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Fictitious splits over the Spanish Revolution

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Toward a more productive engagement between Marxists and anarchists

Ideological labels are not the prism through which we should judge historical actors or events. Ultimately, we may continue to disagree as to who is being consistent or inconsistent in their understanding of either Marxism or anarchism. What is more important is that we recognize where we actually differ, and why. Debate and political conflict should be based on concrete questions of strategy and a rational examination of practical activity. Why foster sectarian division between revolutionaries on the basis of fictitious differences?

David Glanz's talk, Spain 1936: when anarchism failed, is available on Solidarity's podcast.

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well thought out analysis, a shared strategy, and a commitment to linking together and spurring on struggles of the working class so that our ideas become hegemonic, then anarchists want to become the vanguard! Similarly, if by 'Party' we mean an organisation of like-minded militants working towards this end, anarchists have also always embraced the party-form. Indeed, anarchists often used the specific terms 'vanguard' and 'party' in the early stages of the movement. These terms fell out of favour due to their association with vanguards and parties which were *substitutionist*, and so sought to take over and direct the revolutionary movement from above, and which also intended to become the *sole* party (wither in the sense of having unique political legitimacy, or in a one party state).

To give him his due, Glanz must once again be credited for avoiding the laziest kind of Leninist critique by recognising that anarchists do not reject 'parties', or even 'vanguards', *per se*. Indeed, accepting that anarchists are not opposed to political organisation on an ideological basis, Glanz describes the FAI as a kind of 'anarchist party'. Here, however, he misses that the FAI was quite different to the kind of specific anarchist political organisation which had been advocated by the likes of Bakunin and Malatesta, and which its proponents argue for today.

Unlike the Alliance of Socialist Democracy advocated by Bakunin, or, more recently, the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU), The FAI was not an ideologically coherent or formally structured organisation. The FAI did not have clearly defined membership or a shared political programme. Instead, it was a loose federation of affinity groups, open to all activists who identified as 'anarchist'. This ephemeral structure, established in a period requiring a degree of clandestine organisation, had been maintained even after the formation of the Second Republic, and proved inadequate to the task. New organisations were ultimately necessary to meet the moment, though these too ultimately proved too little too late.

– likewise fell by the wayside, and the fruitless attempts to win over the liberal democracies continued.

How does Glanz deal with the existence of the Friends of Durruti and their sympathisers? The same way as any Leninist. Glanz simply states that the Friends of Durruti represented a Leninist tendency, or deviation, within the anarchist movement. He argues that, having been confronted by ‘the failure of anarchism’, these militants necessarily found themselves endorsing Leninist conclusions.

To Glanz, there is no other alternative. Anarchists and Leninists are clearly in opposition to one another! If the programme of the Friends of Durruti, the Barcelona FAI, the FIJL, and Mujeres Libres did represent a return to the traditional anarchist communist position, it would mean that Leninism and anarchism have a virtually identical theory of social revolution! Were this the case, it would raise all sorts of uncomfortable questions regarding the caricature of anarchism that Marxists have repeated for over a century. Given that anarchists maintain a critique of Leninism, despite advocating such a programme, it also raises the question as to where we *actually* differ in our analysis, and why anarchists reject the Bolshevik model...

The FAI and Revolutionary Parties

Glanz suggests the role of the Party as another possible distinction, and as another area where anarchism supposedly ‘fails’. But as we shall see, if we are to take the definition of Party offered by Glanz seriously, we find that this is just as wrongheaded.

As with the term ‘State’, many Marxists define ‘the Party’ (or ‘Vanguard’) in two ways, with one definition referring to an abstract function (which any serious revolutionary should endorse) and the other being a specific form of organisation and decision making. If by ‘Vanguard’ we simply mean a group which has a

David Glanz, a member of the Trotskyist organisation Solidarity, recently gave a talk on the Spanish Revolution, offering it as evidence of the ‘failure of anarchism’. The talk is reasonably representative of the standard Leninist position, and therefore follows the same tendency to misrepresent both the events in Spain and the content of anarchist theory. In misrepresenting anarchism, Glanz is unable to recognise that the real failure of the anarchist movement in Spain was in *breaking* with anarchist ideas, rather than implementing them. Furthermore, an honest accounting of the facts shows that the anarchist idea of revolution, as theorised by the original and historically dominant ‘mass’ (or ‘social’) tendency, is entirely in line with the revolutionary strategy that Glanz describes as the Leninist alternative.

Organisation and the Defence Committees

Glanz must first be given credit for going out of his way to convey the impressive level of organisation achieved by the Spanish anarchists. He explicitly wishes to avoid presenting a caricature of anarchists as hostile to participation in mass organisations of the working class (or, even more ridiculously, organisation altogether). In fact, Glanz actually *overstates* the membership of the CNT (he claims a million members, but in 1936 the figure was closer to 700,000) as well as the coherence of the main anarchist political organisation, the FAI (which had no formal membership, shared programme, or agreed strategy).

The problem with Glanz’s presentation is that he demonstrates a serious lack of knowledge as to what the anarchist theory of revolution actually is and how this relates to the events in Spain. This prevents him from recognising CNT-FAI collaboration with the Republican government as a *break* with anarchist theory — one which consistent anarchists opposed. Glanz thereby avoids confronting

the awkward fact that the consistent anarchists advocated the *exact* position that he endorses.

Where Glanz downplays the organisation of anarchists is in his description of the outbreak of revolution in July 1936. The language used implies an upheaval based entirely on spontaneity and dynamism. Certainly, the masses of Spain demonstrated enormous initiative and creativity in those early days, but Glanz fails to convey the extraordinary level of organisational capacity which had been deliberately built up by the Spanish anarchists in preparation for a revolutionary uprising. For years, the CNT and FAI had utilised worker inquiry to gauge the level of shop floor organisation, and the readiness of members to expropriate and self-manage the economy. In support of the union structures, the anarchist movement also established a huge network of newspapers, cultural institutions, and educational facilities.

More important, however, is the fact that Glanz totally neglects the crucial role played by the CNTs defence committees. The defence committees were responsible for gathering intelligence and statistics, the stashing and provision of weapons, and strategically mobilising local comrades in the event of a revolutionary uprising. These were clandestine committees of workers, answerable to the structures of the CNT, and with a rotating membership. Meticulous planning went into their considerations as to how the force of the State could be smashed and new organs of revolutionary power defended in a coordinated manner.

In response to the military coup, the defence committees leapt into action and rapidly expanded. In many neighbourhoods they served as the nucleus for new revolutionary councils (*comités de barrio*), militias, patrol committees, supply committees, and so on. They would continue to play an important role in the revolution, particularly during the May Days of 1937, where plans to overthrow the regional government of Catalonia (*generalitat*) were drawn up, and came incredibly close to implementation.

streets to oppose the counter-revolution, both in the form of Stalinism and Popular Frontism.

Who were the anti-collaborationists? Anarchist militia members on the front-line, opposed to the government policy of destroying the militia system in favour of a traditional army, and in disbelief at news of attempts to disarm workers at home, began to argue that the fight against fascism required a return to the anarchist theory of revolution. Similarly, local CNT unions and rural collectives were angered by the government's gradual encroachment over production and distribution, and the trading of limited resources for arms which Soviet agents funnelled overwhelmingly to the Communist Party.

Out of these conditions came a new anarchist political organisation: the Friends of Durruti Group (named after the famous and uncompromising militia leader, Buenaventura Durruti). Boasting thousands of members, its specific anarchist programme called for an end to government collaboration by anarchists, the forceful overthrow of the State, the full socialisation of production, for armed force to be exercised by a federated system of defence committees, and for all power to rest in the *barrio* committees and committees of workers' self-management. Coordination would be assured via the form of the revolutionary *junta* – meaning, council, or soviet.

Militants in the Barcelona section of the FAI had come to the same conclusions regarding the 'missed opportunities' of July 1936. The same was true of the FIJL (Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth) and the anarchist-feminist *Mujeres Libres* ('Free Women of Spain'). All called for a renewal of the revolution against the State and property ownership, enforced by the workers and peasants in arms, and coordinated via organisations under their own control. Only deference to the structures of the CNT, and some behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by influential CNT leaders prevented a renewal of the revolution. Appeals to proletarian internationalism – the extension of the revolution into colonial Morocco and France

endorsing the concept. The reason for this is simple. As Malatesta famously noted in 1919:

[Perhaps] our Bolshevized friends intend with the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat” merely the revolutionary act of the workers in taking possession of the land and of the instruments of labor and trying to constitute a society for organizing a mode of life in which there would be no place for a class that exploited and oppressed the producers. Understood so the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the effective power of all the workers intent on breaking down capitalist society, and it would become anarchy immediately upon the cessation of reactionary resistance [...]. And then our dissent would have to do only with words.

Anti-collaborationism: A ‘Leninist’ Tendency in Anarchism?

On May 3, 1937, in what amounted to the beginnings of a coup led by the Stalinist controlled security forces, the central telephone exchange in Barcelona was seized, and the CNT workers inside attacked. Some accounts of the May Days frame the events simply as an armed skirmish, with Stalinists on one side and the CNT-POUM on the other. In reality, the May Days aroused the anti-collaborationist forces which had been building in the preceding months, opening a window of opportunity in which the traditional anarchist programme was briefly revived, and could have been implemented.

In other words, the fighting in May 1937 was not just between anarchists and stalinists, but between libertarian revolutionaries (what Danny Evans has labelled ‘the anti-state’) and the forces of collaboration. Members of the CNT-FAI and POUM took to the

Why does Glanz not mention the defence committees? Is he even aware that they existed? Undoubtedly the existence and role of the defence committees demonstrates that the Spanish anarchists – following anarchist theory – had planned for the forceful overthrow of the capitalist State as well as the defence of a new revolutionary order. In fact, it is arguable that few revolutionary organisations have been so prepared for the logistics of street combat within an urban environment. This is rather inconvenient for Marxists who insist on pretending that anarchists (particularly the anarchists in Spain) had no ‘plan’ or ‘theory’ as to what should be done in a revolutionary situation.

Dual Power and the Idea of ‘the State’

Glanz appropriately describes the situation in anti-fascist Spain as one of ‘dual power’. Defence, neighbourhood, and patrol committees, in conjunction with the militias and the revolutionary self-management of production, were the basis for workers’ and peasants’ power (or, in Glanz’s terms, the power of the ‘direct producers’). The remnants of the Republican government and capitalist production, on the other hand, continued to serve as a second form of power which needed to be forcefully confronted.

Specifically, Glanz argues that these revolutionary forms were the basis for a new *State* power; a force capable of smashing the old capitalist State, and replacing it with what he calls a ‘Workers’ State’. The Workers’ State advocated by Leninist groups like Solidarity is defined in opposition to all former manifestations of ‘the State’. They argue that, whereas previous States have been based on a ‘minority ruling class repressing the majority of direct producers’, with the armed coercion of the ‘army, police, and prisons serving as their core’, the Workers’ State would be something new: revolutionary control by the direct producers, based on the democratic

appointment of delegates, held to the mandates of the workers who elect them.

The problem for Glanz, and all other Marxist opponents of anarchism, is that anarchist communists *agree* with the need for this kind of ‘Workers’ State’, and always have. Anarchists simply think it is unhelpful (and in fact, makes no sense whatsoever) to call this ‘a State’.

Glanz follows the same logic as all Marxists who want to argue that a system of workers’ councils, or Soviets, can be reasonably defined as a State. The specific structural forms of organisation and decision making are dismissed as irrelevant – the essence of the State is instead reduced to the abstract function of an ‘armed body of people’ using ‘coercion’. It follows that if the workers are armed and forcefully defending a revolutionary transformation of society they are carrying out the central function of ‘the State’. The crux of the Marxist argument is that, given Marxists support the use of force to carry out a revolution, they – and, indeed, all revolutionary socialists – must necessarily be in favour of some kind of ‘State’.

Because anarchists reject the creation of any new State – by which anarchists mean something entirely different – Marxists argue that anarchists also reject their unique and bizarre idea of the ‘Workers’ State’; meaning, workers’ power, the use of force, etc. This is the source of Marx’s absurd, but often repeated, claim that anarchists would have workers ‘lay down their arms’ in the event of a revolution!

The truth is quite different. Since its emergence as a mass movement of the proletariat, the overwhelmingly dominant mainstream of anarchism has argued that armed workers should forcefully defend a revolutionary transformation of society.

Anarchists disagree that the essence of the State can be reduced to ‘being armed’ or ‘using force’. Rather, the State is a specific form of social organisation – a centralised apparatus of government with the historic function of reproducing class society (which includes reproducing itself). The modern State comprises the execu-

the kind of politics that Trotskyists advocate. Glanz also obviously rejects the Stalinists of the Communist Party, whom he accurately portrays as counter-revolutionary, aligned with the forces of capitalist reaction, and ruthless in their exercise of power against the revolutionary left.

This leaves the POUM and the miniscule Bolshevik-Leninists. The POUM (which, though sometimes described as Trotskyist, rejected and expelled Trotskyists) suffered the same kind of internal divisions over collaborationism as the anarchist organisations. Criticism of the executive committee was pervasive among the rank and file, but the only truly organised force on the left of the party was a small cell of a dozen members, led by Josep Rebull. For Glanz, the failures of these organisations apparently says nothing about Marxism. On the other hand, the existence of the collaborationist wing of the CNT-FAI apparently forever discredits the anarchism with which they decisively broke!

Glanz likely favours the analysis of the only fully Trotskyist organisation in Spain, the Bolshevik-Leninists. But with so few members they could hardly influence events. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the programme they published in July of 1937. Point one calls for the defeat of fascism via the “only effective weapon... the proletarian revolution”, defined as “the expropriation of the exploiters and... the total destruction of the old state apparatus.’ This is to be replaced by “the dictatorship of the proletariat”, meaning “genuine working class democracy”. Point four elaborates on the specifics, calling for democratic councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers composed of recallable delegates – “Councils of this sort”, they note, “were formed during the July days.” By this, the Bolshevik-Leninists can only be referring to the revolutionary committees of which the anarchists were the driving force and wholly in favour of. As for the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, it had certainly taken on extremely negative connotations for anarchists by 1937, but as late as 1921 we can find CNT plenum resolutions

to justify) their abandonment of anarchism. But Oliver's notion that revolution would constitute authoritarian rule, requiring that anarchists cooperate with bourgeois parties inside of capitalist institutions, became another attractive narrative for those who wanted to excuse the CNTs deviation from anarchist theory. Though the vast majority still believed anarchist principles had been thrown out the window, such arguments helped to confuse and disorient the movement.

Conveniently for opponents of anarchism, Oliver's argument made *real* the *false* picture of anarchism which has been unjustly hurled at it since the First International: an anarchism which opposes revolutionary power as 'authoritarian', leaving itself incapable of overthrowing capitalism. In some ways, this mirrors what Glanz must certainly recognize as a tragic irony of Stalinism: that the worst caricature of Marx's ideas that his enemies could have ever dreamed of was constructed in his name.

For Glanz to take Oliver at his word, without any consideration of anarchist communism's major theorists, political organisations, or the views of the anti-collaborationists within Spain, is akin to taking Stalin at his word that his actions represent an authentic application of Marxist practice. It would be dishonest for an anarchist to base an assessment of either Marx or Lenin's views (let alone the actions of rank and file Bolsheviks) solely on Stalin's regime of terror, or his 'theory' of 'Marxist-Leninism'. It is likewise dishonest for Marxists to cite the excuses of collaborationist anarchists as sufficient for understanding anarchist theory or the actions of all Spanish anarchists.

Tellingly, Glanz appears to have no problem distinguishing between his own Marxism and the actions of Spain's self-professed Marxists. Francisco Largo Caballero (who was sometimes labelled 'the Spanish Lenin') could quote *State and Revolution* to the letter, and upon taking power continued to rant to advisors about the need to smash the old State machinery. Yet neither he or the left-wing of the Socialist Party were a revolutionary force embodying

tive, the legislature, the judiciary, the centralised bureaucracy, the police, the army, the prison system, and so on. Whether dictatorial, or composed of elected representatives, the State always takes the organisational form of an alienated array of institutions situated *above* the working class, and outside of its direct control.

When workers are armed and imposing new forms of revolutionary organisation from below, with representatives replaced by mandated delegates, and centralism replaced by federalist coordination, they are not creating 'a State of a new kind', but, in fact, *abolishing the State*.

Collaborationism: A Break with Anarchism

Clearly, this is not what happened in Spain. Dual power was not resolved by workers smashing the State and carrying out a full communisation of production and distribution. The revolutionary forms of proletarian power were crushed by the Republican government, with, as Glanz notes, the May Days of 1937 serving as the most crucial turning point.

Where Glanz is badly mistaken is in his conflation of the collaborationist position of the CNT-FAI leadership with anarchism – both in the sense of anarchism as a theoretical tradition, and those anarchists who continued to advocate social revolution. Indeed, it is strange that Glanz insists on conflating these things given he himself references the mass rank and file opposition to collaboration.

A few central questions must be considered here. How did government collaboration come about? How was it justified? And what alternative was posed by the anti-collaborationist rank and file?

Hastily assembled conferences of the CNTs' regional and national delegates ultimately made the decision to help rebuild the Republic. These assemblies approved of notable CNT and

FAI figures' decision to accept ministerial portfolios offered by the fledgling Catalan government (and later the central government in Madrid.) The convention of regional delegates also decided to make the CNTs' national committee a permanent body for the duration of the war. The processes followed in making these decisions marked a serious breach with the CNTs espoused principles and usual practices, and lacked the proper consultation and participation of the rank and file which had been routine up to that point (surviving general strikes, insurrections, and other periods requiring complex coordination and quick, decisive decision making).

Participation in government was announced as a *fait accompli* to a mixed reaction. Some CNT members (not all of whom were anarchists, as the CNT was a federation of unions above all else) were enthusiastic. Others were ambivalent, or chose to focus on self-management and the war effort. Many committed anarchists, however, were shocked and horrified by this sudden reversal of principles. But the fear of international isolation and further discord within the CNT was rampant, and had a profound impact on the membership. Furthermore, CNT members who were also influential FAIstas were deliberately selected as ministers to implicate the 'guardian of anarchist purism' in collaboration; compromising the FAI as a possible alternative pole of attraction for disaffected militants. As a result, and with many of the most radical workers busy on the frontlines, the anti-collaborationists failed to mount any serious challenge to the abandonment of anarchism by their own organisations.

Those who argued in favour of collaboration generally did so with two justifications. Firstly, they believed that the anarchist movement, by itself, was not strong enough to follow through on its theory by overthrowing and suppressing the ruling class. The Marxist-left of the Socialist Party were not willing to go down the revolutionary path and the Communist Party was a counter-revolutionary instrument of Stalin's foreign policy. Outside of

Catalonia, the heterodox Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) was a skeleton organisation, and the conservative ruling faction objected to social revolution as an immediate demand. Meanwhile, the Trotskyist 'Bolshevik-Leninists' had, at most, around 30 members. The list of allies seemed desperately short.

Secondly, fascism was seen as a threat so unique that international isolation could not be risked. The collaborationists wanted arms from both Stalin and the liberal democracies and to avoid a global alliance opposed to Revolutionary Spain. These arguments were made by CNT leaders such as Diego Abad de Santillán, with full acknowledgement that the actual anarchist theory of revolution and the principles of libertarian organisation had been discarded.

Leninists like Glanz, however, always limit their analysis to those who attempted to justify their break with anarchism *via the language of anarchist theory*. The favoured case here is always Juan García Oliver. Oliver had, at one point, been renowned for his uncompromising militancy, and initially argued that the anti-fascist uprising was the time to "go for everything". In fact, he was one of the few leading figures to demand that the State be overthrown and workers' power established in Spain. Ultimately, finding himself in a minority among the national delegates, he accepted collaboration and even a ministerial post. Before long – and in keeping with anarchist theory – he was transformed by his position in the State, becoming the most rabid defender of collaborationism, and a bitter opponent of the revolutionary rank and file. Suddenly, Oliver's argument changed: In July of 1936 the choice had apparently not been between collaboration or workers' power, but between an anti-fascist democracy and an "anarchist dictatorship"! Following this absurd logic, Oliver could present his ridiculous new position that entering the Republican State was actually the more consistently libertarian approach!

Abad de Santillán and Federica Montseny (another anarchist luminary turned minister) continued to acknowledge (but attempted