

The Freedom to Succeed

The Anarchist Collectives in the Countryside during the Spanish Civil War

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Many people, upon hearing about Anarchism, consider a society based on anarchist principles as unrealistic, idealistic and naive – the vision of dreamers. Given the homogenous view of the world represented in the media, it is often difficult for people to imagine a society where such universally accepted institutions as the state, the judiciary system, the police, armies, and nations no longer exist.

For a glimpse of how such a society would function it is useful to look to the social revolution that took place in Spain in 1936, when, over a period of two years, people took power into their own hands and started to construct a completely different society based on anarchist principles.

Anarchist ideas had been gaining strength in Spain since the second half of the 19th century. The CNT, an anarcho-syndicalist trade union, was formed in 1910, and by 1936 was very powerful, having a membership of 1.5 million. By that time anarchist ideas were strong in the minds of the peasants. In fact, collectivisation had actually started in some areas of the countryside before the revolution.

On July 17th a military coup took place in Spanish Morocco which spread the next day to the peninsula. In the cities and villages the workers organised themselves to defeat the military uprising and thanks to their courage and initiative the fascist revolt was stopped in three-quarters of Spain. These people however were fighting not only to crush the fascist attempt to seize power, they were also fighting for a new social order in Spain.

As soon as the fascists were defeated, workers' militias were set up independent of the state. The factories in the cities were taken over by the workers, and in the rural areas the lands of the fleeing fascists and fascist sympathisers were taken over. In the rural parts of the Republican zone, under the influence of CNT and FAI (Federation of Iberian Anarchists) members, collectivisation was the most far reaching. Usually it was the members of the CNT or the FAI who called general meetings in the villages and pushed for collectivisation.

At these meetings people voluntarily pooled whatever land, tools and cattle they possessed. To this was added whatever land had been expropriated from the large land owners. "People who had nothing to bring to the collective were admitted with the same rights and duties as the rest".¹ Soon almost two-thirds of all the land in the area controlled by anti-fascist forces was taken over and collectivised. In all between five and seven million people were involved.

The organisational structure and power structure of the collectives

The smallest unit of each collective was the work group, usually numbering five to ten members, but sometimes more. Everyone in a collective, where possible, was obliged to work.

"The collective was the free community of labour of the villagers....The group might consist of friends, or the neighbours on a certain street, or a group of small farmers, tenant farmers, or day labourers."²

Each group was assigned land by the collective and they were then responsible for the cultivation of this land. Within each work group a delegate was elected who, while working alongside

¹ Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution, Jose Peirats, page 139;

² With the Peasants of Aragon, Augustin Souchy Bauer, page 20;

her comrades most of the time, also represented the views of her group at the meetings of the collective. In some collectives there was an Administrative Commission which met with the delegates from each work group and drew up the work plan for the next day.

The Administrative Commission or management committee was responsible for the day to day running of the collective. “They would look after the buying of materials, exchanges with other areas, distributing the produce and necessary public works such as the building of schools”.³ Members of the management committee were elected at general assemblies of all participants of the collective. The general assembly of collectivists was sovereign when important decisions were made.

Federations of collectives were also created. In Aragon, where there were 450 collectives involving half a million people, the most successful federation was set up. Here, district federations and regional federations were established. Collectives in the same local area joined to form a district federation which was made up of delegates elected in each of the collectives. The district federation maintained warehouses to store agricultural produce from the collectives. It was also responsible for communication and transport between affiliated villages, and supported cultural progress in the area.

Regional federations, such as the Regional Federation of Aragonese Collectives and the Regional Federation of Peasants, were also founded which were made up of delegates from the collectives. These federations were set up for various purposes. Among others to set up technical teams to improve agricultural and livestock production; to offer training for young people; to collect production statistics; to create regional reserves; and to offer credits and aid, without interest, to the collectives.

All this took place through the initiative of the peasants. Although the government existed it had no power. “It was shorn of the repressive organs of the state. Power was split into countless fragments and scattered in a thousand towns and villages among the revolutionary committees that had taken control of the land and factories, means of transport and communication, the police and the army. The military, economic and political struggle was proceeding independently of the government, and, indeed, in spite of it.”⁴

Day to day life

In numerous collectives food and other supplies for local consumption were located in the churches, which made ideal warehouses. The method of local distribution varied from collective to collective. In some collectives a family salary was introduced. In others, the members of the collective decided to pay each person a daily salary fixed by the collective. Payment was made on the basis of need and not on the hours worked.

Other collectives abolished state money altogether and either used their own local money or else money was replaced by “tokens” or “coupons” exchangeable for goods.

Often participants of a collective could take as much of certain provisions, such as bread, vegetables, fruit and in some cases wine (Muniesa) and even tobacco (Beceite), as they needed and without restriction. The collectives operated on the basis of ‘to each according to need, from each according to ability’.

³ The Spanish Civil War, Anarchism in Action, Eddie Conlon, page 18;

⁴ *ibid*, page 23;

In all collectives when articles were scarce rationing was applied. “Everyone, whether able to work or not received the necessities of life as far as the collective could provide them.”⁵ The working age ranged from 14 to 60. Sick days were counted as work days. Old people were taken care of and where necessary special homes were built for them.

The role of women in the collectives

“Single women worked in collective workshops or in branches of the distribution co-operatives. Married women, detained by household chores, were free from these obligations, though in times of need they also contributed their efforts. Pregnant women were given special consideration. Everyone worked according to physical ability.”⁶

Whenever collectives chose to pay salaries it seems that women were universally paid less than men. In fact, although women played an extremely active role in the revolution in the cities, in the countryside the traditional role of women does not appear to have changed drastically. We hope to look at the issue of women in the Spanish collectives in more detail in our next issue.

How the “individualists” were treated

Unlike in Soviet Russia, collectivisation was not forced on people and those who did not wish to join the collectives were allowed to do so on one condition: they could keep only as much land as they and their family could work and could not hire anyone to work for them. People who refused to join collectives were called “individualists”.

In keeping with the anarchist principle that there is no freedom unless everyone is free, people believed that participation in the collectives should always be voluntary. The collectivists were by far the majority in the countryside, however they made special efforts to respect the choice made by the individualists and they were not condemned. In many areas the individualists, encouraged by the example set by the collective, eventually joined the collectives voluntarily and their numbers declined.⁷

The individualists often benefited from the collectives. In Calanda for example they received free electricity and paid no rent. They also paid low prices for any goods bought from the collective.

The Freedom to Succeed

The aim of the collectives was “to produce collectively and to distribute the product of their labour with justice to all”.⁸ With the abolition of private property, a profound transformation took place in the mind-set of the people. The way in which the collectivists acted during this

⁵ With the Peasants of Aragon, Augustin Souchy Bauer, page 21;

⁶ Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution, Jose Peirats, page 141;

⁷ With the Peasants of Aragon, Augustin Souchy Bauer, page 57;

⁸ *ibid*, page 28

period shows that the excessive greed evident in today's capitalist society is not an inherent part of human nature.

Communities were not interested in possessing more land purely for the sake of increasing their domain, but instead they wanted only as much land as they could work themselves. There was a strong feeling of solidarity between the different collectives. For example, 1,000 collectivists from the Levant, which was quite advantaged, moved to Castille to help out. The collectives sent food and provisions regularly to the Front and also to the cities.

The collectivists in Albalate de Cinca sent the following to the unconquered city of Madrid in March 1937: ten live hogs, 500 kilos of bacon; 87 chickens; 50 rabbits; 2.5 tons of potatoes; 200 dozen eggs; vegetables and several dozen goats. "There was no question of payment or requisition by the military".⁹ Refugees fleeing from areas conquered by the fascist advance were also taken care of in the remaining collectives.

With the creation of the collectives people were no longer in competition with each other. They were also free from having to follow the orders of some boss, working land they did not own for little reward but instead had control over their work and had equal input in any important decisions made concerning the organisation of work and the management of resources. Thus liberated, the initiative and enthusiasm of the Spanish peasants knew no bounds. "Collectivisation has all the advantages of free co-operation: humane collective labour. Freedom and equality are its foundation."¹⁰

New modern methods of farming were employed. Experimental farms were set up. Resources were used to modernise the farms and get new machinery. Communities gained greatly from having pooled resources. Expert technical advice was made available by the Regional Federation. In addition, parasitic middlemen and the wasteful bureaucracy and other control mechanisms necessary for maintaining a capitalist system were dispensed with.

Production greatly increased in the collectives. In some cases harvests increased by up to five times their pre-revolution level. In Alcoriza the collectivists established a sausage factory in an old convent. "Daily production has reached 500 kilos. This production is sent to the anti-fascist militia. They have also built a shoe factory where they produce leather and fabric footwear, not only for the residents of their village, but also for neighbouring communities."¹¹

In no collective did unemployment exist. This was a big change from life in Spain before the collectives where often peasants would be unemployed for half of the year.

The collectivists were not only concerned with their material well being. They were deeply committed to education and during this period many schools were set up, based on the methods of Francisco Ferrer, the world famous anarchist educationalist. As a result of their efforts many children received schooling for the first time.

In Calanda, "The school is the outstanding program in the village. It follows the philosophy and the guidelines of Francisco Ferrer. 1,233 children attend the school. It is built in an old convent. Gifted children are sent to the Lyceum at Capse. The collective pays the cost."¹² The Libertarian Youth Federation, in particular, were very active in cultural activities setting up libraries, cinemas and community centres.

⁹ *ibid*, page 81;

¹⁰ *ibid*, page 71;

¹¹ *ibid*, page 41;

¹² *ibid*, page 37;

The initiative of the peasants can be seen clearly in the original uses they made of the former churches. Churches became cinemas, cafes, butcher shops, carpenters' workshops, hospitals, noodle and spaghetti factories and in one case a barracks. Perhaps a more typical example of the new role of the church in the collectives is the use put to the former church in Alcaniz:

“The priests fled. The church was not burned. It serves as a warehouse for the collective. The different sections are marked on the church's pillars: shoes and sandals here; soap and other cleaning materials: meats and sausage; preserves and other provisions; fabrics and cloth. Potatoes are stored near the main altar.....

Offices have been set up. Nothing can be obtained with money, only with vouchers. Each member of the collective has a membership card and a book of vouchers. People are given what they request and it is recorded in the book of vouchers. The public enters through the main front door. The side doors are used for delivery of supplies. The church is the local market place.”¹³

The Spanish revolution is unique in history insofar as it is the only time when the masses consciously put anarchist theories into practice. Although the collectives were not given the chance to develop fully and were not perfect, they were nonetheless a great success while they lasted. They show how ordinary people are perfectly capable of organising a just and efficient society given the right conditions. The peasants and workers in Spain showed that anarchism is possible.

¹³ *ibid*, page 29

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