

Remember: The Spanish Revolution (1936–7)

A New World In Their Hearts

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REMEMBER THE REVOLUTION

The 19th of July marked the 60th Anniversary of the Spanish Revolution. For a brief time, capitalism and the State was replaced by solidarity, mutual aid, and respect for others. Workers and peasants, who were deeply influenced by anarchist ideas, ran society collectively and gained control over their lives, industry and land. A central part of the revolution was the struggle against a fascist attempt to take over Spain.

We must remember both the magnificent triumphs and tragedies of the Spanish revolution and attempt to learn from our comrades mistakes.

WORKERS AND PEASANTS ORGANISE

Anarchist- Syndicalist ideas had deep roots among Spanish peasants and workers. In 1911, a massive revolutionary trade union federation, the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) was formed. It had two aims: first, to fight the bosses with mass action in the daily struggle. Second, to make an Anarchist revolution by organising the workers and the poor to seize back the land and factories and mines.

The CNT led many militant and successful struggles against the bosses and the government. By 1936 it was the biggest union in Spain, with nearly 2 million members. But the CNT was always democratic. Despite its giant size, the CNT never had more than one paid official.

The Anarchists did not restrict themselves to the workplace. They also organised an Anarchist political group to work within the unions (the Anarchist Federation of Iberia/ FAI), rent boycotts in poor areas, youth and women. The CNT itself included working peasants, farmworkers and the unemployed. It even organised workers schools!

FASCIST COUP ATTEMPT

In July 1936, fascists led by General Franco, and backed by the rich and the Church, tried to seize power in Spain. Fascists believe in an extreme right- wing dictatorship, and are used by the bosses to violently suppress the masses' struggle for a better life.

The elected government (the Popular Front coalition of left- wing parties) was unable and unwilling to deal with the fascists. It even tried to strike a deal with the fascists by appointing a right- winger as Prime Minister. Why? Because they would rather compromise with the right wing and protect their wealth and power than arm the workers and the poor for self- defence.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

Fortunately, the workers and the peasants did not wait around for the government to act. The CNT declared a general strike and organised armed resistance to the attempted take over. Other unions and left wing groups followed the CNT's lead.

In this way the people in arms were able to stop the fascists in two- thirds of Spain. It soon became apparent to these workers and peasants that this was not just a war against fascists, but the beginning of a revolution! Anarchist influence was everywhere- workers militias were set

up independently from the State, workers seized control of their workplaces and peasants seized the land.

There are many triumphs of the revolution. In this article we are only able to consider a few of the Spanish workers and peasants victories. These included the general take over of the land and factories. Women also made many important gains ... (see separate article on “Women in the Spanish Revolution”).

TAKING BACK THE LAND

Small peasants and farm workers faced extremely harsh conditions in Spain. Starvation and repression was a part of their daily lives. Therefore it was no surprise that anarchism was particularly strong in the countryside.

During the revolution, as many as 7 million peasants and farmworkers set up voluntary collectives in the anti- fascist region. After the majority of landowners fled, a village assembly was held. If a decision to collectivise was taken, all the land, tools and animals were pooled together for the use of the entire collective. Teams were formed to look after the various areas of work and each team elected accountable delegates to a village assembly. A committee was elected to coordinate the overall running of the collective and each collective had regular general meetings in which all members participated.

Individuals who did not want to join the collectives were NOT forced to. They were given enough land to farm on, but were forbidden to hire labourers to work this land. Most “individualists” eventually joined the collectives when they saw how successful the collectives were.

SEIZING THE FACTORIES

Anarchism inspired massive transformations in industry. Workers seized control over their workplaces and directly controlled production by themselves and for the benefit of the Spanish workers and peasants.

TRAM WORKERS

The tram system provided a shining example of just how much better we can do things under direct workers control. On July 24th the tram crews got together, decided to run the whole system themselves. Within 5 days 700 trams were in service, instead of the usual 600.

Wages were equalised and working conditions improved. Free medical care was created.

Everyone benefited from the trams being under workers control. Fares were reduced and an extra 50 million passengers were transported. Yet more money was made and used to improve transport services and produce weapons. With the capitalist profit motive gone, safety became much more important and the number of accidents were reduced.

WORKERS' ARMY

In the early stages of the revolution, the armed forces of the state had effectively collapsed. In their place, the trade unions and left-wing organisations set about organising the armed workers and peasants into militias. Overall, there were 150,000 volunteers willing to fight where they were needed. The vast majority were members of the CNT. All officers were elected by the rank-and-file and had no special privileges.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The revolution showed that workers, peasants and the poor can create a new world without bosses or a government. It showed that anarchists ideas and methods (such as building revolutionary unions) can work. And it showed that imperialism is the enemy of all workers: the fascists used the colonial army from North Africa to launch their attack..

THE REVOLUTION DEFEATED

Yet despite all this, the revolution was defeated. In 1939, the fascists had won the civil war and crushed the working-class and peasants with a brutal dictatorship.

Why did this happen? The revolution was defeated partly because of the strength of the fascists. They were backed by the rich, by fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

The CNT also made mistakes. It aimed for maximum anti-fascist unity and joined the Popular Front alliance which included political parties from government and pro-capitalist forces. This required the CNT to make many compromises in its revolutionary programme.

It also gave the Popular Front government an opportunity to undermine and destroy the revolution, the collectives, and the workers militias. The Communist Party played a leading role in this attack. The Communists organised amongst small employers and conservatives and was only interested in expanding Russia's power.

NO COMPROMISE

Instead of joining the Populist Front, the CNT should have stuck to its original programme: Revolution against the bosses, the State and their fascist friends. Alliances only with worker and peasant structures. Defence by a democratic workers/peasant army. And the immediate decolonisation of all Spanish colonies.

This article was based on:

1. E. Conlon, "Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action." struggle.ws
2. N/A, "The Spanish Revolution: Anarchism in Action."
3. C McLoughlin, "The Spanish Revolution: A New World in Their Hearts. " Workers Solidarity (Ireland) Spring 1996.

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