

# **The Spanish Revolution**

***A new world in their hearts***

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***You feel that, had there been a documentary crew on the battlefields of Spain in the thirties this is what they would have brought back***

So said 'Hot Press' about Ken Loach's excellent film *Land and Freedom*. Yet the version of the conflict in Spain peddled by the school history books bears no resemblance to this 'documentary'. The revolution in Spain is portrayed simply as a civil war fought between democracy and fascism.

*Land and Freedom* goes some way towards redressing this, but even here you have to look hard to see any evidence that there were anarchists in Spain at the time. In fact, the Anarcho-Syndicalist Confederation Nacional de Trabajo or CNT had almost two million members, and they had a profound influence on the Spanish social revolution.

Anarchism had (and still has) a long tradition in Spain. This goes right back to the middle of the last century, 1869 to be precise, when the anarchist ideas of Michael Bakunin were first brought to Spain by the Italian Guiseppe Fanelli. Anarchism developed rapidly in the harsh economic conditions prevailing in Spain at the time.

1911 saw the formation of the CNT. This was an Anarcho-Syndicalist union. They hoped to organise all workers into one big union and bring about anarchism through a revolutionary general strike. In its day to day activity the union put into action the anarchist principles of direct action and direct democracy. All delegates and representatives were subject to being mandated and recalled if they did not carry through their mandates.

## **Strikes and repression**

The CNT experienced rapid growth. Its strongholds were in Catalonia (especially Barcelona) and Andalucia. It also had a large following in the Asturias, Levant, Saragossa and Madrid. It organised militant strikes and protests including several city wide and national strikes. For most of its history it was subject to vicious government repression, not only under the semi-dictatorship in power until 1931, but also under the republican and popular front governments which followed. This included the 1936 popular front government.

Franco's coup began in July 1936. The government had been warned that a military uprising was about to occur but refused to take the warnings seriously. The Prime Minister Casares Quiroga reportedly replied to one such warning

*By which you mean you are sure that the military will rise? Very well then, but for my part, I am going to have a lie down..*

This rather pathetic attempt at humour sums up the attitude of the government. The parties of the popular front reacted in a similarly complacent fashion. The communist and socialist parties issued this joint note

*The moment is a difficult one. The government is sure that it possesses sufficient means to crush this criminal attempt.*

## **Taking arms**

The government refused to arm the workers. Workers armed themselves. The CNT broke out its own arms (that it had been saving for just such a rainy day) and organised detachments to seize

barracks and arsenals before the military could link up and consolidate. Over most of northern and central Spain they beat the fascists and the army with whatever arms came to hand.

There is absolutely no doubt that the initial response to Franco's coup was due to the deep implantation of anarchist ideas among Spanish workers. There was no waiting around for the government to act (and just as well too). Workers beat the coup and moved to take control.

Anarchist influence was everywhere from the formation of the militias and the expropriation and collectivisation of land to the seizures in industry. The smashing of the military coup was like the bursting of a dam, releasing a surging human tide of imagination and creativity.

Throughout *republican* Spain anarchist ideas inspired a transformation. This transformation would take a far longer article than this to describe and, indeed, has been the subject of several large books. However a few examples will at least give a flavour of the times.

## **On the Land**

In the short space of a few years the small peasants and agricultural labourers demonstrated that, far from chaos, anarchism was an efficient, desirable and realisable method of running things. There were unprecedented levels of voluntary collectivisation throughout the land on the anti-fascist side. Gaston Level (in his book *Collectives in the Spanish Civil War*) puts the numbers involved as high as 5–7 million people.

Collectivisation occurred much as described in *Land and Freedom*. After the major landowners had split, a village assembly was held. If a decision to collectivise was taken all individually owned land and machinery was brought together for the use of the entire collective. Teams were formed to look after various areas of work and each elected recallable delegates to a village assembly. Individuals were, however, able to remain outside the collective and keep their own property if they wished, though they were forbidden from hiring labourers to work their land. Most of these people eventually joined, their reservations disappearing in the face of the visible successes of the collectives.

To distribute the common stock of goods, rationing or a family wage was brought in. Given the low level of production at the time it was impossible to go straight to communist distribution (i.e. free goods for all). But there was a major increase in living standards with more of a say for everyone and many free services.

## **A Tale of Seven Hundred Trams**

Industrial collectivisation was extensive especially in the anarchist stronghold, Barcelona. As George Orwell put it in *Homage to Catalonia*

*It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle.*

About 3000 enterprises in the city were collectivised. The tram system provides a shining example of just how much better we can run things when we do struggle up into that saddle.

On July 24<sup>th</sup>, five days after the rising was crushed, the tram crews got together and decided to run the whole system themselves. A committee was elected. They quickly introduced many

changes. Within another 5 days 700 trams were in service. 100 trams had been patched up and rushed into service. The major reason for the quick repair job was the re-employment of 657 laid off tram-men.

## **Putting people first**

With the profit motive gone, safety became more important and the number of accidents was reduced. A new automatic safety and signalling system was introduced. Sections of track were repaired and re-laid.

The old fares had varied from 0.1 to 0.4 pesetas. A new standard fare of 0.2 pesetas was introduced. Yet more money was made (and ploughed back in) and an extra 50 million passengers were carried. Wages were equalised for all workers (which meant an increase for most) and there was free medical care for all workers in the city.

Perhaps the most amazing fact is that over the two years of collectivisation there were only 6 cases of workers caught stealing from the workshop.

## **What went wrong?**

The factors involved in the defeat of the revolution would take an article in themselves to explain, ranging from the military power of the fascists (and their outside aid) to the betrayals by the communists and social democrats, and this is not my purpose here. What is important is that the social revolution did not collapse due to internal problems or flaws in human nature. It was defeated from without. Anarchism had not failed. Anarchists had proved that ideas which look good in the pages of theory books look even better on the canvas of life.

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