

Before The Storm

Buenaventura Durruti

1935

In Valencia's Model Prison where Durruti had been an inmate since that August, CNT and FAI prisoners drawn from Catalonia, Aragon, and Levante proper were in the majority. This homogeneity among the prisoners ensured that the internal affairs of the CNT and the FAI were the especial focus of their discussions. Two years on from the split with the CNT and now that the controversy surrounding it had become less impassioned, the notion of a return to the bosom of the CNT, as advocated by J. Pedro and J. Lopez, was beginning to make some headway; precisely how this return to the fold was to be negotiated, no-one yet knew. All such issues and points were passionately debated in the cells and on the landings of the Model Prison.

Durruti who was more preoccupied with other matters spent his time in prison keeping somewhat aloof from these debates and to judge by one letter written at about this time one might say that he was at daggers drawn with the committees of the CNT.

The letter in question is dated 11.9.35 and was addressed to J. Mira, and was by way of a reply to a letter from Mira. The document he refers to in the course of the letter is one where he outlines his position with regard to the current actions of the CNT. In "Durruti: the people armed" by Abel Paz, Free Life Editions, 1977, this position is summed up as follows- "ammunition shouldn't be wasted uselessly; it was necessary first to put the finishing touches on a social revolutionary organisation, economizing scarce resources for the struggle. The militant cadres who were free, should not expose themselves, nor weaken the movement with useless strikes" [extracts from Durruti's document]

The letter begins like this:

"Got your letter to which I am now going to reply - naturally!- especially as it has to do with matters of some interest to me. From this end I have no news to bring you, except that two comrades were released yesterday. We hope that these releases will continue and that soon we shall all be out.

First of all, let me make this prefatory comment: what any comrades imprisoned with you may think of me matters very little to me. I am true to myself, adhering to the course that I marked out for myself some time ago.

If by chance you have followed my record as an anarchist and revolutionary through the press or in conversations with comrades you will have noticed that the mentality of the vulgar hold-up man or gunman is no part of my make-up. I came to the ideas and continue to profess them because I believed, and still do, that the anarchist ideal is above all pettiness and base resentments.

I have always thought, and think still, that the struggles enjoined by the Confederation in defence of one more peseta and one hour less were skirmishing that the organisation needed, but never advances towards confederal and anarchist goals. The Confederation has well-defined principles: it aims directly at transforming the capitalist system so as to introduce libertarian communism. But for a revolution of this sort, Mira my friend, one needs anarchist ideas and a revolutionary education rather than the education of a hoodlum: much less believe that the CNT should squander all of its vitality on one or two conflicts so that those concerned may have a scrap more cod on the Sunday dinner table.

The CNT which is the most powerful organisation in Spain must take up its rightful place in the collective order. Its battles must be in tune with its greatness. It would be laughable to find a lion in the middle of the jungle squatting for hours on end at the entrance to a rat hole, waiting for some little rat to emerge so that he might gobble it up. The CNT is in the same position at the moment. There are those who argue that the organisation's fight in Barcelona represents a manly, revolutionary stance. I, Mira my friend, think the contrary. Sabotage anybody can indulge in, even the faintest of hearts. On the other hand, it takes men of courage to make a revolution, whether on the committees or among the cadres of militants who are to operate on the streets. After the stance of the comrades and of the organisation in the October rising there can be no talk of confederal dignity just because a tram was set alight, or twenty trams. Is it not deplorable to have to recognise in these straightened times through which we are passing that the organisation in Barcelona represents not the slightest boon to the revolution? Can it be that in these times when the chance of revolution may present itself to us at the most unexpected moment, the organisation is incapable of taking up its post as a body? Is it not shameful that the collective interests should be abandoned for two undistinguished disputes from which a handful of people are going to emerge the beneficiaries? I am one of the chosen ones and I am ashamed that the CNT should be jeopardising its revolutionary trajectory over my weekly pay. Some look upon the organisation as just a body that looks to their ordinary economic interests others as the organisation that works alongside the anarchists to transform society. On these grounds, friend Mira, it is very hard for an understanding to be arrived at between syndicalists short and simple and the' anarchists.

Now to the document in question. Of itself, I paid no more attention than it deserved: a suggestion to the National Committee regarding the current situation and nothing more. How this commotion that you speak to me about ever came about I do not understand. It was a personal action: an exercise of the right that any militant enjoys to spell out his views, even to the National Committee. Delegates from the CNT came here and once certain ideas that they claimed needed clarification had been clarified, we came to an understanding. What is more, after I swapped views with the delegate from the CNT, he agreed with me on the basis of the document.

The document of itself is merely the expression of the opinion that I have ventilated on No5 landing in Barcelona and then, when we were there, nobody raised any objections and it was only when I was transferred to Valencia that any opposition was voiced.

The Regional Committee of Catalonia also came to see us. And after we had had a full discussion, they could not come up with any objection. There was only a complaint about a few words that offended the sensibilities of the Regional Committee. We had no difficulty in removing those because they did not in any way alter the substance of the document.

Once the explanations from one and all (the National and Regional Committees and the signatories to the document) were over, we all agreed upon the need to publish, in 'Soli', a note of clarification so as to enlighten the whole membership . We drafted the note and sent it to the Regional Committee for publication, as agreed. The note contained no retraction of any sort of the document since that was the agreement with the organisation's delegate: why, then, was our note not published? And why did the Regional Committee of Catalonia, and the National Committee which had undertaken to publish another one so as to set minds at ease and ensure that our document would not be misinterpreted, not do so? This stance by the Committees is suspicious. What have they to gain by this affair's not being clarified?

I have letters from the comrades in Burgos penitentiary where the document was given a reading at a meeting and, so they tell me, nobody voiced any objection which is not to say that they all agree with it. But before they had sight of it all sorts of nonsense was being said and now that they have seen it, thoughts are more sensible.

There is much that can be said of the results of the Barcelona tactics but one must be wary in a letter. All I can tell you is that after so much sabotage they have been obliged to step a little outside of confederal principles - so as to talk with the water industry employers and the bosses of the Urban Transport Company. I do not criticise them given the exceptional times we are in. But I do think of the great damage that systematic sabotage has done and is doing us. As a system it is something that the organisation cannot countenance. As a tactic it is highly questionable. Collectively speaking, I reckon that it has done us terrible harm, costing us much more than anything there was in the way of gains. Every time we enter into a struggle it is right to consider the benefit and the drawbacks. I have never been one to advocate abandoning strike disputes, but not abandoning them is one thing: it is quite another to ensure that all our activities revolve around a dispute. That would be to limit the CNT's theatre of action. To confine it to a wage struggle is to demean its ultimate aims.

Luckily the political situation is beginning to resolve itself for us and comrades should be asking themselves how well-equipped we are going to be to bring all our weight to bear in it. On the landings of the jails and prisons the talk now is not of the CNT, and now there are expectations of those whom we have always fought against. At the moment the CNT is no reassurance. In the minds of all the prisoners, these are the only words: "let them open parliament, lift the state of emergency, and get on with the elections". Not a word about the CNT. This is what has been gained by the organisation's stance: confidence in our own strength has been done to death.

The CNT which is the organisation with the most prisoners will not be able to play any significant role either before or after the elections. The CNT's prisoners will have to thank the politicians for their release, and that to me who am an anarchist, has enormous implications. I would like to walk free thanks to the efforts of my comrades and not due to the philanthropy of someone whom I have to fight tooth and nail as soon as I am out."

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Letter sent by Durruti from Valencia prison to the Model Prison in Barcelona where his comrade Mira was an inmate.

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