

War & Revolution

The Friends of Durruti

Conor McLoughlin

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THE WAR in Spain (1936-1939) has often been portrayed as a simple struggle between Fascism and democracy. In fact it was anything but. A military coup launched in July 1936 was defeated by worker's action in most parts of Spain.

There then followed a wide ranging social revolution (see Worker's Solidarity 33). As many as 5-7 million were involved in the collectivisation of agriculture and thousands in worker's control of industry. About 2 million of these were also members of the oldest union in Spain the anarcho-syndicalist; CNT.

As with all revolutions a counter-revolution followed quickly on the Spanish revolution. This was spearheaded by the Spanish Communist party. These were faithful adherents to Stalin's foreign policy of sucking up to France and England in the hope of military and economic alliances. They resisted the revolution at all stages and found willing allies in the Spanish republican and socialist forces. All took pains to convey to the world a struggle between fascism and democracy.

They also took steps to try and make it such a struggle by smashing collectives and factory committees and sabotaging the efforts of revolutionary forces at the front. However even more worrying is the fact that the "anarchists" of the CNT made little attempt to combat these forces. In fact four became government ministers.

One tendency within the CNT; the Friends of Durruti resisted the growing reformism within the CNT. In this review of their pamphlet; "Towards a Fresh Revolution" Conor Mc Loughlin outlines their importance to modern anarchists.

"We are not interested in medals or in general's sashes, we want neither committees or ministers"

Bueneventura Durruti - Solidaridad Obrera Sept 12 1936

"The government has posthumously granted the rank of Lieutenant Colonel to the illustrious Libertarian leader Buenaventura Durruti on the anniversary of his death"

- Solidaridad Obrera April 30 1938

The friends of Durutti were setup in 1937 by rank and file members of the CNT and members of CNT columns resisting militarisation. "Towards a fresh revolution" was published in 1938 as "a message of hope and a determination to renew the fight against an internationalism." It's a short and relatively easy read at 43 pages. It is obviously aimed at activists in the CNT and it pulls no punches in it's attacks on the Spanish bourgeoisie and "colaborationists" in the CNT. However be warned it does assume a certain amount of background knowledge of the history of the CNT and the Spanish revolution. It would be useful to read in conjunction with Vernon Richard's "Lessons of the Spanish Revolution"

JULY 19th 1936

The pamphlet begins by recalling the massive gains made by Spanish workers in areas where they had succeeded in beating the fascist coup. The coup had been defeated by workers facing down the military often with their bare hands. It had been defeated without any help from the popular front government who refused to arm the people. This was to be repeated throughout the course

of the "civil war". The workers confronted fascism with revolution the government proved more afraid of revolution than fascism (which is not to knock the many genuine anti-fascists in some of the government parties.).

The July events triggered a massive social revolution throughout Spain. (see Workers Solidarity no. 33). Workers took over in the factories and on the lands and began the creation of a self-managed communist society. Millions were involved in agricultural communes and worker's self management in the factories.

The pamphlet however poses the central question. Why, when a clear majority supported and took part in the building of a social revolution, wasn't this pushed forward by the CNT; the massive anarcho-syndicalist union. Their answer is brief: "what happened had to happen"

Why was this sellout inevitable as the FOD maintain? Why did leading anarchists move on to become leading ministers in the Spanish government?

In explaining their apparently fatalistic view of the CNT the FOD go on to show how the CNT was devoid of any revolutionary theory or programme. They had "Lyricism aplenty" and detailed plans had been laid down as to how an anarchist Spain would operate at their national conference in Saragosa in May 1936. But they couldn't get from A to B, from bread and butter struggle to a future libertarian society.

For this reason they handed the revolution to the tender mercies of the Socialists, republicans and Communists. These forces which emerged without a shred of support from the July events were not slow to rebuild. Instead of destroying it they propped up the Spanish state in it's hour of need. As the FOD put it: "It breathed a lungfull of Oxygen into an anemic, terror stricken bourgeoisie."

Garcia Oliver one of the "leading militants" who was shortly to enter the government without even consulting the Union's members claimed he had avoided "an anarchist dictatorship". This shows a complete and crass lack of understanding of the essential tasks of an anarchist organisation i.e. the smashing of the state and the transfer of power to worker's and peasants. The CNT and Spanish workers were to pay in blood for this collaboration.

We acknowledge the great work of the CNT in propagandising anarchism and the struggle against Franco. But we must stand with the FOD in absolute condemnation of the deferring of revolutionary politics to class collaboration.

The FOD had a programme which could have won the support of the Spanish masses and led them to anarchism and the destruction of Fascism. However they were too small and too late. The need for such a programme as outlined in "How anarchists should organise" in this issue has never been more pressing

MAY 3rd 1937

By this stage the counter-revolutionaries in the "republican" camp felt confident enough to provoke a fight with the Barcelona working class. Police under the command of Rodriguez Salas, the public order commissar, attacked the telephone exchange. They were strongly resisted by CNT organised workers inside.

Barricades soon sprang up all over the city. Fighting broke out with the CNT and POUM (non-Stalinist Marxists) quickly gaining the upper hand over government and PSUC (Stalinist

controlled Catalan "Socialist" party). After an armed stand off the workers were finally persuaded to lay down arms by the CNT "leadership".

The FOD strongly urged workers to remain put and were in the thick of the fighting. They pointed out that the workers had won and now controlled Barcelona (after a steady erosion of their position since July 1936). They insisted that workers stayed put. They issued a manifesto calling for the disbanding of the army and parties which had supported the coup and the establishment of a revolutionary Junta to continue the war.

It is worth explaining exactly what they meant by this Junta since the word has very bad associations. They wanted the Junta to control only the war effort. It was to be made up of elected, recallable delegates. The economy was to be under the control of workers through their syndicates.

For issuing these demands they were attacked as traitors and agent provocateurs. The CNT brokered peace was an abandonment of the revolutionary Barcelona workers. Several thousand troops arrived from Valencia. There were mass arrests, executions and immediate press censorship. The destruction of the POUM and CNT by Stalin's CHEKA agents began.

The May events were a vital turning point in the Spanish revolution. The collectives were crushed throughout republican areas soon afterwards. Worker's control was smashed and militarisation completed. The "peoples army" then suffered massive and bloody defeats at the hands of the fascists.

We would agree with almost all the FOD's positions summarised at the end of the pamphlet. These include;

1. That the war should have been a continuation of the revolution with a democratic worker's army.
2. All available arms and money should have been seized by the workers. (The CNT spent most of the war guarding the government's 2,259 pesetas in gold! This money which could have aided the revolution was exported to Russia to buy the arms that helped destroy it.)
3. No collaboration with the Spanish bourgeois
4. Real worker's unity
5. Total socialisation of the economy and food distribution
6. Equalisation of pay rates
7. No armistice with Foreign imperialist powers.

To this we could only add the immediate granting of independence to remaining Spanish colonies.

The FOD were armed with a revolutionary programme that could have brought Spain towards anarchism and crushed the Fascists. But they were too small and too late to hope to win workers to its implementation. The need for anarchists organised with such a programme has never been more pressing. We are attempting to build one.

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