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Review, Two New Books on Spanish Anarchism

Jeff Stein

2016, Fall

a review of

Chris Ealham, *Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement*. AK Press, 2015, 336 pp., \$20, paper.

Jason Garner, *Goals and Means: Anarchism, Syndicalism, and Internationalism in the Origins of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica*. AK Press, 2016, 384 pp., \$19.

AK Press has brought out two good books on the Spanish Anarchist movement. The first, *Living Anarchism*, I found an easier and more enjoyable read. José Peirats, as portrayed by the author, is a sympathetic figure. Born into a working class family in Valencia, Peirats joined the CNT at the age of 14 when he began working as a brickmaker after his family moved to Barcelona. Peirats, like many in the CNT, was an autodidact, a self-taught working class intellectual who also took advantage of anarchist schools and cultural activities to learn economics, history, literature, drama and science.

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In 1928 he helped start a newspaper, *El Boletín del Ladrillero*, for members of the CNT brick worker's union. This was during the period when the CNT was rebuilding after it had been driven underground for nearly a decade by the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

When the Primo de Rivera dictatorship collapsed in April 1931, the CNT was divided over what to do. Some wanted to collaborate with the Republic and take advantage of the liberal atmosphere to rebuild the union federation. Others, particularly younger anarcho-syndicalists like Peirats, wanted to go after the capitalists with direct action, agitating for strikes and pushing the revolutionary opportunities as far as possible. The CNT became embroiled in a series of insurrectionary strikes in 1932 and 1933, for which the federation was ill-prepared. Peirats lost his enthusiasm for insurrectionism, which brought him into conflict with the Nosotros affinity group, Durruti, the Ascaso brothers and García Oliver, who instigated these uprisings in the name of the FAI without getting the consent of either FAI members or the CNT. When Peirats and other members of the FAI threatened to expel Nosotros from the FAI, Oliver and Ascaso told the FAI and Peirats they could not be expelled "as they were not FAI members." (69)

Whether it was criticism from the ranks or pressure from the CNT leadership that caused it, Peirats was not prepared when the "anarcho-bolsheviks" of the Nosotros group made an about-face in 1934. The CNT and Nosotros withheld support from a general strike in Catalonia. The general strike was called in support of Catalan regional autonomy that was under attack by the newly elected right-wing government in Madrid, but the CNT was reluctant to support what they saw as a strike that would mainly benefit the political parties. It was during this strike that the so-called 'Asturian Commune' was declared and an uprising broke out in the northwest of Spain. For two weeks an alliance of the Asturian CNT, UGT and Communists fought the Guardia Civil and military, and, in a foreshadowing of things to come, a detachment of Moorish colonial troops.

”When the army took control of Barcelona [to end the general strike in the east], Ascaso, one of the Nosotros insurrectionists, took the unprecedented step of speaking on military radio to order an end to the general strike in Catalonia, even though it had not been called by the CNT.” (79)

Not only had the radical wing of the CNT failed to support the insurrection in the Asturias, but the following year the Nosotros group and the Urales family made it clear that they favored a return to power of the Popular Front of Republicans, Socialists and Communists. Instead of the usual anti-electoral campaign, the CNT leadership let it be known that their members were encouraged to vote for the left in the February 1936 elections.

Peirats resigned his position on *Solidaridad Obrera*, the CNT newspaper. Peirats took a dissident position against a rising bureaucratic trend, not only in the CNT but also in the FAI. He also resigned from the FAI which he saw as increasingly coming under the control of Diego Abad de Santillán, the exiled Argentinian anarchist. Peirats was joined in his anti-bureaucratic position by Balius (who would later organize the ”Friends of Durutti,” the opposition CNT organization that was to play a role in the May 1937 revolt). Both men objected to the shifting political line the two organizations were following, and the way these positions were being sprung upon the union ranks with little or no discussion.

”As Peirats later explained: ’[We considered] the revolution as a phenomenon [requiring] popular participation...Channeling a revolution did not mean imposing proprietary rights over it. And it could not be made by audacious minorities.’” (83)

When the army mutinied on July 19, 1936, Peirats helped coordinate CNT defense efforts. He was part of a poorly armed crowd that prepared to storm the Pedralbes barracks in Barcelona. The soldiers inside learned that the coup has been defeated in the rest of Barcelona, and surrendered. Peirats was the first to enter the barracks and helped seize the armory. The revolutionary euphoria at

defeating the local military was not to last, however. Over the next few weeks, the Catalan CNT was outmaneuvered by the Generalitat and seduced into making an alliance with the Republicans and Catalan nationalists instead of removing them from office. CNT leaders were offered positions in the Catalan Generalitat and the central government in Madrid to "coordinate the fight against the fascists." In hopes of compromising a potential dissident, Peirats was offered a government job representing the FAI (which struck Peirats as ironic since he was no longer an FAI member). Peirats refused, and he played the role of a critic of anarchist "governmentalism" for the remainder of the Spanish Civil War.

After the war was lost, Peirats joined many CNT members in exile in France. CNT members without financial means were placed in concentration camps, where they endured harsh conditions. Peirats was offered support by the exiled CNT leaders to come live in Paris, but he refused any special treatment and remained in the camps near the Spanish border with the rest of the union rank and file. Rather than live off the movement, Peirats accepted an offer by the Dominican Republic to relocate to a remote area of that Caribbean country to work as an agricultural laborer. From there he immigrated to Ecuador and eventually Panama, finally returning to France in 1947 after the Nazis were defeated.

When Peirats arrived in Toulouse, France, the headquarters of the MLE-CNT (Spanish Anarchist Movement and CNT in exile), he was struck by the incredible bureaucratization the movement had undergone in his absence. Whereas the CNT in Spain had only one paid officer, in exile there were seven paid officers in spite of the fact that the union was less than one twentieth the size.

The FIJL youth organization had four paid employees, and the union's newspaper had nine paid staff. Peirats traced this explosion in bureaucracy to the fact that a number of leaders had become financially dependent on the movement, and that the bulk of the movement's money was being provided by Laureano Cerrada. Cerrada had been a fighter in the anti-Nazi resistance and had been

advocated that anarchists should try to instigate revolution without accepting official positions, so that they would not somehow impose their leadership on the new society.

This has always been a contradictory or paradoxical part of Bakunin's thinking. How do the workers maintain self-management in the new society, if they cannot maintain it in their unions before the revolution? I hope that someday Jason Garner will come out with a second edition in which he names who was in the factions he describes and provides details of why he includes them in one faction or another. Until then I recommend using his book as a general reference, but taking his conclusions with a grain of salt unless the reader knows enough of the historical background to understand who he is writing about.

neously” create worker councils. I suspect that wildcat strikes are not as ”spontaneous” as the Situationists or councilists imagine but are the product of worker affinity groups and rank-and-file union dissidents. They only appear spontaneous to outside observers.

Although I found the second book, *Goals and Means* by Garner, informative, I did not enjoy it as much. It is not about specific individuals but more of a factional history of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement, beginning with the First International, through the founding of the CNT, the founding of the FAI, and the lead-up to the Revolution and Civil War. What I found the most interesting was Garner’s account of how various international events shaped the movement in Spain. There was the conflict between Bakunin and Marx, the creation of the CGT in France and its capture by the Communists, the Russian Revolution and the attempt of the Comintern to absorb the revolutionary syndicalist movement in Spain, and the influence of the Argentinian FORA and Diego Abad de Santillán who argued for an ”anarchist workers’ movement” as opposed to an anarcho-syndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist movement. Garner also covers specifically Spanish events, like the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the dictator’s alliance with the UGT, and how this produced the faction of the CNT that felt it needed to collaborate with the Republicans.

What I found frustrating is the way Garner describes factions within the anarcho-syndicalist movement as though they are persons. For example he refers to the ”anarcho-bolsheviks” without clearly identifying who he means. I assume he means the Nosotros group, but it would be useful for his readers to say who he is talking about. I think the term is somewhat misleading for readers unfamiliar with the actual ideas and actions of the group, which could in no way be confused with those of Lenin and Trotsky. What critics of Durruti and Ascaso meant by the term was their tendency to instigate insurrections and strikes in the name of the CNT or FAI without consulting the ranks of the organization. One could just as well claim they were acting like Bakuninists, since Bakunin

given Franco’s printing plates recovered by Italian anarchists during the collapse of the Mussolini regime. After the war Cerrada was funding the FAI and CNT by forging Spanish currency, and indirectly controlling the organizations. Peirats called Cerrada the ”King Midas of the Montseny-Esgleas clique.” (Federica Montseny and her husband, Germinal Esgleas, dominated the MLE-CNT and turned a blind eye to Cerrada’s criminal activities in return for his financial support.)

The control of the MLE-CNT bureaucracy, particularly the activities of Federica Montseny and Esgleas, helps explain why the exiled movement went through a series of splits and expulsions of longtime union members. Montseny had been a government minister during the Spanish Civil War, but adopted an ultra-orthodox position in exile. Peirats had some success fighting Montseny and her minions when he first arrived. He was elected CNT secretary over Esgleas and made a clandestine trip into Spain to link up with the remnants of the union that was working in the underground. Peirats denounced ”anarcho-banditry” bank robbery and other criminal activities for the corrupting influence it had on the movement.

Unfortunately for the organization, Peirats refused to serve long in the secretary position. He accepted an offer the following year to write a history of the CNT during the Spanish Revolution and War, and was offered a small stipend to support him in the meantime. When the stipend was exhausted, he agreed to serve another term as CNT secretary in return for additional funds to complete the history. During his second term he had a confrontation with Cerrada that nearly ended in a gunfight.

In early 1951 Peirats was arrested and accused of receiving six million francs from an armed robbery. A gang of ex-guerilla fighters had been involved in a series of armed robberies in France. The ”anarchists” involved had been expelled from the Lyons FAI for using their comrades to support their efforts but were actually just criminals who kept their stolen loot for themselves. To get even

with the movement for insulting them, the gang had planted some buried weapons in the courtyard of a nearby CNT office, which the French police had discovered. The Cold War was in full force and the French "socialist" Interior Minister was anxious to please Franco, who was now France's anti-Communist ally. The police hoped to implicate the CNT so France could outlaw the exiled Spanish anarchist movement. Peirats was offered leniency if he would admit CNT involvement, but refused. Peirats served a five-month term in prison until a campaign waged by supporters (including Albert Camus) managed to get his release. During his prison stay, Peirats continued to work on his history of the CNT. He also was amused to find out that he was in the same prison as the one occupied by Peter Kropotkin seventy years before.

After he was released from prison, Peirats took a hiatus from organizational work to complete his three-volume history of the CNT, for which he was called "the Herodotus of the CNT."

"The aim of *La CNT en la revolución española* was simple: 'Given the wave of books already published on the civil war in which we are ignored or slandered,' Peirats sought to produce a book that would demonstrate that, as well as a civil war in Spain, there was a social revolution and that this unknown revolution was carried out by anarchists in the face of opposition and hostility of those inside and outside their movement." (154)

When he returned to organizational activity, Peirats focused his efforts on reunification of the CNT. The CNT had split into two factions in 1945: the "possibilists" who had maintained relations with the Republic-in-exile in hopes that the victorious Allied Powers would drive Franco from Spain, and the "sectarians" led by Montseny and Egleas. Peirats doubted that Montseny and Egleas opposed the possibilists on principle, and believed that the split was more due to the threat that they might lose control over a united CNT. Egleas served uninterrupted as MLE-CNT secretary for 1952 through 1958, and most of the committees were dominated by his allies. The supposed reason for the 1945 split was no longer

an issue anyway since the possibilists publicly severed their ties with the Republican government in exile. Peirats became editor of CNT and wrote numerous articles calling for re-unification, which finally bore fruit in 1961 at the Limoges Congress when the MLE-CNT members voted to open talks with the moderates and end the split. Unfortunately Peirats refused to stand for another term as secretary. This left the way clear for the Montseny-Egleas faction to reverse the decision by dictating unacceptable terms to the moderates as a condition of their returning to the fold. Egleas remained secretary of the MLE-CNT up to 1975, when the death of Franco at last allowed the CNT to return to Spain.

In the concluding chapters, Chris Ealham describes how Peirats and the other exiles had their hopes dashed. The CNT was not able to take advantage of the possibilities after Franco's death. There was too much of a generation gap to overcome, and the authorities had no intention of allowing the CNT to take root. Ealham describes the impact of the La Scala affair, in which an agent provocateur planted a bomb at a restaurant the CNT was organizing and the police used it as a pretext for clamping down on the young organizers. Afterwards followed the Moncloa Pact under which strike action was curtailed and the new labor laws imposed on the labor movement in a throw-back union domestication strategy similar to the alliance between the UGT and Primo de Rivera.

It is these closing chapters where I took exception to Ealham's remarks. He suggests the CNT should have tried to take over the CCOO (Worker Commissions). I doubt this would have made any difference. The Communist Party was already very active in these groups and it would not have been as easy as Ealham makes out. Nor do I agree that the CNT should have borrowed from the council communists or the Situationists, having seen for myself how ineffective these groups were here in the States. Anarcho-syndicalism needs to adopt new strategies for subverting labor domestication strategies of the capitalist governments, that maintain union organization instead of waiting for workers to somehow "sponta-