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Review of *We, The Anarchists* by Stuart Christie

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August 18, 2008

We, the Anarchists: A Study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) 1927–1937, Stuart Christie, The Meltzer Press

This is an important book. Christie has done a great service in producing this study of the FAI. One of the most famous and most misrepresented anarchist organisations of all time, this book is essential for refuting these misrepresentations and for understanding the successes and failure of revolutionary anarchism in Spain during the 1930s.

The main aspect of this work is its demolition of what can be called the “bullying militant” analysis of the FAI and its influence in the CNT. Basically, so this myth goes, the FAI (usually a “highly centralised and secret” FAI at that) managed to take control over the CNT in the early 1930s, expelled the moderate leadership and pursued a revolutionary line, helping to destabilise the Republic and accelerate the rise of Franco. How the FAI actually did this is usually left very vague. The Trotskyist Felix Morrow, for example, asserted that “*Spanish Anarchism had in the FAI a highly centralised party apparatus*

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A review of the definitive book on the FAI. Essential reading
for anyone interested in Spanish Anarchism.

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through which it maintained control of the CNT,” without any references or evidence (unsurprisingly, this assertion has become a standard Leninist “fact”). Other historians have painted similar pictures.

Christie presents more than enough evidence that this “standard” picture of the FAI is false, a product of historians “*cynically or unintentionally distorting the available historical evidence.*” He stresses that what passes for analysis of Spanish Anarchism and the FAI is supported more “*by ideological conviction rather than history or investigation of the phenomena of social life*” (Christie quoting Chomsky).

As Christie’s book proves, the FAI was neither “centralised” nor “secret.” It was, in fact, a federation of autonomous affinity groups (Francisco Carrasquer: “*[e]ach FAI group thought and acted as it deemed fit, without bothering about what the others might be thinking or deciding ... they had no ... opportunity or jurisdiction ... to foist a party line upon the grass-roots.*”). That, for example, Trotskyists thought it was centralised is due to its effectiveness and influence. Given their ideological blindness that centralism is more efficient, how could the FAI be decentralised and federal? As for “secret”, Christie argues that this was based on a misunderstanding. As he puts it, “*[a]s an organisation publicly committed to the overthrow of the dictatorship, the F.A.I. functioned, from 1927 to 1931, as an illegal rather than a secret organisation. From the birth of the Republic in 1931 onwards, the F.A.I. was simply an organisation which, until 1937, refused to register as an organisation as required by Republican Law.*” Given that the FAI had a very successful newspaper and was an extremely well-known organisation, it is difficult to see how it was “secret.” Moreover, given the repression directed against the anarchist and labour movement between 1927 and 1936, being an illegal organisation made perfect sense. As such, most attacks against the FAI simply fail to understand the (revolutionary) social context in which it was operating nor the

Christie makes clear, *“the higher committees of the CNT-FAI set aside traditional anarcho-syndicalist reliance on the creative spirit of the people and their capacity for self-organisation.”* It was this act which ensured the defeat of the revolution: *“By imposing their leadership from above, these partisan committees suffocated the mushrooming popular autonomous revolutionary centres –the grass-roots factory and local revolutionary committees, the identifying feature of all great revolutions – and prevented them from proving themselves as an efficient and viable means of co-ordinating communications, defence and provisioning. They also prevented the local committees from integrating themselves to form a regional, provincial and national federal network which would facilitate the revolutionary task of social and economic reconstruction.”* Christie correctly argues that the path pursued in Aragon, namely to implement anarchist ideas and encourage popular power and organisation from below, was the only real answer to the “exceptional circumstances” facing the Spanish anarchists.

Also, by comparing the events in Catalonia and Aragon, Christie refutes those who argue that anarchism failed in Spain. How could it have “failed” during the Spanish Revolution when it was ignored in Catalonia (for fear of fascism) and applied in Aragon? How can it be argued that anarchist politics were to blame when those very same politics had formed the Council of Aragon? It cannot.

Whether one of the reasons for this terrible decision was that the FAI had been *“taken over in mid-1933 by a group of rootless intellectuals and economic planners under the leadership of Diego Abad de Santillan,”* as Christie in part argues, is open to debate. I would suggest that this is a weak argument (as compared to his main one) and one which underestimates the need for a specific anarchist group to spread its ideas within the class struggle. What is true, however, is that Christie’s book is essential reading for all anarchists who not only want to understand history, but also to learn from it.

repressive nature of the Second Republic (under both left and right).

Christie unravels the actual chronological order of events in order to show that *“the oft-repeated charges that the FAI provoked the split within the CNT”* during 1930s are false and that, in fact, *“the truth of the matter is that it joined the debate”* between the reformist (pure unionist) and anarchist wings of the CNT *“fairly late in the day.”* He places the debates of the 1930s in terms of a conflict between the higher apparatus of the CNT with its more radical membership. The “moderate” CNT unionists so beloved by the liberal historian were so simply because they were turning into bureaucrats.

Part of the problem, of course, is that the “standard” accounts are *“distorted by their insistence on judging the CNT against their own authoritarian model of the ideal union, one firmly controlled by an elite ‘moderate’ centralised leadership.”* The CNT was not organised in this way, although the “moderate” leadership tried to make it so. In early August 1931, the National Committee of the CNT issued a statement attacking its own militants for provoking “excessive conflicts” and proposed that in future all member unions should obtain the agreement of the local, district or regional federation before going on strike. This “abuse” of autonomy was, in fact, the decisions of the union membership!

It was in the face of this separation between the membership and the committees that ensured the growing influence of the FAI. As Christie argues, the *“anarchist militants who constituted the base of the CNT”* had founded the FAI, *“an ad hoc federally structured association whose function was to reaffirm the revolutionary nature of anarchism and to provide a rallying point for the defence of the anti-political principles and immediate Libertarian Communist objectives of the CNT. By 1932 the reformist threat had been eliminated – democratically!”*

The way the FAI took part in the decision making process of the CNT is also discussed. The C.N.T. was based around mass

assemblies in which all members could speak. It was here that members of the F.A.I. took part in forming C.N.T. policy along with other C.N.T. members. Anarchists in the C.N.T. who were not members of the F.A.I. indicate this. Jose Borrás Casacarosa notes that “[o]ne has to recognise that the F.A.I. did not intervene in the C.N.T. from above or in an authoritarian manner as did other political parties in the unions. It did so from the base through militants ... the decisions which determined the course taken by the C.N.T. were taken under constant pressure from these militants.” Jose Campos notes that F.A.I. militants “tended to reject control of confederal committees and only accepted them on specific occasions ... if someone proposed a motion in assembly, the other F.A.I. members would support it, usually successfully. It was the individual standing of the faista in open assembly.”

Clearly, Christie’s book is essential reading for anyone interested in learning about the early 1930s CNT and FAI and for those seeking to refute the many myths associated with those organisations. In addition, his account of the early days of the 1936 revolution are important to understanding why the CNT and FAI made the decision to collaborate against Franco rather than encourage the social revolution. As he puts it:

“The higher committees of the CNT-FAI-FIJI in Catalonia saw themselves caught on the horns of a dilemma: social revolution, fascism or bourgeois democracy. Either they committed themselves to the solutions offered by social revolution, regardless of the difficulties involved in fighting both fascism and international capitalism, or, through fear of fascism (or of the people), they sacrificed their anarchist principles and revolutionary objectives to bolster, to become, part of the bourgeois state ... Faced with an imperfect state of affairs and preferring defeat to a possibly Pyrrhic victory, the Catalan anarchist leadership renounced anarchism

in the name of expediency and removed the social transformation of Spain from their agenda.

“But what the CNT-FAI leaders failed to grasp was that the decision whether or not to implement Libertarian Communism, was not theirs to make. Anarchism was not something which could be transformed from theory into practice by organisational decree ... [the] spontaneous defensive movement of 19 July had developed a political direct of its own.”

By fully providing and discussing the context in which this dilemma was discussed, Christie has provided the key work by which to judge all other accounts of the Spanish Revolution. Unlike most accounts of this historic decision, his analysis is grounded in the objective circumstances facing the CNT and FAI at the time. This is a breath of fresh air compared to the superficial (and usually inaccurate and often non-materialist) analyses of both historians and Trotskyists.

Equally important is his discussion on how this decision was made. Rather than being made by a regular plenum of Catalan unions, with a published agenda and mandated delegates, it was made by an “extraordinary” plenum of militants. It was over a month before a regular plenum was held, so presenting the membership with a fait accompli. This break with traditional procedures was the first of many and this centralisation of power within the CNT aided the collaborationist position of the leadership. This first break with anarchism, provoked under “exceptional circumstances,” soon became the norm within the CNT and FAI.

Ironically enough, rather than show that anarchism is flawed, the experience of the Catalan CNT after it had rejected anarchist theory confirmed the principles of anarchism — centralised, hierarchical organisations hindered and ultimately destroyed the revolution. Simply put, it seems ironic to blame anarchism when anarchists ignore its recommendations! As