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The CNT-FAI, the State and Government (1938)

Albert Jensen

2005 (1938)

Albert Jensen belonged to the Swedish section of the IWA, the SAC. The following article, "The CNT-FAI, the State and the Government," was originally published in the *International*, No. 2, May 1938, the monthly review of the IWA. Jensen sets forth some of the background to the Spanish Revolution, and offers some criticisms of the conduct of the CNT-FAI, particularly its fateful decision to collaborate with the Republican government, a policy which ultimately led to the defeat of the anarchist social revolution in Spain prior to the fascist military victory in March 1939.

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The Military Revolt Of July 19, 1936 And The Extraordinarily Swift Suppression Of That Revolt In Barcelona And Catalonia By The Workers:

It was the masses and the comrades of the CNT-FAI who took the initiative. The governmental authority was absolutely passive. The workers took possession of industry, collectivizing it and putting it under the control of the syndicates. The

expropriation of large farms, the collectivization of these, and also, in a certain measure, those of small rural proprietors. Land and sea transport, the post, telegraph and telephone services, schools, and public health organizations were collectivized and controlled by the syndicates. At the same time, the workers created an army of militias under the control of the syndicates. Militia Committees were founded with the collaboration of the UGT [the Socialist trade union federation] and the political parties. With the same collaboration, a Council of Economy was constituted. The Police force was cleaned out and reorganized with the organs of revolutionary control. Political and economic control was almost completely controlled by the syndicates and the organism created in collaboration with the political parties. The military camarilla was suppressed with astonishing rapidity by the commencement of the social revolution.

With the new economic life and the political activities passing into the hands of the revolutionary movement, the Catalan State started to break up. Already, the Government had no real authority. Perhaps no more than a certain nominal power. A state without institutions of coercion and violence is no more a state. The Catalan government has no more the military apparatus at its disposal. The government no longer controls the police force which put itself under the control of the revolutionary organs. The State is without authority and the government powerless. Companys [Republican politician] tried to create a new military apparatus by mobilizing the old forces with the end of forming a new state army, barracked, commanded and formed by officers devoted to the State. The various classes of men of military age in Barcelona decided against enrolment in this army and instead formed groups of militias controlled by the syndicates and the organisms of the revolutionary movements.

The Catalan Government was deprived of one function after another and was powerless with regard to the productive

life by the syndicates; the control of public services and transport by the same organizations; the revolutionary control of the police force by the Workers' Patrols; the absence of military and police apparatus of its own replaced by workers' administration of the new military apparatus of the militias. The Committee of Militias and the Council of Economy had power in their hands and were working for the Revolution. Obviously the State was not liquidated completely but there remained but a rudiment of it. The liquidation of the State had begun and this would continue progressively until the end in complete agreement with anarcho-syndicalist ideas if the revolutionary movement could continue the work undertaken.

But the line of revolutionary development was broken. A new government was formed in Barcelona. Was it perhaps thought that the latter answered more to the character of a revolutionary council than to an authoritarian government? But such self-deceit could not be continued for very long by the revolutionaries. The Generalidad assumed the appearance of any other government with all its customary activities. The CNT-FAI helped to form this government and offered its representation in it. With a generosity—a little too opportune—the CNT-FAI renounced all its majority positions, which are rightfully theirs, thus working in favour of the representatives of the UGT, the partisans of Marxist dictatorship, and the bourgeois parties. And once this was an accomplished fact, it was the beginning of self-destruction and counter-revolution and, from that time on, it was stated that the CNT-FAI could not make a "totalitarian" revolution.

This was the construction given of the historic events, for the greater part by foreign comrades probably. But for us, the question is this: Was this acceptance of the State and the Government—even if it had to have a purely provisional character—in reality, the only issue? Was no other attitude possible? And if so, cannot these events be considered as a proof of the weakness of the revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist

theory? If such is the case, must we not admit frankly that our movement has ideologically gone astray? And if the tactic employed was inevitable, must we not be forced to the conclusion that the State cannot be suppressed in any way?

First of all, permit me to make one observation. At the time when the question of governmental participation in Catalonia was still being discussed, the CNT-FAI was still in the position to take power unto themselves, if they had so wished. That has been affirmed many times. But this idea was repulsed because logically it was realized that that would mean a dictatorship of the CNT-FAI. And nothing is more objectionable to anarcho-syndicalism than dictatorship, not only the dictatorship of others but also its own. In place of this, a democratic solution was adopted, in all good faith by the comrades, through the acceptance of governmental collaboration.

But a government in a state of war must have recourse always to dictatorship. Let it pretend to be democratic, liberal, social democratic, or anything else it pleases, it will still be dictatorial. It governs by decrees and uses full powers. The CNT-FAI thus accepted a system of state and governmental dictatorship which is essentially counter-revolutionary, and they arrived at this in order not to be compelled to realize their own dictatorship. That was certainly noble, but is hardly loyalty to ideas.

However, can one say that this solution carried great advantages for the social revolutionary movement and the war against fascism? Probably it will be said that it was an advantage to the anti-fascist war. But there remains what I consider to be no less a fact: that one form of dictatorship was repulsed in order to accept another. If the line adopted was the only one possible then the question is raised whether the movement was or was not obliged to change its attitude regarding the taking of power and dictatorship. There are so many questions and problems that, in the name of logic, it is necessary to clarify.

I have noted already the following question: If, compulsorily, the State and the government must be accepted, and with

would have brought forth a new form of life for all the revolutionary forces that wanted a real social change? Would not such an appeal have separated a considerable mass from the UGT and which would have continually increased? For success in such a sense, would it not have been possible to pass over the bureaucracy of the UGT and the sectarian intrigues which later prevented the revolutionary alliance? Would it not have been possible to win over particularly the peasant masses, thus creating a revolutionary basis of the masses which would have made all counter-revolutionary sabotage impossible? Would not anarcho-syndicalism have obtained, within the new power, a directing and decisive influence?

...We are told that the collaboration of the CNT-FAI for the war was necessary unconditionally. But was it necessary to collaborate with the government for that? And if that were so, why could the CNT-FAI not address a clear and firm declaration to the government stating that, after having been in the first lines of struggle, in the organization of defence, and after having obtained the first successes, they would continue to collaborate loyally for the war against fascism, but that, under no pretext, would they tolerate any attack on the revolutionary accomplishments and that they would defend these with all the necessary means? I think such an attitude would have inspired a little more respect from the bourgeois class than has governmental participation, collaboration, and manufacturing of laws with which the counter-revolution has been able to sentence to prison for more than ten years, certain of our comrades because of their revolutionary activities. In any case, it seems to me, that the theses of anarcho-syndicalism which say that the force of the working-class is not in its political representatives but in its organizations and in the capacity of action of the workers, have still some value.

desperate situation to which the CNT and the FAI had to adapt their tactics and their activities.

...But despite all that, the fact must be noted that new strength was given to the State and to the enemies of the Revolution by the governmental participation of the CNT-FAI. The enemy of the working-class was assisted to reconstruct its instrument of power called the "State"—this State which had reached irremediably the stage of concentrating the counter-revolutionary forces that were directed against the revolution for the purpose of suppressing it. Thus, the revolutionary forces themselves assisted the hangman whose purpose it was to strangle them.

To recognize the State as an inevitable evil in a determined situation is one thing. But it is another thing to collaborate actively in the reconstruction of the counter-revolutionary power, and that seems to us, and to numerous other foreign comrades, an absolutely incomprehensible method. If it was necessary to resign itself to the existence of the State, the CNT and the FAI should have dispensed, nevertheless, with collaborating actively in the reconstruction of the same. It appears that the CNT and the FAI would have better been able to defend itself by profiting from the revolutionary achievements without the governmental power, by pressing forward, through the means of its organized forces, to its own methods, and to control over the essential part of the country—that is, over industry and agriculture.

Numerous foreign comrades are wondering if it would not have been possible, at a certain moment, to have taken the initiative in concentrating the revolutionary forces against the bourgeois State. For example, was it not possible to have created a new expression of power by convoking a representation of a Council of Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers—a power that would not fall into the hands of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie? Would not such an assembly have been able to mobilize the worker and peasant masses in such a fashion as

participation in the latter, must it not be concluded that the State cannot be suppressed in any way? Whether the State is accepted as a means of dictatorship or for a slow reform of society, experience in other countries where either of these lines has been followed has proven that the State has always been the stronger. There is Russia where the path of dictatorship was pursued. The dictatorship was to be nothing more than the transition period. But dictatorship leads to the inevitable: the creation of a new master class that uses the State to maintain its position in power. The abolition of the State promised by the Bolsheviks never came. The development of dictatorship within forms into a vicious circle: first, revolution to suppress class society and gain freedom; second, the creation of the proletarian State power to achieve this end; third, the proletarian State produces a new master class (State bureaucrats, party officials, military chiefs, the Cheka, etc.); fourth, the new master class, having in its hands, the State apparatus, consolidates it and secures it in order to maintain its privileged positions; and fifth, the point is reached where a new revolution is needed to create a new proletarian State. Thus is created a circular movement for the creation of a new dominant class and another revolution, never attaining the suppression of classes or the conquest of liberty. If the State cannot be completely liquidated in the Revolution and by the Revolution, then never will we be able to be free.

In the countries where the State was accepted as an instrument of reform to achieve Socialism and for the realization, through its intermediary, of libertarian communism and by making propaganda against the phantom of the State which gradually withers away, there the reformist State has been replaced by the dictatorial State (as in Germany, for example) and there is slavery indeed. Or, in the countries where Socialism is sacrificed (as in the Scandinavian countries) for the purpose of gaining reforms within the capitalist system, the State is considered, not as something to be abolished, but, on

the contrary, as the supreme expression of "liberty." In one or the other case, the only thing there is, is the absence of liberty, the essence of the State system.

But the CNT and the FAI did not enter the government for the purpose of renouncing their opposition to the State. If I understand their motives well enough, they thought that thus they would be better able to defend the interests of the revolution within the government itself. That, in principle, is accepting the social democratic point of view, and renouncing, on the other hand, methods of direct action which are an integral part of the social conceptions of anarcho-sindicalism. Such a position produces practically the obligation to accept all the theoretical political system, even to reserving direct action as a complement to parliamentary political action. And such a combination of direct action with parliamentary political action is quite in harmony with social democracy. It is worth noting one other thing proven by experience: that in this case, direct action is slowly strangled by political and parliamentary action and that all the revolutionary tendencies are exhausted and die of atrophy.

At the commencement, the CNT and the FAI did not abandon their opposition to the State. They still defended the point of view that the State must be destroyed. Logically, that is incomprehensible. How can one maintain an anti-State attitude while, at the same time, accepting what one wants to suppress? The consequences are there and these must be taken into account.

If our conception of the revolutionary process in Catalonia is relatively just, if, in effect, the Catalan State lacked power and had none of the governmental apparatus at its disposal, if the control of public, political, and productive life had passed over to the syndicates and revolutionary organisms, if all the State apparatus really collapsed like a burst balloon, there was no logic in accepting the State, thus giving it new power and a new spirit. This acceptance of the State can scarcely be de-

scribed otherwise than counter-revolutionary. Wounded unto death, the State received new life thanks to the governmental participation of the CNT-FAI. The dying body of the state recovered and gained new strength. Its feeling of power reappeared. The transfusion of the fresh blood of the CNT-FAI to this cadaverous body gave it the renewed desire to govern, to be powerful, to exercise its power over the masses and to dominate them. The CNT-FAI gave new substance to this monster. The Council of Economy became a State institution. The Committee of Militias followed the same road. The renewing blood of the dominant class circulated in the veins of the State. The militias were militarized. The State began to attack the revolutionary conquests of the workers. Free trade was an offering to the profit making system of the middle-class. The State systematized its resistance by carrying several blows against the collectivist regime. Under the protection of the State, the counter-revolutionary elements of the population acquired a position that became more and more solid. The State which had never been an instrument of the revolution but on the contrary, the very being of the counter-revolution, became more established each day. At the same time that the State was being strengthened, the position of the revolutionary forces became weaker. The State created a police force sufficiently strong. Also it transformed the militias into a body under its orders and no longer controlled by the workers. While becoming stronger each day, it became more and more the enemy of the social revolution.

Naturally the situation was very much more difficult for the CNT and the FAI..In effect, the Spaniards struggled and are struggling still not only against the masters in their own country but also against international fascism which is sustained by international capitalism..In this situation, the CNT had to act in such a fashion that would prevent internal conflicts between their own forces inside the country. They continued to collaborate with, and unite all the available forces for the war against international fascism. That was, in a general way, the