

1 May 1937: Controllers and Controlled

Lucía Sánchez Saornil

April 1937

We could write the history of our movement from July to the present on the basis of these two vogueish Gallicisms.

Although we can feel it slipping from our grasp with every minute we cannot give up on the revolution. The people won it in the bloody days of July, and all the confusing slogans designed to distract the attention of the workers will not make them forget it, just as we cannot, as the women's sector of the struggle, forget the fundamental objectives of the war. Because we all know that giving up on the revolution means accepting the unlimited continuation of the principle of enslavement as the basis of society. As workers and as women, we are convinced that only the revolution can bring us the moral and economic liberation that has been longed for over so many centuries.

It is precisely because of this conviction that we sound the alarm at the turn that events are taking. It wouldn't have occurred to anyone in July to doubt that the workers had begun their revolution. Property, production, the whole life of the country was in their hands. The government, which during the revolt had lost its real organs of expression and power – the armed forces – was at the mercy of the workers and was only maintained by and through them. With the state apparatus demolished, the government survived by the grace of the people that used it to create a temporary nexus of convergence and unity of the popular sectors assaulted by fascism. The government stopped being the representation of a non-existent state whose prerogatives of organising national life had passed entirely into the hands of the workers. In a nutshell, the people controlled in one day all the actions of the government, displacing it from power and leaving it in place as a merely nominal skeletal representation.

This was the first revolutionary error. By maintaining the government, its old bourgeois structure was respected and around it the whole weight of the bureaucratic apparatus that it had sustained up to that point. The workers did not realise that they had left the most vicious enemy of the revolution standing.

The revolutionary work began. The committees, in which the people expressed and perfected their administrative organisations, grew and multiplied. It was not fast work, but slow and hard. It was necessary to step forwards and then step back, to stitch and to undo stitches, before finding the exact expression of popular aspirations. And it was against this process that the impatient, pressured by bureaucrats who saw the ebbing of their privileges and administrative hegemony, began a low-intensity war against the Popular Committees.

Immediately the revolution began to stagnate. The need to win the war was manipulated by certain sectors against the social movement, calling for maximum power to the government. Day by day the prerogatives of the committees passed to the old and failed bureaucracies. The organisation of housing, transport and food supply were snatched from the hands of the Popular Committees on the pretext of their not contributing effective solutions and thus, from being controlled, the government gradually became the controller. To the extent that it was able to wrest power from the workers, it was converted from a mere organ of anti-fascist representation into an organ of power. The creation of economic privileges facilitated the rapid construction of an armed force at its service, and with the resurrection of the new state the strangulation of the revolution began.

Nevertheless, all is not lost if the unions know how to act decisively; if they do not allow the plunder to be finalised and they defend their right to the management of the economy, we might yet save ourselves.

And to those who say that the war comes before everything, we will respond: For the war everything, except freedom. Long live the revolution!

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