

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Jered Fisher

Platformism and the Spanish Anarchist Movement

2003

Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from

anarchistplatform.wordpress.com

Written by Jered Fisher, a member of Firebrand Collective, the Portland, OR affiliate of the Federation of Northwest Anarcho-Communists (FNAC). Originally published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #8, Fall/Winter 2003.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Platformism and the Spanish Anarchist Movement

Jered Fisher

2003

Those who desire to change the world face many difficulties, from repression to apathy to struggling to keep the vision of creating a new world in the shell of the old. For anarchists, who struggle against oppression of all kinds, the difficulties that arise from this staunch moral philosophy are many. The Dielo Trouda group of Russian anarchists in exile, who participated in the Russian Revolution, analysed why the anarchist idea did not win out. The product of this analysis was the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, which addressed problems of organisation within the anarchist movement. In the 'Organisational Section' they outlined four principles of organisation they believed would lead to a more successful anarchist movement. They are as follows:

- Federalism, having a free agreement of individuals and organisations who work collectively towards common objectives.

- Tactical Unity, meaning that common tactics should be used within the movement, giving it a common direction leading to a fixed objective.
- Theoretical Unity, that the actions of the movement should be in concord with its principles.
- Collective Responsibility, meaning that every member of the movement is responsible for the political and revolutionary activity of the movement and that the movement is responsible for the political and revolutionary activity of every member.

These four organisational principals, in general, hold true to creating a more successful movement when observed. They are worthy of consideration and hopefully adoption by the present anarchist movement. To make a case for these principles of organisation, a positive historical example of their execution is in order.

Spain, which has experienced the largest anarchist movement in history, provides countless examples of the practice of the organisational principles, which were used without knowing of their formal articulation, herein to be referred to as the platform. This led to success in building their revolutionary movement. To further the argument for the platform, the failures of the Spanish anarchists must be analysed from a platformist perspective. This analysis is not an assertion that the success or failure of anarchism depends on strict adherence to the platform, but rather, that conscious, organised attempts at creating a movement based on anarchist principles can benefit from the platform's organisational philosophy. In the struggle for and realisation of anarchist ideals in Spain, the practice, and failures, of the organisational principles outlined in the platform (federalism, tactical unity, theoretical unity, and collective responsibility) were decisive factors in the successes and failures of their movement, as it will be for anarchists today.

ble, and federalism was used by all anarchist organisations. When these principles were not observed, revolutionary waves of strikes were crushed and delegates joined the government. The success or failure of anarchist movements relies heavily on observance of these principles. What has been learned from their struggle will further the present struggle. Their mistakes and successes, and their passion for a new world based on liberty and communism will be attained. The struggle will never end, and if it is to continue it must be critical of its past and present, so that the future may be better.

It is difficult to say what could have been done instead. One group in Spain called the 'Friends of Durruti' proposed and fought for an alternative that would have preserved anarchism. Wayne Price tells this of the Friends of Durruti:

*„They proposed a national council elected by workers from their mass unions. Their program, 'Towards a Fresh Revolution' states: Establishment of a Revolutionary Junta or National Defence Council... Members of the Revolutionary Junta will be elected by democratic vote in union organisations. This is similar to the program for workers and peasants councils (although not quite as good since it required working through the existing union structures). Of course, they wanted themselves and others of like mind to be elected to the national council, but what they were proposing was a popular democratic structure, not a party-state. Unfortunately, it was too late for the Spanish Revolution.“ [Price, *A New World in Our Hearts*, p.50–51]*

In Spain the anarchists waged a fierce and passionate struggle, unmatched in the history of anarchism. They failed at times and ultimately in 1936 in part due to their commitment or non-commitment to platformist principles. The Spanish anarchists, in their struggle came to the same conclusion as the Dielo Trouda group. They realised that certain organisational principles needed to be followed for their revolution to succeed. Although they never laid out these principles in the manner that the Dielo Trouda group did, they were conscious of their necessity. At the founding congress of the FAI it was said that „each group was free to carry on whatever activities they wished while aiming for unity in action and propaganda through the federation“ [Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: History of the FAI*, p.109].

This passage shows their commitment to theoretical and tactical unity. Delegates were directly recallable, collectively responsi-

The revolution in Spain, spanning the years of 1936–9, was not merely the result of spontaneous acts of the working class. Instead, it was the result of seventy years of agitation and organisation building by anarchists in combination with peasant communal culture and the spontaneous creativity of the working class.

The communal traditions of Spain made many Spanish people receptive to the idea of collectivism. A strong anti-clerical sentiment, due to the church's collaboration with the capitalists and royalty of Spain, made the working class open to anarchism's atheism. Already wary of electoralism, due to corruption and political manipulation, the working class was receptive to the anti-statist and federalist ideas of the anarchists.

Urged by Bakunin, Guiseppie Fanelli went to Spain in 1868 with the objective of gaining Spanish adherence to the First International. The few, small workers groups Fanelli spoke to in Madrid and Barcelona immediately accepted Bakunin's articulation of anarchism and affiliated with the First International, calling themselves the Spanish Federation. By 1870 they had their first congress, with 100 delegates, representing 150 workers' societies in thirty-six localities.

The Spanish Federation had a decentralised structure based on (immediately recallable) delegates at the local trade and industrial levels who represented their sector of the workforce. General federations were established in areas that did not have enough workers in a common industry. In addition, the delegates would select representatives (also immediately recallable) to a federal council. It was the anarchists in the First International who would help create this structure which would pave the way for the Workers' Federation (1881–1889); the Pact of Union and Solidarity (1888–1896); the Federation of Workers' Societies (1900–1905); Workers Solidarity; and finally, the CNT (National Confederation of Labour, 1911-current).

A federal structure was maintained by all the unions (largely anarchists), allowing for bottom-up organisation, ensuring local

autonomy, and fostering self-initiative and self-management. The federal structure also proved to be quite resilient in times of repression. One of the industrial federations may have been broken, but the local organisations, even if forced to maintain a quiet profile, continued to work and struggle. For the goals of anarcho-communism to be met, such a structure will be necessary. By creating the structure now, anarchists can engage in federation-wide projects that have the potential to influence mass movements with anarchist ideas and, simultaneously, build a revolutionary anarchist movement.

In 1911, five days after the formation of the CNT, a general strike was called. Each local federation chose whether or not they would respond to the call. The tactical choice of a general strike was seen a great threat to the capitalists and led to severe repression of the CNT, enough so that it would have to go underground. From 1911 until after WWI, the CNT was not a revolutionary force, but was slowly regained its strength.

In the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution there was a great revolutionary fever which spread across the world. In Spain, an attempt was made to overthrow the land-owning rulers of the state by a large coalition of groups, ranging from Republicans to Socialists to anarchists with the intent of instituting a constitutional government. The CNT and UGT (the socialist General Union of Workers) participated in this plot by supporting a general strike. When the movement was repressed, the CNT did not disappear as it did in 1911, in fact it grew. By 1919 the CNT had 700,000 members. This was partially due to other unions dissolving and joining the CNT. Revolution was on the minds and in the hearts of all of the oppressed working class in Spain.

Shortly after, in the Andalusia region of Spain, there were so many strikes and local insurrections that the government sent in the army to put a stop to the movement there in May of 1919. In southern Spain, martial law was declared, workers centres were closed down, papers suspended, and thousands arrested. But in

The committee was refused arms from other countries. It was a form of social organisation that was too radical for foreign governments to support. The anarchist movement realised that the committees could not win the civil war without more arms. So after the plenum, the three main parts of the anarchist movement in Spain, the Libertarian Youth, CNT, and FAI decided that the CNT should take an invitation that had been extended to join the government.

This was the end of collective responsibility in the Spanish anarchist movement. Although, whenever possible, decisions were sent to the CNT rank-and-file, the nature of government does not allow for direct democracy. There was still an anarchist movement in Spain and a struggle for a libertarian society. Yet the CNT made the fatal mistake of collaborating with the state.

Once arms started to come to Spain from Russia, through the government, the power dynamic shifted. With guns from Stalinist Russia came control from Stalin. Stalinists were weaving and manipulating their way into the government and all other social and economic areas of life in Spain. Finally, in 1937 the Stalinist Negrin was put into the position of Generalitat. In May of 1937 the Communist government attacked the anarchist collectives and they were eventually wiped out all across Spain. The collectives were replaced with a top-down, dictatorial style Soviet 'collective'.

After the May Days the CNT and FAI pulled out of the government and the FAI was deemed an illegal organisation. The revolution was lost, as was the civil war. By 1939 the fascists had taken all of Spain. Those who couldn't escape into exile were sent to concentration camps and killed. Not until the 1970s, when the fascist dictator Franco died, could anarchism be publicly spoken of in Spain.

With collective responsibility lost, the revolution in Spain appeared to be hopeless. The only options that were considered were either collaboration with the parties and State or an anarchist dictatorship. Neither option was in line with the principles of anarchism, and the results of either would have been terrible.

triumph. The horns of cars speeding through the streets of Barcelona, filled with workers with guns in hand, sounded a marvellous symphony: 'FAI, FAI, CNT, CNT'. The letters of the CNT and FAI were inscribed on all the walls, every building, on all doors and entrances of houses and cars, on everything. The red and black banner waving in the wind was a fantastic triumph, a marvellous picture that we contemplated with enchanted soul, with shining eyes, asking ourselves if we were awake." [Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: History of the FAI*, p.186]

A large amount of social and economic power lay in the hands of the CNT. Through the collectivised enterprises the CNT had massive economic power. „Frank Mintz estimates 1,265 to 1,865 collectives, „embracing 610,000 to 800,000 workers. With their families, they involve a population of 3,200,000..." (Dolgoff, *The Anarchist Collectives*, p.71). Through this economic power the CNT had a deciding role in Spain.

Even though anarchist principles were not in practice throughout all of Spain many people were still involved in the fight against the fascists. Initially, the collaboration took on the form of the 'Anti-Fascist Militias Committee'. This committee was composed of fifteen seats, which were allotted to different unions and parties. The CNT decided to join this after the July 20th plenum where delegates voted to do so. This decision was brought back to the local and district federations where, on July 21st, it was adopted. The delegates who represented the movement in this crucial time were held directly accountable by the entire membership of the CNT and joining the 'Anti-Fascist Militias Committee' was done so in accordance with collective responsibility. Yet the very nature of the committee and the desire of the government in the committee led to the destruction of collective responsibility.

northern Spain this attempt at repression only increased the membership of the CNT. In Catalonia on January 16th, 1919, all constitutional guarantees were suspended, but this did not stop the revolutionary movement though.

From February 6th through March 16th there was a general strike in Barcelona which paralysed 70% of the factories in the area. The strike ended with wage increases, the eight-hour day, recognition of the unions, back wages, and the reinstatement of all fired workers. This strike, although not achieving the demand of the release of all political prisoners, should be considered a success, albeit a reformist one.

Why didn't this strike and all of the other revolutionary activity in Spain during this period turn into a full-blown revolution? There are many answers to this, a few being language differences, difficulties in co-ordination, communication, and finally suppression. The main reason though, was the lack of tactical unity. When one area of Spain was creating an insurrection why didn't other areas of Spain join them? The Barcelona general strike could have turned into a national general strike if other areas joined in either spontaneously or through co-ordination by the CNT.

The CNT used the general strike in combination with insurrections in various regions of the country and nearly sparked a revolution in 1919. However, a lack of tactical unity prevented a general strike on the federal level, thus limiting the possibility of a nationwide revolution.

It takes many organisational principles for a revolution to succeed and theoretical unity is one of them. The actions of a movement must be in accord with its principles and its activities must be in adherence to a common theory, thus leading to a common goal. At the congress of 1919, the CNT declared its theoretical belief in libertarian communism. The tactical choice of the general strike was now reinforced by a theoretical belief in usurpation of the means of production as necessary for the revolution. CNT propaganda would now proudly proclaim the organisation's goals.

Due to severe repression, most acutely felt during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship of 1923–29, the CNT ceased having federal congresses in 1919. Although the CNT appeared inactive on the ground, important theoretical work continued. In 1927, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) formed with the objective of keeping the CNT as a revolutionary anarchist organisation.

Within the CNT there were two groups of anarchists, the moderates and the radicals, who made up most of the FAI. Eventually the moderates, who tried to play down violence and revolution, were pushed out of the union in favour of the radicals who were anarchist purists and saw an immediate revolution approaching. The FAI radicals helped keep the CNT, theoretically and actively, a revolutionary anarchist organisation. Their success in pushing the moderate elements out of the FAI allowed for greater theoretical unity, which was soon to prove its relevance in the 1936 revolution.

Factories and farms were expropriated from the capitalists and collectivised. In fact, the anarchist collectives in Spain consisted of three-quarters of the land in the 'Republican' areas, those not occupied by Franco. The collectives didn't come into existence through force; they came into being due to the constructive, creative efforts of the Spanish working classes, guided by the principle of libertarian communism. The CNT structure served as a means of co-ordinating production and consumption, but its role would have been meaningless had the rank and file not adhered to anarcho-communist principles. It was theoretical unity that paved the way for the creation of a new society built on the principles of libertarian communism. Without theoretical unity the anarchist movement will fail in winning people to anarchist ideas.

For an anarchist movement to act according to its principles before, during, and after a revolution, it must do so consciously. In the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, the successes and failures of the anarchists were partially dependent on collective responsibility, meaning the entire movement is responsible for the political

and revolutionary activity of every member and each member is responsible for the revolutionary and political activity of the movement as a whole.

After the CNT's 1933 anti-electoral campaign a right-wing fascist government was elected into power due to leftist working class absence at the polls. When elections were called for in 1936, a leftist government was voted into power. The CNT did not call for abstention this time, leading directly to the leftist victory. Durruti, a famous Spanish anarchist militant, explained this complex situation:

„The left bloc declares that if the right wins, they will proceed to launch the revolution; the right replies that if the left wins, they will start a civil war. We therefore find ourselves on the eve of revolution or civil war. We must explain this clearly to the workers and make them understand that the vote will not solve anything. The worker who casts a vote and then stays home is a counter revolutionary. And the same is true for the worker who does not vote. This question can only be resolved in the street with arms in hand.“ [Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: History of the FAI*, p.154]

In February 1936, the Spanish revolution started, with massive peasant occupation of the land. When the fascists attempted a military takeover on July 19th, the civil war started. The fascists were defeated in many parts of the country and a full scale social revolution broke out with factory occupations and the like. The collectivisation of factories and farms was massive in scale and soon whole industries became socialised.

The social revolution and civil war had begun. The working class was carrying out a social and economic revolution while simultaneously fighting a civil war against the fascists. From the beginning, the anarchists played a major role in the events. Federica Montseny spoke of the scene on July 19th, in Barcelona:

„The day came to an end gloriously in the glow of fires, in the revolutionary intoxication of a day of popular