

# **The CNT: Resolutions from the Zaragoza Congress (1936)**

Confederación nacional del Trabajo (CNT)

2005 (1936)

The CNT was founded in 1910, continuing the tradition of the anti-authoritarian and federalist workers' movement in Spain that dated back to the First International (Selection 36). The CNT was consciously anti-bureaucratic and revolutionary. At the CNT's 1919 congress, the delegates adopted the following statement of principles:

Bearing in mind that the tendency most strongly manifested in the bosom of workers' organizations in every country is the one aiming at the complete and absolute moral, economic and political liberation of mankind, and considering that this goal cannot be attained until such time as the land, means of production and exchange have been socialized and the overweening power of the state has vanished, the undersigned delegates suggest that, in accordance with the essential postulates of the First International, it declares the desired end of the CNT to be anarchist communism. (Quoted in Jose Peirats, *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, Vol. 1, Hastings: Meltzer Press, 2001, page 11)

The CNT, as the most militant workers' organization in Spain, suffered the consequences. Many CNT militants were murdered by the hired guns of the employers, others were executed by the Spanish authorities, and many more were imprisoned. In 1924, the CNT was suppressed by the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, and remained underground until 1930.

The CNT quickly sprang back into action, despite internal disputes over the direction of the organization, primarily between the anarcho-syndicalists and more reformist oriented syndicalists, but also between the "pure" anarchists and various Marxist elements that had been trying to co-opt the CNT since the early 1920's. In the late 1920's, the more militant anarchists formed the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), the primary purpose of which was to foment revolution, but also to keep the CNT on an anarchist path.

The CNT and the FAI were involved in a variety of unsuccessful uprisings during the 1930's, in areas such as Catalonia, Casas Viejas and the Asturias, resulting in further waves of repression.

In February 1936, a leftist Popular Front government was elected and many imprisoned CNT and anarchist militants were released. The CNT began to regroup and prepare for the coming battle with fascism. On the eve of the election, the CNT National Committee had issued this prophetic communiqué:

Proletarians! On a war footing against the monarchist and fascist conspiracy! Day by day the suspicion is growing that rightist elements are ready to provoke military intervention... Insurrection has been deferred, pending the outcome of the elections. They are to implement their preventive plan if there is a leftist victory at the polls. We are not the defenders of the Republic, but we will do unstinting battle with fascism, committing all of our forces to rout the historical executioners of the Spanish proletariat. Furthermore, we have no hesitation in recommending that, wherever the legionnaires of tyranny launch armed insurrection, an understanding be speedily reached with antifascist groups, with vigorous precautions being taken to ensure that the defensive contribution of the masses may lead to the real social revolution and libertarian communism. Let everyone be vigilant. Should the conspirators open fire and should their fascist rebellion be defeated in its first stages, then the act of opposition must be pursued to its utmost consequences without tolerating attempts by the liberal bourgeoisie and its Marxist allies to hold back the course of events. Once hostilities begin in earnest, and irrespective of who initiates them, democracy will perish between two fires because it is irrelevant and has no place on the field of battle. If, on the other hand, the battle is tough, that recommendation will be redundant, for no one will stop until such time as one side or the other has been eliminated; and during the people's victory its democratic illusions would be dispelled. Should it be otherwise, the nightmare of dictatorship

will annihilate us. Either fascism or social revolution. The defeat of fascism is the duty of the whole proletariat and all lovers of freedom, weapons in hand, yet the most profound preoccupation of members of this Confederation is that the revolution should be social and libertarian. If we are to be the greatest source of inspiration of the masses, if they are to initiate libertarian practices and create an unbreachable bulwark against the authoritarian instincts of the whites and the reds alike, we must display intelligence and unity of thought and action. (Peirats, page 94)

In May 1936 the CNT held a national congress in Zaragoza, with 649 delegates representing 982 unions with a membership of over 550,000. The Spanish Revolution was to begin a few months later, on July 19, 1936. Consequently, the resolutions passed at the Zaragoza Congress are particularly important, as they set forth the CNT's stance on a number of issues on the eve of the Revolution and Civil War. The resolution on libertarian communism was largely the work of Isaac Puente, author of the widely reprinted and translated pamphlet of the same name (Sydney: Monty Miller, 1985; originally published 1932). He was killed by the fascists soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The following extracts are taken from Jose Peirats, *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, Vol. 1 (Hastings: Meltzer Press, 2001), and are reprinted with the kind permission of the publisher.

## **Resolutions from the Zaragoza Congress**

THE CONTENTION THAT THE REVOLUTION is nothing but a violent episode through which the capitalist system is sloughed has been given undue tolerance. In fact, it is merely the phenomenon which effectively clears the way for a state of affairs which has slowly taken shape in the collective consciousness.

The revolution, therefore, has its origins in the moment when the gulf between the state of society and the individual conscience is realized, when the latter finds itself, either through instinct or through analysis, obliged to react against the former.

So, in a few words, our belief is that revolutions come about:

1. as a psychological phenomenon opposed to a given state of affairs which stands in contradiction to individual aspirations and needs;
2. as a social phenomenon, whenever that response takes collective shape and clashes with the capitalist system;
3. as organization, whenever the need is felt to create a force capable of imposing the realization of its biological objective.

In the external order, these factors deserve to be stressed:

- a. breakdown of the ethic which serves as the foundation of the capitalist system;
- b. the economic bankruptcy of that system;
- c. failure of its political manifestations, whether the democratic system or, in its ultimate expression, state capitalism or, to all intents and purposes, authoritarian communism.

When these factors coincide at a given point and time, a violent act is needed to lead into the truly evolutionary phase of the revolution.

In the belief that we are now at the precise point when the convergence of all those factors may bring about this tantalizing possibility we deem it necessary to frame a proposition which, in broad outline, profiles the basic pillars of the future social edifice.

Constructive conception of the revolution. Our understanding is that our revolution should be organized on a strictly equitable basis.

The revolution cannot be based on mutual aid, on solidarity or on the archaic notion of charity. In any case, these three formulae, which historically have sought to compensate for the deficiencies of rudimentary social models which left the individual defenceless in the face of a concept of arbitrary law, ought to be recast and refined into the new norms of social coexistence which find their clearest expression in libertarian communism. In other words, all human needs are to be met with no limitations other than those imposed by the requirements of the new economy...

Organization of the new post-revolutionary society. The first steps of the revolution.

Once the revolution has moved beyond its violent phase, the following will be abolished: private property, the state, the principle of authority and, consequently, the classes which divide humanity into exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed.

With wealth socialized, the unfettered organizations of the producers will assume charge of the direct administration of production and consumption.

Once the libertarian commune has been established in each locality, we shall set the new mechanisms of society to work. The producers of each sector or trade, organized in their unions and workplaces, will freely determine the manner in which this is to be organized.

The free commune is to confiscate whatever was formerly possessed by the bourgeoisie in the way of provisions, clothing, footwear, raw materials, work tools, etc.

Such tools and raw materials pass into the hands of the producers so that the latter may administer them directly in the interests of the collectivity.

Firstly the communes will see to it that all the inhabitants of each district are housed with as many amenities as possible, with specific attention being guaranteed to health and education.

According to the fundamental principle of libertarian communism...all able-bodied individuals must work, assisting the collectivity proportionate to their strength and capabilities. Once labour is free, work will become a true right and, in return, the commune will fulfill its obligation by meeting the needs of all.

It is necessary to explain that the initial stages of the revolution will not be easy and that each individual will need to give of their best efforts and consume only what productive capabilities can afford. Every period of construction requires sacrifice and the acceptance of individual and collective restraints geared to improving the work of social reconstruction.

The producers' organizational plan. The economic plan will be tailored to the most rigorous principles of social economy in all spheres and directly administered by the producers through their various organs of production, which are to be appointed at general assemblies of all organizations and which will be under their constant supervision.

In the workplace, the union, the commune, in every agency regulating the new society, the producer, the individual, will be the most fundamental unit, the cell and the cornerstone of all social, economic and moral creations.

The point of liaison within the commune and in the workplace will be the workshop and factory council, which will form agreements with other work centres.

The liaison organs between unions will be the statistical and production councils which will federate with one another until they comprise a network of all the producers within the Iberian Confederation.

In the rural context, the basic unit will be the producer in the commune, which will have usufruct of all the natural assets within its political and geographical boundaries. The liaison body will be the cultivation council, which, composed of technical personnel and workers from the agricultural producers' associations, will be responsible for the intensification of production by selecting the most suitable lands.

These cultivation councils are to build up the same network of liaison as the workshop, factory, production and statistical councils, thereby complementing the free federation of the commune as a political jurisdiction and geographical sub-division.

For as long as Spain remains the only country to have effected its social transformation, the industrial producers' associations and the agricultural producers' associations alike are to federate at the national level if, of course, they deem this proper for the fruitful running of the economy. There will be a similar federation among those services whose characteristics require this as a means of facilitating logical and necessary liaison between libertarian communes throughout the peninsula.

It is our view that the new society will eventually equip every commune with all the agricultural and industrial accoutrements required for it to be autonomous, according to the biological principle that the individual is most free when they need least from their fellow individuals.

The libertarian communes and their operation. We must erect the political expression of our revolution upon the triple base: individual, commune and federation.

Within a scheme of activities reaching into every facet of the peninsula, the administration will be of an absolutely communal nature.

Consequently, the foundation of this administration will be the commune. These communes are to be autonomous and will be federated at regional and national levels to achieve their general goals. The right to autonomy does not preclude the duty to implement agreements regarding collective benefits.

In this way, a consumers' commune without any voluntary restrictions will undertake to adhere to whatever general norms may be agreed by majority vote after free debate. In return, those communes which reject industrialization, the naturists and nudists, for instance, may agree upon a different model of coexistence and will be entitled to an autonomous administration released from the general commitments. Since such naturist/nudist communes (or communes of some other sort) will be unable to satisfy their own needs, however limited these needs may be, their delegates to congresses of the Iberian Confederation of Autonomous Libertarian Communes will be empowered to enter into economic contacts with other agricultural and industrial communes.

In conclusion, we propose that the commune be created as a political and administrative entity and that the commune be autonomous and confederated with other communes.

Communes are to federate at county and regional levels, and set their own geographical limits, whenever it may be found convenient to group small towns, hamlets and townlands into a single commune. Amalgamated, these communes are to make up an Iberian Confederation of Autonomous Libertarian Communes.

To handle the distribution side of production and so that the communes may be better able to support themselves, supplementary agencies designed for such purposes may be set up. For

instance there might be a confederal council of production and distribution with direct representation from the national federations of production and from the annual congress of communes.

The commune's mission and internal workings: the commune will have a duty to concern itself with whatever may be of interest to the individual.

It will have to oversee organizing, running and beautification of the settlement. It will see that its inhabitants are housed and that items and products are made available to them by the producers' unions or associations.

Similarly it is to concern itself with hygiene, the keeping of communal statistics and with collective requirements such as education, health services and the maintenance and improvement of local means of communication.

It will orchestrate relations with other communes and will take care to stimulate all artistic and cultural pursuits.

So that this mission may be properly fulfilled, a communal council will have to be appointed, with representatives on it from the cultivation, health, cultural, distribution and production, and statistical councils.

The procedures for choosing the communal councils are to be determined according to a system that provides for differences such as population density, taking account of the fact that metropolitan areas will be slow to decentralize politically and to form federations of communes.

None of these posts will carry any executive or bureaucratic powers. Apart from those who may perform technical or merely statistical functions, the rest will perform their role as producers coming together in session at the close of the day's work to discuss the detailed items which may not require the endorsement of communal assemblies.

Assemblies are to be summoned as often as required by communal interests, upon the request of members of the communal council or according to the wishes of the inhabitants of each commune.

Liaison and exchange of produce. As we have outlined, our organization is federalist and guarantees the freedom of the individual within the group and the commune, as well as the freedom of the communes within the federations and the federation's rights within the confederations.

So we proceed from the individual to the collective, guaranteeing all individual rights, thereby maintaining the principle of liberty.

The inhabitants of a commune are to debate among themselves their internal problems regarding production, consumption, education, hygiene and whatever may be necessary for the moral and economic growth of the commune. Federations are to deliberate over major problems affecting a county or province and all communes are to be represented at their reunions and assemblies, thereby enabling their delegates to convey the democratic viewpoint of their respective communes.

If, say, roads have to be built to link the villages of a county or any matter arises to do with transportation and exchange of produce between agricultural and industrial counties, then naturally every commune which is implicated will have the right to have its say.

On matters of a regional nature, it is the duty of the regional federation to implement agreements which will represent the sovereign will of all the region's inhabitants. So the starting point is the individual, moving on through the commune, to the federation and right on up finally to the confederation.

Similarly, discussion of all problems of a national nature will follow a like pattern, since our organisms will be complementary. The national agency will regulate international relations, mak-

ing direct contact with the proletariat of other countries through their respective bodies, linked, like our own, to the IWA.

As far as the interchange of produce between communes is concerned, the communal councils are to liaise with the regional federations of communes and with the confederal council of production and distribution, applying for whatever they may need and any available surplus stocks.

By means of the network of liaisons established between the communes and the production and statistical councils set up by the national federations of producers, this problem will be resolved and simplified.

As for the communal aspect of this question, the producers' cards issued by the workshop and factory councils, which will entitle holders to acquire whatever they need to meet their requirements, will suffice. The producers' card constitutes the basis of exchange and will be subject to two conditions: firstly, that it is non-transferable; secondly, that a method be adopted whereby the card records the labour value in working units, a value which will be valid for the acquisition of products for a maximum period of one year.

Members of the non-active population are to be issued with consumer cards by the communal councils.

Naturally we will not prescribe a hard and fast norm. The autonomy of the communes ought to be respected, although they may, should they see fit, adopt some other arrangement for internal distribution, provided that these new procedures do not in any way trespass against the interests of other communes.

The individual's duties towards the collectivity and the notion of distributive justice. Libertarian communism is incompatible with any system of castigation, something which thus implies the disappearance of the current system of correctional justice and of the instruments of punishment (jails, penitentiaries, etc.).

...[S]ocial circumstances are the principal cause of so-called offences in the present state of affairs and consequently, once the causes underlying the offence have been removed, then, as a general rule, crime will cease to exist...

Thus we understand that whenever the individual fails to perform his duties, whether morally or as a producer, popular assemblies will arrive at some harmonious and just solution to the problem.

So, libertarian communism will found its "corrective action" upon medicine and pedagogy, the sole preventive measures acknowledged by modern science. Should some individual suffer from anti-social or pathological conditions, pedagogical therapy will cure any imbalance or lunatic inheritance and stimulate an ethical sense of social responsibility.

The family and relations between the sexes ...The first step in the libertarian revolution consists of ensuring that all human beings, without distinction of sex, are economically independent. Thus it is understood that both sexes are to enjoy equality of rights and duties alike and the economic inferiority between man and woman will thereby disappear.

Libertarian communism proclaims free love regulated only by the wishes of the man and the woman...

The religious question. Religion, a purely subjective facet of the human being, will be acknowledged as long as it remains a matter of individual conscience, but in no instance may it be regarded as a form of public display or moral or intellectual coercion...

Concerning pedagogy, art, science and the freedom to experiment. A radical approach will have to be adopted to the question of education. Firstly there will have to be a vigorous and systematic assault upon illiteracy. It is an obligation of restorative social justice incumbent upon the revolution that learning be restored to those who have been dispossessed of it, since just as capitalism has appropriated and arrogated society's wealth to itself, so the cities have appropriated and arrogated learning and education for themselves...

We deem it a primary function of pedagogy that it should help mould men with minds of their own-and let it be clear that we use the word "men" in the generic sense-to which end it will be necessary for the teacher to cultivate every one of the child's faculties so that the child may develop every one of its capacities to the full.

In the context of the educational system which libertarian communism is to put into practice, any schedule of punishments and rewards is to be repudiated once and for all, since those two precepts are at the root of all inequality...

Apart from the merely educational aspect, libertarian communism will guarantee access to science, art and all manner of research compatible with the pursuit of the production of necessities, thereby ensuring that human nature will be balanced and healthy.

The aim is that in libertarian communist society the producers are not to be divided into toilers or intellectuals, but that they may all be simultaneously toilers and intellectuals. When individuals have completed their daily work and fulfilled their mission as a producer for the community they are to have free access to the arts and science.

There are needs of a spiritual nature which run parallel to material needs and which will become more prominent in a society in which humanity is emancipated.

Since evolution is a continuous line, the individual will always have aspirations and ambitions to get on, to outdo his parents, outstrip his fellows and improve himself.

All such drives to better oneself, to experiment, to create-be it artistically, scientifically, or in a literary way-cannot, under any circumstances, whether material or general, be cast aside by a society based upon wide freedom: it will not thwart them, as presently happens, but instead will encourage and cultivate them in the belief that humanity does not live by bread alone and that a humanity living by bread alone would be a disgrace...

Defence of the revolution...until the social revolution may have triumphed internationally, the necessary steps will be taken to defend the new regime, whether against the perils of a foreign capitalist invasion...or against counter-revolution at home. It must also be remembered that a standing army constitutes the greatest danger to the revolution, since its influence could lead to dictatorship, which would necessarily kill off the revolution...The people armed will be the best assurance against any attempt to restore the system destroyed from either within or without.



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