Peasants voluntarily collectivized their farms. Transportation and communications were

run by worker committees. Police were replaced by worker patrols. Much of the armed forces were led by the anarchists.

In spite of this, anarchists eventually lost the struggle against fascism. They were to abandon all their principles, joining the capitalist government (including holding the Ministry of Justice). How did this happen?

As Chris said, a turning point came early in the Civil War. After initially beating the fascists in Catalonia, two anarchist leaders met with the (powerless) president of the regional government. He offered to resign but asked for collaboration instead. Garcia Oliver, one of the anarchists, explained why they chose cooperation with the capitalist state. “The CNT and the FAI decided on collaboration and democracy, renouncing revolutionary totalitarianism which would have led to the strangulation of the revolution by the anarchist and Confederal (CNT) dictatorship... (choosing) between Libertarian Communism, which meant an anarchist dictatorship, and democracy which meant collaboration.”

That is, these anarchist leaders saw only two alternatives: (1) The FAI-CNT takes power by itself. But the FAI was a minority even within the CNT; probably most CNT unionists were not anarchists. There were many other workers and others who did not agree with the full politics of the FAI-CNT. In the country at large, half the working class was organized into the reform socialist union (UGT) and others were not in any union. Therefore, if the FAI overthrew the state and established itself as the ruler, the result would have been a one-party dictatorship. As far as it goes, the logic of this scenario seems correct. (2) Working together with all other anti-fascist forces, including not only the reform socialists but the various capitalist parties and accepting the existing hegemony of the liberal-capitalist state. This started them on a road which led to anarchist ministers in a capitalist government, the defeat of the revolution, and the victory of fascism in Spain (shortly before the start of World War II).

Chris indicates that the anarchists should have taken the first alternative, even though “support for the CNT was not universal.” But the anarchists were right on this point: seizure of power for the FAI-CNT would have created “revolutionary totalitarianism (and) anarchist dictatorship.”

There was, however, a third alternative. They could have called for the federation of the popular committees and councils (juntas): the factory councils, collectivized peasant villages, soldiers’ committees, workers’ patrols, etc. Federated together, these could have become an alternate power to the Catalonia government — and, spread nationally, to the Spanish state — a situation of dual power. Such a federal structure could have overthrown the state and carried on revolutionary war against Franco without creating a party-state dictatorship.

This would have been more rather than less democratic than the liberal state. Different political tendencies would have been represented according to how popular they really were among the oppressed. Capitalist parties would have had representation only according to their support among the oppressed. Coalitions (between anarchists and reform socialists) would have been based on the real balances of forces. As the working people became more radicalized, their regional and national representatives would become more revolutionary.

The program of a federation of councils was raised throughout the Spanish Revolution by Leon Trotsky and his few Spanish followers. It is true that Trotsky’s advocacy of councils was purely instrumental — as a weapon for overthrowing the existing state, not as a framework for a new society. We know from the Russian Revolution that he was willing to ban non-Bolshevik socialist parties from the soviets (councils) and to turn the soviets into mere tools of the Bolshevik party. But this does not excuse the anarchists from failing to raise the program of a federation of councils as an alternate power.