

The CNT in the Workplace

CNT

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This is the second installment in a three part series about the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo, the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist union. It is translated from the pamphlet, Anarcosindicalismo, Basico. The CNT presently has about 35,000 members.

The CNT in the Workplaces: The Union Section

The CNT members in a workplace are collectively known as the Union Section. The union section functions by means of assemblies, in which the concrete problems of the union are addressed. In the struggle with the employer, the union section must achieve freedom of action, propaganda, affiliation and defense of affiliates, the right to hold assembly, and the right to sign contracts on the union's behalf. Such is the legal environment today, and the state of the union movement, that the CNT has to fight day by day to attain former rights now endangered, since the employers refuse to recognize the anarcho-union, due to its tactic of boycotting the union elections.

The Union Elections

The union elections were an invention of the employers and the UCD government of the time at the end of the 1970s, to regulate the reawakened labor movement. After the death of Franco and the collapse of his vertical [government-dominated] unions, the country was shaken by a series of strikes and mass protests in which the protagonists were primarily, the people themselves, and in order to cope with this situation unionism was institutionalized.

The largest unions, the UGT and CCOO and the rest, with the exception of the CNT, accepted a system of bargaining by means of a new invention: the enterprise committee. The enterprise committee is chosen by means of a secret ballot between candidates representing the unions. As soon as the enterprise committee is chosen, the employer discusses agreements only with it. The union elections are held, more or less, every three to four years. After the elections, the government announces the results. Only those unions which exceed 10% of the votes are given representation to sit and discuss and negotiate with the government.

The elections are always won by UGT-CCOO, who number approximately 200,000 members. Other unions like Basque Workers Solidarity (ELA-STV), the USO, the Galician inter-union, or unions of sanitary professions, etc. obtain smaller results (between 7,000 and 3,000).

The government evaluates these vote figures in order in order to give economic subsidies and to professionalize the unionists who work in its facilities. Also the employer by means of collective bargaining, subsidizes the enterprise committees and occasionally sits some of its members on its board of directors. It is necessary to make clear that the CNT does not accept subsidies, neither from the State nor the employer, since these are the organizations which must be combatted, and the CNT does not want to lose its independence to confront them.

The acceptance of a system of privileges, subsidies, and union institutionalization, has after more than a decade led to the practical disappearance of the idea of the union as a social transformer, because:

- The union elections remove the power of decision from the people. In the workplace only the committee makes decisions during its mandate.

- The union elections always give victory to the most reactionary candidates, who always win in an individual and secret vote.
- The persons elected to the committee have a fixed term and are not subject to any discipline. They represent you although you don't want them, they negotiate in your name without your permission, they don't call assemblies if they don't want them, they limit what you can discuss or agree on with the employer, etc.
- In consequence, all negotiations are in the hands of the committee.

The CNT rejects the principle of authority, and therefore, representatives with unchecked power. If the CNT were to enter into the system of union elections, executive delegates, paid functionaries and government subsidies, it would reproduce exactly that which it is trying to abolish. The price which the CNT pays for maintaining some consistency (total consistency and purity does not exist), was to experience two organizational splits by persons who preferred to conform, rather than face the difficulties of making progress by anarcho-syndicalist action, and instead to build a union based on elections-subsidies-officials. These splitters formed what is today the Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT).

In practice, the CGT, while having gained greater freedom, to have available funds to pay its functionaries, it has obtained insignificant electoral results (0.67% in the last elections with some 1,620 delegates in the enterprise committees). According to the laws elaborated by the mass sociologists Friedrichsen-Hoffman, in a democratic election by ballot-box, the candidates most reactionary always win. (First principle of secret voting.) If by some heavenly miracle it should gain a higher representation, in the course of its mandate it would turn reactionary. (Second principle of secret voting.) And if, incredibly, at the end of their mandate it would remain progressive it is certain that the next election would not repeat the results, and it would be relegated to third or fourth place. (Third principle of secret voting.)

If in order to accomplish something it is necessary to vote it should always be by raising hands in assembly. The results are always different and more beneficial in general, according to anarcho-syndicalist ideas.

Another difficulty for the CNT is that its union sections, although legal, do not have any rights if they don't participate in the elections. Therefore these rights must be won day by day by the section.

Daily Activity of the Anarcho-Section.

When a section begins to function, that is to say, when two or three members at whatever workplace decide that they are fed up beyond endurance, they have to obtain:

- An understanding of the many problems of their co-workers and to become in tune with them. To win simple demands and thus create a sympathy towards the section. These questions should be resolved by a direct approach, by speaking directly to the boss, supervisor, etc. If this doesn't work, the union should intervene with its classical arsenal (negotiation-pres-sure-boycott-sabotage-strike etc.), and if for whatever reason these don't work, or if the balance of forces are impossible, or if it would be necessary to spend more energy than

we are ready for, you can seek a judicial settlement through the legal representative of the union (the local union secretary).

- Legal recognition of the section in regards to the CEMAC and the employer. Legalization does not assume an establishment of any guarantee nor right. But it permits that in some cases, the union could call a legal strike and other activities, and to retain a lawyer.
- Identification of the enemy, which is on one side the employer, and on the other, in 99% of the cases, the enterprise committee and the rest of the unions which collaborate with it. It is necessary to augment the contradictions and to not let any pass. But we do not ever lose sight that the real enemy is the employer, and that the other unions can have members and militants with good intentions.
- The section needs to participate in the Health and Safety Committee of the center. If one does not exist, then the union should promote its creation. One way or the other, the section should elaborate its plans for safety on the workplace, and the prevention of sicknesses, and accidents.
- The collection of full data about the workplace, worker benefits, economic plans, redundancies, organizational structure, management salaries, habits and characteristics of the boss... This serves, over all, to anticipate anti-union plans, and also for the hypothetical self-management of the workplace.
- The production of bulletins, information leaflets concerning the issues, explaining the views of the CNT. The point always is emphasized that it is the workers who must decide in the assemblies.
- The anarchosection would struggle to make the employer recognize the collective representation of the workers, that is to say, that the representatives elected by the assembly have the right to negotiate, which today is solely in the hands of the Enterprise Committees.
- When the Enterprise Committee calls a general assembly, to speak in these as the CNT, to win agreement with our proposals. To reject the taking of secret votes. The secret vote is always reactionary. In the assembly when the vote is open, the people can count for themselves, so that nothing can be hidden, they lose their fear and gain a common sentiment which can see things clearly.
- If the assemblies decide things which go against the position of the CNT section, the section would respect the decision if it does not violate CNT principles, but we would not agree to it if it does, and we would always defend our positions.
- If there should come a time in which the incompetence and treason of the Enterprise Committee or the institutionalized union is very evident, it would be time to plan to overthrow the Committee, and propose that it be replaced by direct representation of union sections and by workplace assemblies.
- In case of a strike, to win a majority, or at least a minority presence, on the strike committee. It is necessary that the decision to strike be decided by a majority in the general assembly,

and that at that same assembly a strike committee is named which would be in charge of relations between the assembly and the employer. This is the only case under the existing labor law, where the employer is obligated to talk with the representatives of the assembly. [Otherwise the employer need only talk to the Enterprise Committee, which is not bound by the decisions of the worker assembly. — Translator’s note]

- The section must respect the general assemblies, but not forget that we are a union, which organizes workers, and therefore we have our own positions.
- It is necessary to emphasize that a larger CNT, is the best guarantee that the decisions of the assemblies would be respected.
- The section must be conscious that a factory assembly can be manipulated. If the employer and the other unions see that they are losing their positions, they will send into the assembly all their forces: the Enterprise Committee, the union sections of the collaborationist unions, the foremen, the supervisors, etc. The CNT union section will be accused of lacking representation, of not giving alternatives, of being terrorists and so forth. This will come about, sooner or later, according to the balance of forces and the will to resist. This struggle will not be easy.

Relations Between the Section & the Union

The section names a person who coordinates with the union and its committee, another who represents it in dealings with the employer, and another who handles funds. In case of problems which exceed the abilities of the section, recourse is taken to the union, which is the center of life of the anarcho-union, and which sustains the section. In the same way, the union can request the aid of the section. The positions follow the same pattern as in the union, and it is recommended that these responsibilities be rotated throughout the entire section.

Workplaces and Sectors Without Enterprise Committees

There are places of the “submerged economy”, temporary work, etc. There are places in which employment hangs by a thread, wages are poor, working conditions are unhealthy, and the employers dismiss without a thought any who raise their voice. It is advantageous for the section to request the aid of the union so that pressure can be exercised by people upon whom repression can’t fall. In these workplaces direct action often produces better results, because judicial means is almost always unhelpful, except to demonstrate a firing has been due to anti-union repression. It is necessary to make clear that to function as a union in a workplace, does not require an all or nothing approach. It includes a trial period. A dismissal for union activity, is a dismissal to eliminate a radical, it is the only case in which the employer is required to reverse, (if you can prove it). The majority of the previous recommendations are also valid here, even better, because at times there exist no other unions.

Relation of Your Union with Other Local Unions of the CNT

In the case in which different unions of the CNT, (construction, metalworking, food services, public services, etc.), exist within the same city, these join together in what is called a Local Federation (F.L.) which coordinates itself by means of a committee. This committee has the same duties as the union committee and the same attributes. The local committee therefore is an organism of relations, administration and development of accords which have been mandated to it. In no case is it an executive group.

How is the Local Committee Chosen?

The local committee is chosen in a Local Plenary Meeting of Unions, a meeting of the different local unions (Oficios Varios [General Industries], Health, Construction...) with mandated delegations, limited to written instructions taken previously in their respective assemblies. This assembly of delegations names a general secretary and treasurer. The rest of the responsibilities: press, education, archives, legal, etc. are covered by a person from each union branch.

The Local Plenary Meeting of Unions makes decisions within local limits. For this it is necessary that the unions hold their respective assemblies and come to agreements beforehand. The Local Plenary Session is convoked by petition of a union to the local committee.

What happens if there is only one General Industrial union in a locality? The union in question can gather with other nearby localities and form a district federation, with the same attributes as a local federation.

Means of Relation and Coordination Between Local Federations: The Regional Confederation

When various unions of a particular geographic entity establish relations, they form a Regional Confederation of Labor. For example, the Regional Confederation of Labor of Andalucia-Canarias. The geographical limits can be modified by the will of the unions, and regions can be merged (this requires the agreement of both regions), just as they can divide themselves (if desired by 75% of the unions).

The unions of the Regional Confederation make decisions in common by means of the Regional Plenary Meeting of Unions. The delegations of the different regional unions carry the direct responses of agreements taken by writing at their own assemblies. The Regional Plenary Meeting of Unions is responsible for deciding all the questions within its respective geographical limits. To provide coordinative activities, the plenary meeting names a person who represents the regional confederation, who acts as general secretary of a regional committee. At the same time a locality is elected to be to be regional headquarters. The rest of the secretaries of the regional committee, (treasury, legal, prisoner-defense...) are elected in a plenary meeting of local unions where headquarters is located, and each union names a person to carry out the duties. It is a little complicated, but perhaps an example would clarify things:

The "Oficios Varios" [General Industrial] unions of Cadiz, Sevilla, Grenada, Cordoba, Jaen and fifty more from different localities, meet in the Regional Plenary Meeting and name Juana Perez,

from the SOV of Cadiz, as regional secretary for the Regional Confederation of Labor of Andalu-cia Canarias, and designate the Local Federation in Cadiz as headquarters. The Local Fedration of Cadiz is composed of unions in Metal, Construction, Graphic Arts, "Oficios Varios," Public Service, Chemicals and Retirees.

These unions meet in Local Plenary Meeting and elect the rest of the secretaries proposing a person from each one of these.

Together these secretaries (General, organization, legal, information, archives, etc.) form what is called the Permanent Secretariat, which together with the local secretaries of the region, form the Regional Committee.

The Regional Committee is an organ of coordination, management, and administration. It can not make decisions nor agreements. It can only work on the tasks it has been assigned. It can be recalled at any moment, by a plenary meeting of the total region which could question the continuation of the committee. It would have a maximum duration of three consecutive years and is always followed by a new elected one, it would have to be approved by a regional plenary meeting afterwards. The members of the committees can not make proposals to the plenary meet-ings and assemblies. It must be made clear that the sovereignty of the Regional Confederations always rests with the industrial unions.

The functions of the Regional Committee are the same as in the other committees, except for the greater geographical area that it encompasses.

Relations Between Different Regional Confederations

The National Confederation

The different regional confederations which operate within the borders of power dominated by the Spanish state, form the National Confederation of Labor [CNT]. The regional confederations reach agreements in the National Plenary Meeting of Regions, which delegations attend with agreements written in their respective Regional Plenary Meetings of Unions. The National Plenary Meeting of Regions has the capacity to make agreements within its geographical limits and to name a national general secretary and a local federation to be the headquarters of the National Committee.

For example: The confederations of Gallega, Murciana, Astur-leonesa, etc., meeting in a national plenary of regions elects Belinda Fernandez of the Metalworkers of Barcelona, as general secretary of the CNT. The headquarters of the National Committee is relocated to the Local Federa-tion of unions in Barcelona, which is composed of 32 unions, and which meets in a local plenary to elect the rest of the secretaries. These people, Belinda Fernandez and the others elected from Barcelona, form the Permanent Secretariat of the National Committee of the National Confedera-tion of Labor. The rest of the National Committee consists of the general secretaries from each region. The functions of this committee are the same as those previously explained for other committees and are bound by the same limitations.

Why are Committees Elected this Way?

It is done this way to avoid homogeneous committees. Other organizations elect slates of can-didates, factions and programs, build coalitions to win office and from there gradually promote

the politics of the winning side. According to anarcho-syndicalism, however, committees should have neither programs nor politics. The direct election on the part of the unions guarantees the heterogeneity and diversity of the committee. Any type of representation involves some executive power, but the CNT minimizes the power in the hands of the more active and informed individuals.

How Do the Unions of the CNT Make Decisions?

By means of the CNT Congress. To the congress come the direct representatives of the unions independently of the region or local to which they belong, with written agreements from their own previous assemblies. The congress decides over the general activity of the CNT to avoid different regional confederations acting against each other. The congress can also choose a new national committee and decide on as many matters that seem relevant to the unions. From its foundation in 1910, the anarcho-union has celebrated seven congresses, the last three since the death of Franco.

The congress is convoked by the National Committee when there exists sufficient necessity, when new or contradictory situations have arisen which require a response. Then it is convoked a year ahead of time, the convocation is ratified by a National Plenary of Regions, the themes for discussion are presented and a debate commences within the unions some seven months before the opening date. The congresses of the CNT are always very tempestuous. Usually the first sessions deal with technical matters, how to vote, how the discussions will proceed, which delegations will be accepted, the reading of greetings. It is also traditional that the members repeat and defend their agreements to the point of congestion, which leads to a passionate atmosphere.

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