

Only the Workers can free the Workers

An introduction to the Workers Solidarity Federation

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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PART 1: THE POLITICS OF THE WSF

WORKERS STRUGGLE AGAINST BOSSES

The WSF believes that at the moment we live in a capitalist society in which there are two major classes :

- the ruling class: bosses/capitalists, generals, top State officials, professional politicians
- the working-class: blue collar workers, white collar workers, workers in the service sector, the poor, the unemployed, the marginalised youth, rank-and-file soldiers.

There is also a middle class of professionals, small business, and middle management. Overall the middle class tends to stand with the bosses, although a minority supports the workers struggle.

The bosses own the factories, banks, mines, shops, etc. Workers don't.

All that the workers have is their ability to work. The workers and their families need to work for the bosses in order to earn a living.

The workers create all the wealth. The workers build the roads, the schools, the buildings, the goods in the shops. The workers transport and work in the shops.

But the workers do not control the wealth that they create.

Workers make cars, but very few ever own one. Workers clean university offices, but they do not receive a decent education. Workers grow the food on the land, but they starve. Workers build the houses of the rich, but they live in shacks and one room buildings.

The bosses suck up the wealth that the workers make. Everything that the workers make is owned by the bosses. If the workers build cars, the cars belong to the company.

The bosses sell the goods. The bosses use a little bit of the money from the sales to pay the workers. They keep the rest for themselves.

Workers dig gold from the ground, but they earn only few hundred rands a month. The bosses sell the gold, and make millions of rand.

This is how the bosses exploit the workers.

The worker gets a low wage, and so becomes poor.

The boss gets a high profit, and so becomes rich.

The wealth of the bosses is stolen from the working class.

This is why the boss wants to squeeze as much work out of the worker for as little wages as possible. This gives the boss high profits.

Goods and services are not made to meet the needs of ordinary people. Production is for profit. Although there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, people starve because profits come first.

AGAINST CAPITALISM

This is capitalism: the dog-eat-dog world of profits and exploitation. This is modern slavery-wage-slavery.

The interests of the working class and the ruling class are in total opposition to each other. The workers and the bosses can never unite because they have fundamentally different class interests.

So long as the millions and millions of working class people have nothing, while the few have all the good things in life, there will not be peace in society. There will only be a war between the two classes.

A class war.

WORKERS- UNITE!

We believe that workers need to fight back against capitalism and the bosses.

Divisions between workers make them weak. Divisions make it difficult to organise against the capitalist bosses who exploit us. In this way, divisions undermine the conditions of almost all workers. Instead of being divided, we must be united.

A working class united will never be defeated.

Only united workers struggle can end capitalist exploitation and the legacy of apartheid oppression. We stand for workers unity- for workers to unite in a struggle against racism, capitalism and all oppression. For workers to unite whatever their colour, language, country of origin, or sex.

APARTHEID BUILT CAPITALISM

We believe that the struggle of the Black working class in South Africa is a struggle against the slave bondage of capitalism.

We believe that Apartheid built capitalism. Capitalism was the main cause of apartheid.

Apartheid was designed to give these bosses a very cheap labour force.

This very cheap labour force was created through repressive and racist laws designed to keep labour cheap, rightless, and controlled.

In the 1870s, gold was discovered in South Africa. The bosses saw a chance to make big profits. To do this, the bosses needed the cheapest labour that they could find.

These bosses were mostly White, because of South Africa's colonial history.

The easiest way to get cheap labour was to create a highly exploited Black working class.

Because of South Africa's colonial history, poor Blacks had almost no rights (rich Blacks could get exemptions and special privileges).

This made it easy for the bosses to

- use force to make poor Blacks become workers on the mines and farms
- use force to keep Black workers' wages very low

New laws were passed to force poor Black farmers to find work on the mines. In particular, there were new taxes which had to be paid in money. This resulted in young men being forced to go to the towns to earn money on the mines. In most cases, the chiefs helped recruit labour and collect taxes.

In town, the bosses housed the mine workers in compounds. The aim of the compounds was to keep the workers in slave-like conditions, so that they could be closely controlled. If the workers tried to resist, the bosses could imprison them in the compounds.

These Black workers were migrant workers. This meant that they came to town for a only a limited period, while their families stayed in the countryside. These workers came from South Africa and from other countries like Lesotho, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The pass laws were started to make sure that the workers only stayed in town to work for the bosses. Then they had to go home to the locations and reserves.

This migrant labour system had many advantages for the bosses. It slowed the growth of big townships. This made it hard for workers to organise.

Migrant labour also meant that the bosses had to pay less tax towards schools, housing etc. Before the 1950s, there were very few government funded Black schools in South Africa.

Migrant labour allowed very low wages to be paid: the bosses said that the families could live from farming on the land. And when workers were sick or old, they could be sent back to the countryside with very little pension.

Because they were Black, these workers had no rights. They were not allowed to organise freely or to form trade unions.

When the Black workers fought back, the bosses were ruthless: they crushed all strikes with force- in the case of the mines, the big strikes of 1918, in 1946, and 1986 all met with severe repression. It was only in 1979 that Black trade unions were recognised by the government.

The aim of Apartheid after 1948 was largely to maintain the cheap labour system.

The cheap labour system was in trouble in the 1940s. The migrant labour system was breaking down because the land in the reserves had become too poor to farm, and so many Black workers began to live permanently in the city. Also, workers had built strong resistance movements and trade union movements at the time (they were often led by the Communist party).

Apartheid tried to force Black people back into the reserves, so that they could be migrant workers. Apartheid tried reinforce the pass laws, and even extend them to women. Apartheid also banned and destroyed the resistance movements and trade unions.

Apartheid also tried to justify the lack of political rights of Black workers by claiming that all Blacks were citizens of one or other reserve (now called "homelands"). This was also an attempt to create ethnic divisions between Black workers.

Apartheid built capitalism. Capitalist development in South Africa was based on labour-repressive policies that created a cheap Black labour force.

The result of apartheid was massive Black poverty and suffering.

These policies had a racist character because they were applied only to Black people. In turn, racist theories that Blacks were not entitled to equal political rights, education, social facilities or skilled labour were used to justify this situation.

The racial character of South Africa capitalism was rooted in the country's colonial past, which had established the principle of "no equality in church and State" between Black and White. Racial oppression and racial theories derive from the period of colonialism and slavery.

The compound system, migrant labour, pass laws, the ban on Black trade unions- this is the oppression on which the giant profits of the rich in South Africa were built.

DIVIDE AND RULE

We believe that racism was used to justify and also used to set worker against worker. This weakens workers struggles. It is the tactic of divide and rule.

On each mine, workers of different languages and groups were housed in separate compounds. The aim was to divide the workers into different tribes. In this way, workers from different regions and countries could be played off against each other in "faction fights".

These conflicts helped the bosses, because they made it difficult for the Black workers to organise into powerful trade unions. These divisions made the workers weak.

From the 1870s, there were growing numbers of White workers in the towns. Some of these workers were “poor Whites” from South Africa. Others immigrated from Europe to work on the mines.

In the early years, these workers were very militant. This was partly because some of these workers had a background in trade unionism and socialism in Europe.

It was also because, at first, many of these workers faced bad conditions. On the mines, more than half of the White workers got the lung disease, phthisis. Most trade unions were banned, and when the White workers built general strikes in 1907, 1913, 1914 and 1922, they were crushed by the army, and their leaders were deported or hanged.

The bosses decided to divide the Black workers and the White workers. They were afraid of unity (in 1913, both Black and White miners came out on strike and this scared the bosses).

The bosses divided the White workers from the Black workers by giving the Whites the best jobs and better pay. In this way, they won the support of most White workers.

The bosses also did their best to divide African workers from Indian and Coloured workers. These workers were also oppressed by apartheid-capitalism.

These days, the bosses are telling us to blame the workers from Mozambique and Zimbabwe for taking our jobs and houses. Today we are told to blame the Nigerians and Zairians for crime. It is the same old game: divide and rule.

WHY APARTHEID WAS OVERTHROWN

The end of apartheid in 1994 shows what united workers can achieve.

Mass action by the workers and the poor forced the regime to the negotiating table. Mass action by structures such as the trade unions forced the regime to end legalised racial oppression.

This is what we can achieve- if millions of workers are on the move, the bosses are afraid. They feel our power. They see our power.

Because their economy was in a crisis, and because the workers were rising up, the bosses were forced to end apartheid.

AFTER APARTHEID: WHAT NEXT?

The struggle ended the apartheid system. This was a great victory. We now have some basic political rights: freedom to organise and freedom of speech, protection from racist and sexist laws, freedom against discrimination.

However, although we defeated Apartheid, we did not defeat capitalism or overthrow the bosses. And the government still arrests the workers (see section below on government).

Although we have some political rights, we do not have any economic rights. We have no say over how our workplaces and communities are really run. The bosses still steal the fruits of our labour.

Instead what has happened is that a growing layer of Black bosses are also becoming involved in business. These Black bosses have the same interests as the White bosses. They are also happy to fire workers or cut wages. This group is part of the ruling class.

It is clear that Black workers must not form alliances with any bosses- Black or White. All bosses want the same thing- to exploit workers.

CAPITALISM AND RACISM: ONE ENEMY, ONE FIGHT

Because of apartheid, Black workers face problems like

- rotten schools for their children
- underdeveloped townships with bad roads, poor sanitation, and high crime
- mass unemployment
- the apartheid wage gap
- racism at the workplace.

We believe that these problems cannot be solved under capitalism.

As long as the wealth is in the hands of a few bosses, there will not be money to end the miserable legacy of apartheid. We need to take the wealth from the bosses and put it under workers control. Then we can use the economy to reconstruct our communities and workplaces. We are tired of racism and bosses. We need to have democracy and direct control over our work.

As long as we live in a capitalist system, the bosses will promote racism to divide the workers from each other. Capitalism caused apartheid and racism. Racism can only be ended when capitalism is ended

We need to fight for land redistribution, for the upgrading of historically Black schools and an improved teacher-pupil ratio, for free education and democratic teaching methods in all sectors of education, affirmative action in White-dominated trades and professions, and end to the Apartheid wage gap, improved training for Black workers, and a large-scale programme of house building, road building and electrification which also deals with the issue of unemployment.

All attacks on immigrants, and attempts to divide immigrant from South African workers must be opposed.

WOMEN'S FREEDOM

Women are exploited and face oppression every day. In the workplace women are forced into low paying, insecure and unskilled jobs. Women's problems do not stop at the workplace. When we come home we have to face another shift of housework with little help from their husbands or boyfriends.

If this is not enough, women have to deal with violence. Thousands of women a year are raped, beaten or emotionally abused.

Women's oppression is in the direct interest of capitalism and the State. By giving women the worst work, with no job security and low wages, the bosses create a super- cheap workforce, which they can hire and fire at will.

Bosses keep their labour costs low and their profits high by hiring women as casual or part-time workers and denying them rights and benefits- such as maternity rights.

Bosses use women's oppression to divide the working class and keep all wages low. Cheap women workers can be used to threaten male workers. Male workers are warned not to fight for higher wages and better conditions because if they do the bosses will hire cheaper women workers. This causes resentment between male and women workers and prevents them from organising against the real enemy- the boss.

Women's unpaid work in the household supplies bosses with the next generation of workers at no extra costs. Women do the cooking, cleaning and child rearing for free. Women workers also take care of the sick and the elderly in the same way.

This is why the bosses powerful media (newspapers, radio, television, books, and advertisements) promotes sexist ideas by providing hateful and exploitative ideas and images of women. The media promotes ideas that say women are inferior and those women's oppression or abuse is justified.

Male workers do not fundamentally benefit from women's oppression. If men and women workers fight together, they could all benefit through better family incomes, less money worries, and stronger worker unity.

Men and women workers must unite together against capitalism and the bosses- including women bosses. Rich women and working class women do not have the same interests. The only way in which working class women can be free is if they challenge the capitalist system, which caused their oppression in the first place.

We must build tomorrow today. We must fight for equal pay for equal work, for women's access to jobs that are traditionally denied to them, for job security for women, for free 24 childcare funded by the bosses and the State, for paid maternity leave and guaranteed re-employment, and an end to all violence against women. Men must do a fair share of the housework.

Women must have an equal right to all positions of "leadership" in mass organisations. Women must be given access to free safe abortion on demand, and to free health care. We must build these struggles in the factories and the townships. Progressive working class men must support these struggles.

CAN WORKERS' FREEDOM COME THROUGH GOVERNMENT?

We are often told that workers' freedom and socialism must come through the government. Some people say that if we run in elections we can get "political power". Then we can use this political power to get "economic power" i.e. control over the mines and factories and farms.

We believe that this idea is wrong and false.

First of all, running in elections always leads to militants and socialists dropping their revolutionary principles.

Look at the so-called Labour Party in Britain. They do not go to the people with a clear socialist message. They go for whatever is popular and will ensure that they get elected. This becomes more important to them than educating people about the meaning of socialism.

They do not mobilise the people to take mass action. They do not organise the people to empower themselves at the grassroots. People are seen as voters, not as people who can be actually involved in politics and bringing socialism about.

When politicians have our votes, they quickly forget the needs of the workers and break the promises that they have made to us.

WHERE DOES POWER LIE?

There is a second reason why we believe that socialism and freedom cannot come through parliament.

The reason is that real power in this society does not actually lie in parliament.

Real power in this capitalist society lies outside parliament. It is in the company boardrooms, and in the un- elected upper levels of the government and military.

If we tried to bring socialism through parliament, we would be blocked by these forces.

The money would leave the country and the economy would enter a crisis. If this was not enough to stop us, then the top government officials would start to confuse and sabotage and corrupt the revolutionaries in parliament. And if that did not work, the army would come to crush us.

If we look at a country like Chile we can see how this works. In 1973 the people elected a moderate socialist government led by President Allende.

This democratically elected government was toppled by a C.I.A (the CIA is a special wing of the American government) backed military coup. Repression followed in which the workers movement was smashed and thousands of militants lost their lives.

This happened for two reasons. The Chilean socialists did not understand that real power is not in the parliament but in the boardrooms of the big companies, the State bureaucracy, and the military.

The second reason is that the Chileans did not smash the state but tried to capture it peacefully. We must understand that the army and police are against us. They are there to protect the wealth of the ruling class.

Allende refused to arm the workers and so made the job of the military much easier.

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT?

But why should this be so? To answer this question, we need to understand the real nature of government

The state (i.e. governments, armies, courts, police, etc.) is a direct result of the fact that we live in a capitalist class society. A society where only 5% of the people own 85% of the wealth, 120,000 capitalist farmers own almost all land, and 5 big companies control 80% of all shares on the Stock Exchange (SA figures ca. 1994)

The state is there to protect the interests of this minority, if not by persuasion then by force. Laws are made not to protect us but to protect those who own the wealth and power.

ONE LAW FOR THE RICH- ONE LAW FOR THE POOR

Even under the new government, there is one law for the rich, and one law for the poor. The new government is still a bosses' government.

When workers go on strike they are met by police dogs and rubber bullets. When workers go on strike they are attacked by the media (T.V and in the newspapers) for "harming the economy".

But the bosses who exploit workers and throw people out of work and into more misery never face punishment.

In 1997, the Chamber of Mines fired 150,000 workers. These workers earned money to feed their families. This means that the mining bosses have forced hundreds of thousands of people

into hunger. These workers and their families will not be able to buy medicine. Or enough food. Or school uniforms. Or be able to pay rent and electricity and water charges.

The mining bosses are guilty of starving and oppressing these working class people.

But do you think the bosses will be arrested for this crime?

There is not even a law against firing people.

On the other hand, if the workers went on strike against the dismissals, the workers would be conducting an illegal strike. This means that they could be fired or arrested or even charged in court.

Instead of arresting the bosses for crimes against the working people, the government enforces the cruel decisions of the bosses. And it protects the bosses from the anger of the workers.

Every State in every country acts this way. Every State in the world defends the ruling class.

Do you still think that the law protects the workers?

If you think that the State is there to protect you, think about the fact that most tax in South Africa is collected from ordinary people through VAT, rents and rates. The companies pay under 25% of all tax (SA figures, ca. 1994).

PARLIAMENT OR DEMOCRACY

There is a third reason why we oppose the use of parliament.

This is that parliament is not real democracy.

When we vote, we are asked to hand over our lives to 400 people in parliament. These 400 people are only accountable every five years and who can basically do whatever they like between elections. These 400 people enjoy a "sweet life" of wealth and ease.

These 400 people are making all the decisions for 40 million people.

Parliament does not give us any real democratic control over our daily lives- at work or in the community.

We workers must realise that the government is part of the problem- it is a tool of the bosses.

SO HOW CAN THE WORKERS WIN?

We still need drastic changes in this country and in this world if we are to win freedom for the working class.

This change can only come from below. Freedom can never come through the government or the capitalist system.

This change can only be brought about by the workers. The ruling class and the most of the middle class support capitalism and the government.

Central to our politics is the belief that ordinary people must make the revolution. Every member of the working class (workers, unemployed, women, etc.) has a role to play.

Only the workers have the numbers and class interest and ability for mass organisation needed to end this system of exploitation. Only the workers can create a free society because only the workers do not exploit.

SOCIALISM FROM BELOW

Freedom cannot be given, it has to be taken.

We must concentrate on organising on the ground. Freedom will never come through elections. Socialism does not come through electing socialists to Parliament but through the direct action of workers taking control of the factories and land. For us socialism can only come from below, not from the top.

Socialism can only come about through the revolutionary general strike- when the workers organised in their unions seize the means of production and put them under workers control.

Socialism will not come through the government. Socialism will replace the government with worker and community councils (see below).

IDEAS AND ORGANISATION: KEYS TO REVOLUTION

In order for the working class to end oppression, capitalism, and the government, and replace it with workers power and socialism, two main things are needed:

- the working class must be united. The strength of the workers lies in mass action and mass organisation. All workers must be united so that they are strong enough to defeat the coalition of exploiters and oppressors. Workers must also be united across different countries. If the workers revolution only takes place in one country, it can easily be crushed from outside. The workers revolution must include workers from all the different countries in the world. Revolution must be international.
- the working class must have a clear vision of a new society and how to get there. As many workers as possible must support and fight for a new socialist society under direct workers control (and not a government elite).

REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM

It is not enough for the workers to believe in the revolution.

The workers must be organised to make the revolution as well.

We believe that the main organisation that the workers will use to make the revolution will be the trade unions.

Trade unions are workers combat organisations of the working class. They are built to defend and advance workers interests against the bosses.

In order for the trade unions to become revolutionary, we need to do two main things

- make sure that the unions are under the control of the workers on the shop-floor. Unions must be based on workers democracy. The unions should not be controlled by full-time officials, the unions must be based on the self-activity of as many workers as possible. There should be as few full-time posts as possible.
- The unions must be radical and militant. Unions need to be won to a programme of workers revolution. Union members must not put faith in politicians and political alliances. The unions should be independent of political parties. Unions must commit themselves to organising a revolutionary general strike in which the unions seize the land, mines and factories and place them under direct workers control.

We believe in building a rank and file movement which would embrace workers from different workplaces and areas of work. Its main function would be to encourage solidarity between all workers. It would support all strikes, fight for workers democracy in the unions, fight for equal rights for women and ultimately resist any attempts by the bosses to make us pay for their crisis.

The unions can organise the workers to seize the factories, offices, farms and mines, and place them under direct workers control in a revolutionary general strike.

INTERNATIONAL WORKERS UNITY

As we said earlier, we believe that all workers have basically the same class interests.

All workers would gain from a world without the bosses. All workers benefit when workers are united against the bosses.

We realise that workers are often bitterly divided. This is what the bosses want. If we are fighting each other, then we can't fight the bosses.

The WSF stands for workers unity. We believe that workers in different countries must be united. We are one class of people, with one set of interests. It doesn't matter if you are working in China, the USA or Zambia. We all face the same enemy- international capitalism.

Capitalism is an international system- and must be defeated internationally. If the workers revolution is confined to only one country, the revolution will be defeated by external forces. Military invasion, blockades, sanctions- these will be used to try to stop the revolution.

The only way to win is to spread the revolution as far and wide as possible. If all the workers are on the move, how can the tiny minority of capitalists hold power?

For all of these reasons, we believe in promoting workers unity in every way we can. We believe in the unity of the international working class- across the boundaries of national frontiers, skin colour, and language.

In South Africa, workers are deeply divided on racial lines. Partly this is because the bosses gave White workers privileges to win their support.

In South Africa the motor force of the revolution will be the Black working class- the biggest, most militant, and best organised group of workers.

It is possible that with the end of job reservation and other discrimination, White workers will start to stand with Black workers. In fact, moves towards such unity have already begun- a good example is the affiliation of SASBO to COSATU.

We support this unity, but we know that unity can only be built on the basis of anti-racist workers politics- not by pandering to racist prejudice.

We also believe that the revolution in South Africa will be based on the Black working class- with or without allies.

Workers unity in the fight against exploitation and oppression is the only way forward.

Workers of the World- Unite!

WHAT WOULD LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM LOOK LIKE?

We have used the term "libertarian socialism" and "workers control" many times, so lets outline how we see the future society.

In place of racism, women's oppression, and worker exploitation, there would be full social and economic equality for all.

In place of government and capitalism, the future society would be based on workplace and community councils. These would be elected at the grassroots.

In the community, the councils would be based ultimately on block and street structures.

In the workplace, the councils would be based on section and factory committees.

The councils would federate with each other so that decisions could be made covering large areas.

Delegates could be sent from each area and workplace. The delegates would be recallable, i.e. if those who voted them in are not happy with their behaviour they can immediately replace them with someone else.

There would be no capitalism or government as we know it. Instead, there would be an international working-class democracy based on control from below. The whole world would be united through the federations of workers councils.

There would be no capitalist system. Instead of a society based on money and profit making, society would be based on workers control of the factories and meeting human need.

Within this society there would be genuine individual freedom. Individuals would have to contribute to society but would be free to the extent that they do not interfere with the freedom of others.

WHY WE DO NOT SUPPORT MARXISM OR RUSSIA

This is where we disagree with Marxist socialists who supported Russia and China.

According to these socialists, socialism must come from above – through “socialist governments” led by the “revolutionary vanguard” or Communist party. In other words, these socialists – often called Marxists or Leninists – believed that a small group was needed to make the revolution for the people.

According to Lenin, the Russian leader, workers could only achieve a basic “bread and butter” consciousness. They could not invent socialism. Socialism therefore had to come from the middle class “intellectuals” organised in a party of “professional revolutionaries”.

The result of this sort of thinking was clearly shown in both Soviet Russia and Red China. Both Russia and China were dictatorships. Workers were not allowed to organise trade unions. Workers were not allowed to strike or hold meetings or organise struggles.

What existed in these countries has nothing to do with socialism.

Power rested in the hands of a tiny party elite. The government was the boss and the workers were still exploited and told what to do. We call this “State-capitalism”.

Workers did not control their workplaces. All power was held by the bureaucracy and so-called “Communist” party.

The collapse of these countries was not the collapse of socialism- it was the collapse of State-capitalism.

PART 2: CAN IT WORK?

You probably agree that what you have read so far are mostly good ideas. You probably accept that the wealth of society should be distributed equally and also that ordinary people should have more say in the running of their lives.

But can it work? Can ordinary people really create such a better world?

The best way of finding out is to look at history. Because libertarian socialism (anarcho-syndicalism) has such a rich and proud history, we only have space to focus on one example: The Spanish Revolution (1936–9).

THE SPANISH REVOLUTION (1936- 7)

The Spanish Revolution was the product of years of patient organizing by libertarian socialists (anarcho-syndicalists).

In 1911, a massive revolutionary trade union federation, the CNT (National Confederation of Labor) was formed. It had two aims: first, to fight the bosses with mass action in the daily struggle. Second, to make a revolution by organizing the workers and the poor to seize back the land and factories and mines.

The CNT was a union built on the ideas of libertarian socialism (anarcho-syndicalism).

The CNT led many militant and successful struggles against the bosses and the government. By 1936 it was the biggest trade union in Spain, with nearly 2 million members. But the CNT was always democratic. Despite its giant size, the CNT never had more than two paid officials.

The libertarian socialists (anarcho-syndicalists) did not restrict themselves to the workplace. They also organized an anarchist political group to work within the unions (the FAI), rent boycotts in poor areas, and among working and poor youth and women.

The CNT itself included working peasants, farmworkers and the unemployed. It even organized workers schools!

In July 1936, fascists led by General Franco, and backed by the rich and the Church, tried to seize power in Spain. Fascists believe in an extreme right-wing dictatorship, and are used by the bosses to violently suppress the masses' struggle for a better life.

The elected government (called the "Popular Front"- a coalition of left-wing parties) was unable and unwilling to deal with the fascists. It even tried to strike a deal with the fascists by appointing a right-winger as Prime Minister. Why? Because they would rather compromise with the right wing and protect their wealth and power than arm the workers and the poor for self-defense.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

Fortunately, the workers and the peasants did not wait around for the government to act. The CNT declared a general strike and organized armed resistance to the attempted take over. Other unions and left wing groups followed the CNT's lead.

In this way the people in arms were able to stop the fascists in two-thirds of Spain. It soon became apparent to these workers and peasants that this was not just a war against fascists, but the beginning of a revolution!

Libertarian socialist (anarcho-syndicalist) influence was everywhere- workers militias were set up independently from the State, workers seized control of their workplaces and peasants seized the land.

TAKING BACK THE LAND

Small peasants and farm workers faced extremely harsh conditions in Spain. Starvation and repression was a part of their daily lives. Therefore it was no surprise that libertarian socialism (anarcho-syndicalism) was particularly strong in the countryside.

During the revolution, as many as 7 million peasants and farmworkers set up voluntary collectives in the anti-fascist region. After the majority of landowners fled, a village assembly was held. If a decision to collectivize was taken, all the land, tools and animals were pooled together for the use of the entire collective. Teams were formed to look after the various areas of work and each team elected accountable delegates to a village assembly. A committee was elected to coordinate the overall running of the collective and each collective had regular general meetings in which all members participated.

Individuals who did not want to join the collectives were NOT forced to. They were given enough land to farm on, but were forbidden to hire laborers to work this land. Most “individualists” eventually joined the collectives when they saw how successful the collectives were.

SEIZING THE FACTORIES

Libertarian socialism (anarcho-syndicalism) inspired massive transformations in industry. Workers seized control over their workplaces and directly controlled production by themselves and for the benefit of the Spanish workers and peasants.

TRAM WORKERS

The tram system provided a shining example of just how much better we can do things under direct workers control. On July 24th the tram crews got together and decided to run the whole system themselves. Within 5 days 700 trams were in service, instead of the usual 600.

Wages were equalized and working conditions improved. Free medical care was created.

Everyone benefited from the trams being under workers control. Fares were reduced and an extra 50 million passengers were transported. Yet more money was made and used to improve transport services and produce weapons. With the capitalist profit motive gone, safety became much more important and the number of accidents were reduced.

WORKERS ARMY

In the early stages of the revolution, the armed forces of the state had effectively collapsed. In their place, the trade unions and left-wing organizations set about organizing the armed workers and peasants into militias. Overall, there were 150,000 volunteers willing to fight where they were needed. The vast majority were members of the CNT. All officers were elected by the rank-and-file and had no special privileges.

WOMEN IN THE SPANISH REVOLUTION

Before the revolution women faced very oppressive and repressive conditions. Women had no independence, they were paid far less than men, single women were not allowed to go out at night without a male companion.

During the revolution many men and women changed their old conservative beliefs about women. Women fought as equals in the workers militias and were involved at all levels of collectivization of the land and industry. But change does not occur over night and many sexist practice and ideas remained.

In May 1936 libertarian socialist (anarcho-syndicalist) women formed a women workers' movement Mujeres Libres ("Free Women"). They aimed to empower women by giving women confidence to participate in the revolution and fight for their own liberation. They also combated the sexist ideas of male workers and peasants.

Mujeres Libres worked in close alliance with the CNT unions, the FAI, and the Libertarian Youth. Mujeres Libres believed the fight against women's oppression was part of the larger struggle to end all forms of oppression. This meant that the fight for women's liberation was part of the fight against bosses and the state.

Mujeres Libres won many achievements for women during the revolution. They organized democratic schools for women and won legalized abortion and contraception, divorce rights, child care facilities, and equal wages to men.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The revolution showed that workers, peasants and the poor can create a new world without bosses or a government. It showed that libertarian socialist (anarcho-syndicalist) ideas and methods (such as building revolutionary unions) can work. And it showed that imperialism is the enemy of all workers: the fascists used the colonial army from North Africa to launch their attack.

Problems did arise in Spain as is inevitable. These are considered in other WSF booklets and materials.

The main point is that given the right conditions mutual aid and co-operation will flourish. History is not neutral. What we learn in school is the necessity for government, rulers and capitalism. What we do not learn is that many times it has been shown that this government is not necessary. People are not inherently bad. Given the right conditions a spirit of mutual aid and co-operation can grow. People are not naturally evil and greedy.

JOIN THE WSF

What the WSF is saying are not just "nice" ideas. History shows us that these ideas can work. A new society can be created with the workers in control. But it won't happen spontaneously — We must organise for it.

That is why we need a revolutionary political organisation. An organisation that draws together all those fighting for workers control.

An organisation that gives us the chance to exchange ideas and experiences, and to learn from the lessons of history. An organisation that allows us to struggle together for a new society. An organisation that will work in the unions to fight the bureaucratic leaders, win the rank and file to libertarian socialist (anarcho-syndicalist) ideas, and transform these workers organisations into revolutionary combat units.

We do not need a group of leaders and their passive followers. We do need an organisation working towards mobilising the mass of ordinary people in the process of making the revolution.

If you like what you have just read, you should start working to build just such an organisation.
You should join the Workers Solidarity Federation

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Workers' Solidarity Federation
Only the Workers can free the Workers
An introduction to the Workers Solidarity Federation
1995

Retrieved on 8th August 2021 from struggle.ws
This pamphlet is a short introduction to the politics of the Workers Solidarity Federation (South Africa), a libertarian socialist (anarchist) political organisation.

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