

THE SPANISH REVOLUTION

1936



1986

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

We include this special section within the pages of the "Syndicalist" in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish revolution, which began on July 19th, 1936.

In the amount of space we can devote to the subject we cannot hope to do justice to the massive organisational structures that were developed in the period between 1936 and 1939. We hope that we can at least give some small insight into the workers' movements and their achievements, and the context in which they grew.

The following pages give brief descriptions of the collectivised villages, towns and cities of Spain, the worker-controlled factories and industries, self-management of farming by peasants, and finally a short look at the reaction against these achievements by the Socialist, Communist and Republican parties and politicians.

INTRODUCTION

This period in Spain represented a far-reaching social revolution. Although it took place in the context of civil war, it was one of the most complete experiments in history in workers' control and self management.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

For decades the Spanish Labour movement, and indeed Spanish working-class culture, had come to be imbued with anarchist principles and methods. The most concrete expression of this was the mass industrial union, the C.N.T. (National Confederation of Labour) with a membership of millions and an influence far beyond



that. The anarcho-syndicalists of the C.N.T. and the anarchists of the F.A.I. (Iberian Anarchist Federation) contributed greatly to the working-class organisation that led to the take over of industry and the land by workers and peasants in 1936. The C.N.T. had consistently urged workers to organise from the base upwards and to aim for revolution without relying on state authority or political parties. Furthermore, the consciousness of workers and peasants was such that they were able to take control of the social and economic structures on their own account, against the wishes of the political leaders and parties which many of them voted for, or even belonged to.

THE TRIGGER

On July 18th 1936 the right and the army revolted against the Republican government elected earlier that year. They chose a time when the left and the workers were in disarray, as usually happens when a naive faith in social-democratic government is being punctured. Even during the first few months of the Popular Front government workers, peasants and the middle class were increasingly disillusioned, just as they had been in 1931 after the bourgeois revolution and the birth of the second Republic. But despite the political disunity, the workers' movement was united in its libertarian sentiments against the military uprising. The army

was resisted all over Spain, and workers achieved swift and crushing victories in Catalonia, the Asturias and Madrid. The immediate task was to keep industry running, and to adapt machinery to provide arms and ammunition for the workers. In several cities this was carried out so creatively and imaginatively that productivity increased substantially. Systems of distribution were efficiently set up and the normal functions of communities were taken over by collectives. Within a week columns of volunteer militias were organised by the C.N.T.-F.A.I. which left Barcelona for the Aragon front.

ONE STEP FORWARD.....

In Catalonia the whole of industry was collectivised. But the Bourgeois state machinery of the Republic remained more or less intact. The bureaucracy and manipulation of the politicians - Socialist, communist and republican - soon began to interfere seriously with the progress of the revolution. This process was accelerated as so many of the respected C.N.T. and anarchist militants and other militant workers left for the front. Eventually the waters became so muddied, and people so confused, that C.N.T. leaders actually joined the republican government and became ministers. In effect they went back on their beliefs and betrayed the whole history and traditions of the C.N.T.. Ironically, it was those traditions that had facilitated the libertarian character of Workers' control in Catalonia.

LIBERTARIAN ARAGON

The situation was markedly different in those parts of Aragon not under the control of the fascists and military rebels. To start with they controlled much of the region. But as the volunteer militias crossed from Catalonia into the villages of Aragon they found that the apparatus of the Republican regime had all but melted away. The mayors and functionaries had little to say during the bloodbaths instigated by the fascists, and then the imminent arrival of the militias left most of them frightened, out of touch, or in sympathy with the fascists anyway. In the absence of the nuisance of the local state the reconstruction of social and economic relations along libertarian lines was already taking place.

BARCELONA PUBLIC SERVICES

The following article will look at the development of workers' organisations and the achievements that were built up in the Barcelona public services of power (gas, water and electricity), transport and health.

The reason we have chosen these services is to show the wide-ranging social implications that are thrown up when workers are left to their own devices to work, run and organise their industries for the good of all. There are many other examples in the engineering, clothing and other sectors which would have been worth mentioning, but due to lack of space this was not possible.

All quotations are from Gaston Leval's "Collectives in the Spanish Revolution", which was a catalogue of the author's experiences as he travelled around Spain at the time.

PART ONE

THE WORKERS TAKE OVER

As the military uprising began to take shape so the workers of Barcelona began to organise themselves. The public services throughout the city were of the greatest importance, and this situation led the workers to realise on the very day of the uprising that the services had to be continued.

When the battles of Barcelona had finished the workers returned to work as usual though with one major difference; they were now in complete control.

In the case of the transport workers street battles had brought all traffic to a standstill. The roads were blocked by the barricades that were erected to stop the

advance of the fascists. In many cases the barricades were the burnt-out shells of trams and buses. Transport was indispensable, the streets had to be cleared and the transport system got working again. The Syndical section of the Tramways appointed a commission of seven workers to occupy the administrative offices while others inspected the tracks and drew up a plan for clearing the streets and other work that had to be done. Here started the worker-controlled transport system of Barcelona. Likewise, the power industry was also indispensable. Gas, water and electricity supplies were taken over by the workers and were supplied continuously until the end of the civil war in 1939. The only stoppages during this three-year period were temporary due to aerial bombardment attacks by the fascist Air Force..

The new social system created was to bring all public services together for the greater advancement of social needs being fulfilled. The creation of a worker-controlled environment not only heightened conditions for the workers themselves, but also had widespread implications throughout the Barcelona streets. For instance the knowledge that was held by one group of workers was made widely available to all who could potentially use it, both within the city and throughout the rest of the country. In the case of transport Barcelona had a large and over-abundant system, while other areas of Catalonia had very few or no services at all. The Barcelona transport workers did all they could to help, and all lorries and buses which were not being put to good use

were sent to areas such as Lerida, along with financial help.

THE WORKERS ORGANISE

The basic organisational structure of the workers' movement was that of rank and file control. This was true in the public services and with slight variations the structure was the same in workplaces throughout Spain.

The structure of rank and file controlled syndicates was not a new idea in Spain, nor was it spontaneous. For many years the C.N.T. and their forerunners had built workplace syndicates though obviously on a much smaller scale. Some of these syndicates had actually survived through the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in the 1920's. The ideas already had a long history of development in the minds of Spanish workers. On the takeover of the workplaces the workers immediately began to elect their delegates to the works committees and Central Liaison Committee (a structure that was to bring together both C.N.T. and U.G.T. workers). All major decisions that were made were the sole right of all workers at the Syndical Assembly of the two workers organisations. All delegates were under the complete control of the assembly and played an almost administrative role.

Below we give an example of the workplace structure set up in the Barcelona Power Industry;

"The first nucleus is the job speciality (trade), each speciality sets up a section immediately with groupings by factory, workshop or 'building' of at least 15 workers... Each section nominates two delegates which the assemblies choose; one of a technical calibre who will participate in the committee of the undertaking and another entrusted with the management of work in the section.

The Building Committee (as it is called) comes next. It is nominated by section commissions and consists of a technician, a manual worker and an administrator.

MANUAL WORKERS DELEGATE

The manual workers delegate has to solve, or try to solve, difficulties which might arise between different sections, those arising within a section being settled by the interested parties themselves. He receives suggestions from workers in the different trades for the nomination or transfer of personell, and the sections give him daily reports on the progress of work... Periodically he calls the sections to general meetings which take place at the syndicate, which tightens the links between workers from different undertakings. During these meetings proposals and initiatives are studied which are likely to improve productivity and production, as well as the workers situation, or be of interest to the syndical organisation... It should

reports addressed to the Council for Industry are prepared.

TECHNICAL DELEGATE

The delegate with technical functions supervises the activities of his section, and uses every endeavour to increase productivity, to lighten the workers burden by introducing new methods. He checks on production at power stations, the state of the network, prepares statistics and charts indicating how production is developing".

Unlike the capitalist orientated production for profit of today, the Spanish workers saw no production necessary other than for social need. All those involved in production were involved in the decision making.

COUNCILS FOR INDUSTRY

"There are of course three; one each for water, gas and electricity. Each is composed of eight delegates* four from the U.G.T. and four from the C.N.T.... The General Council of the three industries, which is also composed of eight members with, as before, four from each union organisation. This council co-ordinates the activities of the three industries, attunes the production and distribution of raw materials from a regional, national and international point of view.

The Council once again plays a mainly administrative role and is obliged at all times to submit its activities to the scrutiny of local and regional assemblies.

In the case of Transport and Health organisations the structures were very similar. Transport engineers and those within the hospitals could not take any important decision without consulting the local committee. Not only because they were delegates but also to ensure that all responsibility was shared by all those affected, and of course where practical problems are involved manual workers generally have the experience where-as technicians may not.

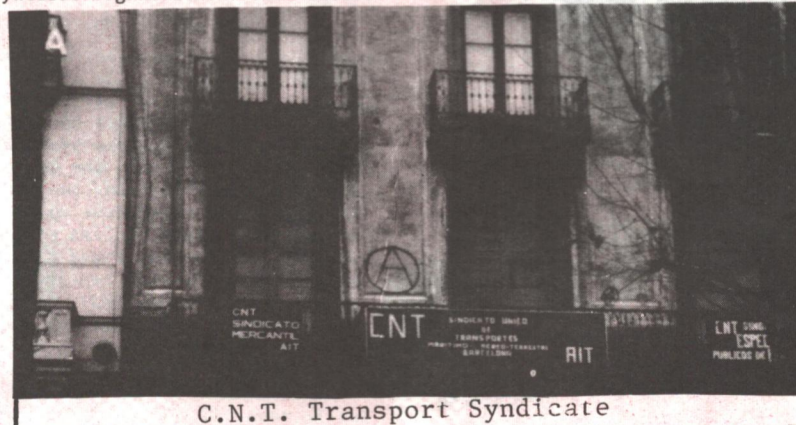
PART TWO

GENERAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Though food, materials and personell were extremely short due to the civil war major advances were made in the worker controlled industries. The achievements not only matched those previously made but in most cases past efforts were generally surpassed.

TRANSPORT

The city streets of Barcelona were cleared of debris only five days after the fascist uprising, the trams were once again running though in greater numbers than they had ever done before. Seven hundred trams were now in operation instead of the six hundred that were usually operating in the city. More social developments regarding safety and service were to come through the workers and the co-ordination with others in industries involved in transport.



C.N.T. Transport Syndicate

be noted that the specific activities of the Manual Workers Delegate do not prevent him from continuing to work at his job alongside his comrades.

ADMINISTRATIVE DELEGATE

The delegate with administrative functions supervises the arrival and warehousing of materials, records requirements, deals with bookkeeping for supplies and reserves and keeps an eye on the state of income and expenditure. He also deals with correspondence and it is his responsibility to see that the balance sheets and

A small and partial catalogue of some of these achievements follows;

"To start with 3,000 metal poles holding up electric cables supplying the current were eliminated as they were interfering with the traffic and causing many accidents and were replaced by a system of aerial suspension. Then a new safety and signalling system was introduced consisting of electric points and automatic discs. Furthermore the company of Agua, Water, Light and Power had installed in many places and right in the middle of the >

routes taken by tram cars, transformer cabins or power distributors, which made all kinds of detours and bifercations necessary, sometimes very sharp and resulted in accidents. This had gone on from when the services had first been laid, and were determined by the whims of financial or political interests. The comrades of Water, Light and Power (now in control) moved these cabins to where they would be in nobodys way, thus making it possible to straighten out once and for all the tramway lines".

The design and building of new tram cars was embarked on by the workers including two new models to climb the steep hills of Barcelonas outlying areas. The new cars weighed 21 tonnes compared with the 35 tonnes of the old models. The new models, even though they were much lighter, were also able to carry more passengers. Before the revolution services were highly duplicated with many routes being covered by 12 different road services and the train.

This was highly wasteful and showed the complete "absurdity of the capitalist system", the workers began a plan eliminating those services that were no longer needed. Plans were drawn up showing all routes to each destination and a new and less wasteful system implemented. Apart from changes in the transport system relating to social need working conditions were also transformed. Washbasins and showers were installed in the sheds and workshops for the first time. Another major achievement was the establishment of a workers' medical service. This included doctors, home-helps and a clinic for the use of workers and their families. Until then, the clinic had been specifically for the use of the rich. Now, those that needed it had access to specialist treatment by a gynaecologist, a specialist in disorders of the digestive tract and another in general surgery.

The health of the general public was also an area in which transport workers played their parts. All tramcars were dis-

infected weekly for the safety of passengers - preventive medicine established by workers long before it was a fashionable concept elsewhere.

HEALTH

The new socialised society held health care as a major priority. The Health Syndicate was divided into four principal groupings,

- General health care,
- Social hygiene and health, in relation to the general organisation of society as a whole.
- Sanitary inspection.
- Social assistance.

It was obvious that the mortality rate of Spanish children under one year of age (80,000 annually) had to be drastically reduced, especially when most of these deaths were due to social causes. Hospitals needed to be built, health care expanded and made accessible to everyone, while hy-

giene and the prevention of disease had to be promoted.

In June 1937, "18 hospitals managed by the medical syndicate (of which six were created by it), 17 sanatoria, 22 clinics, 6 psychiatric establishments, 3 nurseries, 1 maternity hospital as well as two annexes to the General Hospital, one for bone tuberculosis and another for orthopaedic treatment and out-patient departments were set up in all principal localities in Catalonia."

The health syndicates of the CNT were involved in the organising of field hospitals behind the various fighting fronts as well as co-ordinating evacuation of large numbers of children and the elderly from the war zones, anti-gas brigades, street shelters and the building of bomb shelters. The health sector was, as any other, controlled by its workers, the doctors went where they were needed, health was a social duty and a service to the community.

ARAGON AND THE COLLECTIVES

Some of the areas of Aragon nearest the military front were foremost in creating a new social and economic organisation. In these areas libertarian communism developed very quickly and naturally, firstly with the assemblies in villages to discuss the pressing agricultural problems. This movement was initiated in some villages within a week of the military rebellion.

FEDERALISM

When the volunteer militias arrived the village assemblies started to become co-ordinated with neighbouring areas. Defence committees were established instead of the old municipal councils, and a Regional Defence Council was organised by the Aragon C.N.T. from October 1936. This marked a formal recognition of the revolutionary change in Aragon, and a determination to defend that change. Despite hostility or ambivalence in Catalonia, the Aragonese were serious and committed federalists, shunning centralisation or the domination of geographical areas in favour of true co-operation and regional co-ordination.

THE SIMPLE STEP

Collectivisation came to the villages of Aragon by adapting social trends rooted in the rural experiences of peasants and village trade unionists and anarchists. In some districts the local committees of the C.N.T. undertook the task of agrarian re-organisation. But however spontaneous the adoption of collectivisation was from area to area, care was taken not to impose the new systems on peasants and small holders who had traditionally clung to their tiny plots of land. The right of individuals to remain outside of the collectives was strictly maintained, although in practice relatively few stayed outside in the face of the outstanding successes of the agricultural collectives. This success can be measured by remembering that these villages were also feeding the many militias on the Aragon front.

assemblies, usually by delegating commissions to investigate and report back on particular problems. At the district or regional levels similar delegation processes allowed the more ambitious schemes to be implemented without control slipping from the hands of the people.

Village assemblies were held weekly, fortnightly or at least monthly. The various delegates and commissions lived in the village, so that all issues and problems were discussed routinely as part of normal social life. The assemblies themselves were part of that normality. Even the smallholders and individualists who had not joined the agricultural collectives participated in the assemblies if they so desired. The recall of delegates who had not performed their duties adequately tended to be done in the same spirit - that of a simple, social fact. Bitterness and conflict over this censure did not spoil the process because all who took part knew what was going on, and were prepared to discuss it openly and unselfconsciously.

FARMING FOR PEOPLE

Even in the midst of war, research and development in agricultural matters made great strides, due to the involvement of the communities in decision-making at all levels. Experimental farms and nurseries were set up across Aragon to meet the needs of the people as stated by them, not on behalf of them by experts.

MEAT AND VEG

Production of cereals and other crops was increased substantially by the collectives, both in amount and variety. The need to feed villages and militias furthered collectivisation and then its effectiveness. The use of fertilisers and machinery and more efficient cultivation techniques increased wheat production throughout Aragon, when in other areas the harvest was down.

TOWARDS LIBERTARIAN COMMUNISM



the region. The system was so obviously appropriate for the people and for the times that several collectives were run by socialists, and even some wholly by communists, when both political parties were doing all they could to destroy the collectives movement.

THE RESPONSE TO SOCIAL NEED

The growth of imaginative and constructive schemes to improve the lives of the peasants and villagers was astounding. Real, social services were created virtually from nothing. Medical centres, schools, old peoples' homes and especially hospitals were built and equipped almost entirely with resources available locally. The hospitals were often far ahead of their time for Spain, and were advanced even by British, American or Swiss standards. Schools, which the republicans had talked much about and even built, were only used during the libertarian communist period. When the departure to the front of a large proportion of the manpower is taken into account, the real extent of these achievements can even more be appreciated.

During the subsequent period under Franco all of these amenities were like

fabled memories - they were all destroyed by the fascists to put back the standard of life for the peasants to an existence more suited to medieval society.

SOCIAL LIFE

The social feeling in the villages, as can be imagined, was also transformed. The families of fascists who had died or left were integrated into the collectives with little ill-feeling. The real, tangible involvement of all in the decisions affecting them and the mutual aid and solidarity that resulted, were perhaps the most conspicuous human faces of libertarian Aragon.

That all of this could happen so quickly and thoroughly; and that it could work so well despite the pressures of war, political intrigue and outright malevolence by some; can sustain all of

us who see the need for libertarian communism as the only real hope for humanity. In Spain the collectives were crushed - indeed the Spanish people were crushed - by Franco and the fascists. But not until after simple practical anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism in Aragon had shown the world how people can live.



CNTAIT Militia Brigade 1936

In any case, the malicious stories of hostile strangers descending on villages and enforcing collectivisation do not stand up to examination, except as usual propoganda by politicians, lapped up by foreign correspondents in Madrid bars.

ORGANISING THE COLLECTIVES

The village collectives were agricultural to start with, usually involving an elected administrative body delegating teams to co-ordinate every side of farming in the locality. Soon, discussions in village assemblies led to the whole communities being collectivised. This meant that at all skills, trades and resources, on the one hand, and organisation, needs and possibilities on the other could be constructively rationalised. Decisions remained under the control of the

Carpenters and building workers were now freed from working for the large estates, and began to construct buildings for animal husbandry and its development. Piggeries, chicken runs and hatcheries and facilities for the farming of rabbits, ducks, geese, turkeys and cattle soon meant that the people were able to eat meat where before their consumption of it was minimal.

The building of flour mills and other facilities to use crops more efficiently, and the fruits of the experimental farms revolutionised farming in Aragon. Those who were initially suspicious of the collectives steadily joined them as they saw what it could mean for themselves and their families. From July 1936 to April 1937 the numbers of farming and village collectives doubled to include most of

THE POLITICIANS

From 1936 to 1939 the Spanish Communist Party began as small in numbers, but gradually increased its influence by worming members into strategic positions. The role of the USSR and the C.P. was initially to encourage the movement of anarchists and other militant workers into the front line, and to isolate and discredit them there. At the same time they waged a covert war against collectivisation; sabotaging industry irrespectively of the effects this had on communities and on the war effort. Their aim all along was to increase their own influence, hoping to be a dominant force after the end of the war. Their attitude was such that it didn't matter to them if this strategy helped lose the war, led to the death of tens of thousands of workers, and destroyed whole working-class organisations so long as they come out of it with some slight advantage.

OPPORTUNISTS IN OPPOSITION

There were two particular reasons for the C.P. and Russia's opposition, in practice, to the revolution. The image of the Bolshevik revolution and its Stalinist aftermath had to be protected. A successful anarchist revolution in Spain would have tarnished the reputation of state communism. Closer to home, a familiar part of Leninist dogma is that 'conditions' must be right for a revolution to succeed. What they mean is that if the C.P. is able to take over, and in Spain they were not. Hence the 'conditions' were not right from that point of view.

POLITICAL DIVERSIONS

The other prominent politicians and parties associated with the Popular Front government were little better than the communists. Perhaps they were less malevolent in their hostility to working class organisation, but the effect was the same. In the classic manner, they were politicians, protecting their own interests and sacrificing people and principles when it suited them. The tragedy of this in Spain was that ordinary people could still retain faith in them even when they had the real means of change in their own hands. The anarchist leaders who joined the government found out what they should have known already. They became dupes and pawns in the parliamentary game that they couldn't win - a game that politicians seem to see as the really important arena of society, as opposed to the meaningful and potentially powerful rank and file organisation of the working-class and the community.

LEADERS AGAINST THE BASE

The Socialists, Communists and Republicans were at best half-hearted about the movement for collectivisation. In fact they were all opposed to the idea of workers' control, but often could not get away with voicing their opposition. This was especially true in those areas where collectivisation was non-political (ie spontaneously chosen and organised by workers) but where those involved in forming the collectives were in fact >

