

A Conference in Spain

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The following article appeared in the December 1992 issue of SAC-Kontakt, journal of the Swedish Workers Central-organization, the syndicalist federation of Sweden. It was translated for LLR by Christina Dagberger of the SAC. The article is significant because it suggests a thaw in the relations between the SAC and the IWA (syndicalist international federation).

Relations with the IWA and CNT

The Spanish Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) invited anarchist and syndicalist worker-organizations from the entire world to a conference in Barcelona in August 1992. When the invitation arrived at the Internationella Kommitteen (IK – International Committee) it was a clear sign that our continuous work over the past years was finally beginning to pay off.

The background – which some readers are certainly familiar with – consists of a conflict and a series of misunderstandings which since the 1950's have characterized the relations between Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (SAC – the Swedish Workers Central-organization) and the International Workers Association (IWA), as well as the split of the CNT after the Franco dictatorship's fall, which caused similar fissures in larger portions of the anti-authoritarian European workers movement.

The following is a short description of these unfortunate events as well as a description of the IK's effort to reach a friendly and constructive relationship with the IWA and the CNT. Following that is a detailed report from the conference as well as my impressions of the CNT and the IWA.

The Conflict between the IWA and the SAC

The conflict with the IWA (AIT in Spanish) has two sides. Post World War II Europe was characterized by the cold war and the well- documented attempts of the CIA to influence West European workers organizations into an anti-revolutionary and anti-communist direction. In 1952, SAC adopted a Declaration of Principles which, compared to its predecessor, was clearly more reformist. It was decided the same year by referenda to build a state supported unemployment fund, which became reality in 1954.

The IWA, which at that time organized very few working unions (in practice only the SAC and the French CNT), and therefore able to hold a more “orthodox” anarcho-syndicalist line, disapproved of such “co-operation” with the state and supported opposition to this reorientation, which not the least came from SAC's older revolutionaries. The IWA, which worried about reformist tendencies, decided to give their secretariat the responsibility of observing different sections' tactical and principal stances.

In Sweden, this was perceived as the beginnings of a centralized, opinion watchdog – something completely alien to an anti-authoritarian and federal movement. In 1956, the SAC withdrew from the IWA by not paying its membership dues.

The Spanish Split

The Spanish CNT, which during the Franco dictatorship was forced to go underground and into exile, returned upon the fascist collapse as the revolutionary Anarcho-Syndicalist mass-movement it had once been during the 1930's. In the summer of 1977, when the CNT held its first

mass meeting since the civil war, 300,000 enthusiastic supporters were present in Barcelona. Its revolutionary power, however, was soon subdued by internal struggles caused by intricate patterns of personal and political conflicts. These conflicts escalated until the 1979 congress, where a minority (according to the CNT, but a majority according to those who became the CGT) of more reform-minded comrades left.

The situation became worse as both groups claimed the name “CNT” as well as the resources confiscated by the Franco dictatorship [ie. the funds and union buildings included in the “Patrimony” – LLR]. The ideological and material legacy conflict was not settled until 1989, when a Spanish court rejected the splinter group’s claims. They then changed their name to Confederation General del Trabajo (CGT).

The Spanish conflict had immediate effects upon the global movement. The IWA supported the CNT and anarcho-syndicalist groups in different countries split up into enemy camps along the lines of the internal Spanish division. Three camps crystallized in Sweden: one pro-CNT, one pro-that-was-to-become-CGT, and one completely uninterested or unknowing group.

These three groups within SAC were united in their determination not to split upon the basis of the Spanish conflict. None other than the employers and their collaborators – the reformist unions – would benefit if the SAC split. The SAC decided therefore to remain neutral (a Swedish tradition wouldn’t you say). We regretted the Spanish conflict, but at the same time we explained that it could hardly be the Swedish workers responsibility to decide which of the opposition groups was the legitimate CNT. During the congresses of 1983 and 1990, we declared our intention to cooperate and hold channels open to both parts. The Swedish door was open for both.

The Problems of Neutrality

One of the many problems with neutrality is that the decision does not appear quite as clear to the groups involved in the conflict seeking international support. For those caught up in an intensive, emotional struggle, thought of as decisive and a matter of life and death, the lines of distinction between good and evil are crystal clear. A naive Swedish attitude of we-want-to-be-friends-with-everyone is destined to misunderstanding. The thought that anyone who talks to the enemy are my enemy, is hard to ignore.

The fact that we even communicated with and visited the “renegades” in the soon-to-be CGT was enough for the CNT to suspect Swedish foul play. When in 1986, the SAC decided to lend 250,000 SKR [at 1993 exchange rates this would be about \$35,000 U.S. – LLR] to the soon-to-be CGT – money they would use for participating in union elections – the situation became interpreted as: “The SAC, those reformists, supports the trotskyist/reformists in the splinter group!” That we could just as easily have lent money to the CNT was unimportant. The SAC “schemes for those traitors and for nothing less than the despicable purpose of the Francoist, class-collaborationist institution of union elections.” After that, many members of the CNT and IWA saw the SAC as a sworn enemy. Confusing and vicious rumors, which had the purpose of smearing SAC’s reputation, soon spread and of course, outraged the Swedish syndicalists who were confronted with them. All this created a situation of mutual suspicion, misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

The IK's Long Range Plans

The IK works under these circumstances. In the IK's "International Program," which was ratified by the 1990 [SAC] congress, it is clearly stated that we are "especially open...to good relationship with ideologically similar organizations...both within and outside the IWA." Over the years, the IK has participated in many international events. As well as much else, we have worked towards building up a working co-operation between non- political-party-tied, anti-authoritarian, revolutionary unions both in Eastern and Western Europe. This has included many trips and meetings where we have either met or contacted IWA sections.

Meeting on a personal level has many benefits. As long as the personal chemistry works, one soon understands that the other is actually human and not the devil that rumors portray. Once a political discussion begins, one discovers the other as an anti- authoritarian socialist and a brother in a common revolutionary struggle. Details about "who said what to whom in 1953" lose their importance and a series of misunderstandings can be cleared. Slowly, but surely, the SAC and the IWA sections could lower their guard and begin to communicate with each other.

Untangling a Mess

When the CNT invited the SAC to participate in their international conference, Certamen Anarquista Mundial (CAM), a milestone was passed which clearly marked that we were well on the way to the goal which we had set for ourselves — good and constructive relationships with the CNT and the IWA. We have much more in common than not. We understood, of course, that our presence would be controversial, and I, who had the honor to be our representative, prepared myself for many confrontations with hardened anarcho-syndicalists who were still caught up in the old patterns of conflict. I, however, felt confident that I could accomplish that which I set out to do and looked forward to tackling the Spanish bull by the horns.

And rest assured, I explained at least a thousand times over our position in a series of central points:

- No, the SAC does not support the state. We are a revolutionary union that fights both capital and the state.
- No, the SAC does not receive money from the state, however, the individual member receives a grant if she becomes unemployed ("Oh shit, we have about the same system in Spain...")
- No, the SAC has not tried to split the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement. You have done a good job of that yourselves, which we regret.
- No, the SAC did not give money to the CGT so that they could participate in union elections. We lent them money but what the CGT decided to do with it was their responsibility, not ours.
- No, the SAC does not participate in union elections. We don't even have such a system in Sweden.

- No, the SAC does not only support the CGT. Just look at the decisions of our congress which clearly points to the fact that we also want good contacts with the CNT.
- No, we do not need to take a position in the Spanish conflict. The majority of our members are neither knowledgeable of nor interested in the conflict. We can not demand that our new members begin to study Spanish or Spanish anarcho-syndicalist history. We are a working, direct-democratic revolutionary union which has other issues that our members find more pressing to engage in, such as the struggle in the workplace. For many members, it is about as important to take sides in the Spanish conflict as it is to decide which of the two guerilla groups in Cameroon to support.
- No, we are not trying to build a new international to compete with the IWA. However, we seek constructive co-operation with non- political-party-tied, ideologically similar, unions. Be my guest and read this yourself in the International Program our congress drafted.
- Yes, our Declaration of Principles in 1952 was more reformist than it had been. Did you know that we decided upon a new Declaration in 1972 that was ratified 4 years later? No? Be my guest, see for yourself. Yes exactly, there is a difference. Not to mention that we are revising and updating it now and it will hopefully be even more radical and clear.
- Yes, we have employed functionaries. No, it is not the state but our members who pay their salaries. Their salaries are based upon the principle of equal pay and we see it as no more reformist to work for our own union than to work for a capitalist company.

And that is how it went. My saving grace was that the Spanish young people quickly understood the points and stepped in to correct the older members as soon as they saw that I was bombarded with the same questions that I had just answered. During the final days, the Spaniards, English and French discussed amongst themselves and a clear, positive view of the SAC spread throughout the conference. We could unite behind the fact that in today's circumstances, where the anti-authoritarian left is the only left that is left and therefore the only organized resistance to robber- baron-capitalism's havoc, it would be devastating to waste our energy upon internal differences when we have a revolution to organize. More about these concrete proposals later. It is now high time to get into the actual conference.

International Workers Conference

Every Swedish syndicalist, who has ever taken part in an international conference on the continent, be it in France, Italy, or Spain, are acquainted with those special characteristics we associate with problems in organizing a conference: an impossible time table, endless philosophically oriented arguments which challenge Fidel Castro's reputation for length, and poor — if even that — translations (God knows that French, Italian and Spanish are international languages spoken by all the workers of the world).

Mentally prepared to endure yet another conference under these conditions, I was nearly bowled over by my confrontation with the opposite reality: the time schedule was respected by the participants and those who arrived late blushed in an almost Nordic manner, simultaneous translations worked perfectly the entire conference, every session was introduced by a prepared

leading statement, the following debates were disciplined and for the most part pertinent and towards the end a five minute limit was set – and it worked!

During three days, we worked with four main themes – the fall of planned state capitalism in Eastern Europe; the capitalist crisis in general; the situation of the anarchist workers movement; as well as which types of methods that we should use to build a dynamic and strong anti-authoritarian movement today.

The first two introductions of themes as well as the following discussions, were predictable and held no surprises. The SAC and most of the other participating organizations and individuals had the same analysis and opinions regarding these subjects. The only variation from an average Swedish syndicalist debate was the portion which zeroes in upon and attacked the church. The process of secularization has come further in Sweden than in Spain.

As expected, the last two themes were more interesting. Most of the participating organizations presented the situation in their own countries under the third theme. Participating in the conference were, among other IWA sections, Italy (USI), England (DAM), Germany (FAU), France (CNT) and Bulgaria (CNT). There were as well, many autonomous groups and communes from Spain, Grupo Malatesta from Portugal, autonomes and anti-fascists from Germany, the French Anarchist Federation, Italian railway workers and many more.

One interesting topic, among others, which I would like to highlight is that of an anarchist school in Estremadura, Spain. We watched a video and listened to a pair of teachers who worked there. The presentation was impressive. The school was located in town and the children picked up by a school bus, just as all the other children in the area. It was directed towards a balanced, overall view, with a well thought out pedagogy, which was truly revolutionary and a brilliant anarchistic alternative to the bourgeois indoctrination that otherwise characterizes the western school system. If we had something similar here, I would send my children without a moment of hesitation. And why not? We have enough teachers in our organization to start similar schools in Sweden, at least in the larger cities.

I have two personal reflections concerning the third theme. The first is that this conference, despite its global claims, was clearly Euro-centered. With two exceptions, Morocco and the Spanish colony in Africa (known as the Canary Islands), everyone at the conference was from Europe. This points out the importance of attempting to tie new knots and establish contact with worker organizations in, above all Asia and Africa (we already have got good contacts in America). In this context, we must understand that anarcho-syndicalism is a western phenomenon, which is why we cannot expect to find groups who actually call themselves “syndicalists” or “anarchists.” In both Africa and Asia, there are other traditions which mean that anti-authoritarian ideas are clothed in other words. The second observation, which was immediately noticeable, was that the conference was overwhelmingly dominated by men. Not that we have anything to brag about but I hope that Swedish anarcho-feminists establish contacts with Mujeres Libres, the CNT’s “Free Women,” who expressed such a desire.

The conference ended with more concrete, action-oriented discussion. The debate was both intensive and interesting. The same type of contradictions that we usually find at home arose: tensions between union and political poles, between intellectual and anti-intellectual workers, between a men’s and women’s perspective and between generations. It was quite comforting to note that those stances which I thought the sensible “won the debate.” The importance of a wide and anti-authoritarian mobilization against the right-wing was emphasized. In order to realize this, we must set dogmatic beliefs aside and be more flexible. Many speaker’s noted the

positive in SAC's participation: we must respect the fact that the anarchist workers movement will express itself differently in different countries depending upon different circumstances, and find the necessary forms for a working co-operation in our common struggle against capital.

How to Continue?

As usual, the unofficial parts of the conference were the most rewarding. Many long discussions lighted up the breaks and nights and good personal contacts could be made. Those which were most important for the SAC and the future deserve to be documented: the unofficial bargaining with the CNT and IWA.

The CNT's new general secretary, Jaime Pozas, was easy to get along with. He had lived in Sweden where he worked as a cook, and had been a member of the SAC. He is therefore quite familiar with the Swedish situation. We agreed that we must work towards a good and friendly relationship and should cooperate on questions of mutual interest. My impression of the CNT is that it is a well working anarcho-syndicalist organization — contrary to what is occasionally said by CGT-influenced comrades in Sweden. They are similar to us on a series of ideological and practical questions, even if there are, naturally, points upon which we differ. The CNT is absolutely not a small, orthodox, dogmatic sect; but a revolutionary, anarchistic, workers organization which we should take a positive stance towards and cooperate with.

The IWA's new secretary, Pepe Jimenez, was even more easy to get along with. The IWA's secretariat moved to Valencia after the 1992 IWA Congress. We had a very long and constructive meeting where we ventilated opinions on everything from the IWA's organization and internal democracy, the controversy with the SAC, to a series of burning political questions. We soon found that we had similar points of view concerning the most serious questions and problems facing the working class today. We also agreed that we had everything to gain by cooperating. The SAC's participation in the conference is a beginning to normalizing relations between the IWA and the SAC. We should begin by cooperating on general questions and slowly work towards expanding the level of contact.

Today, the IWA consists of only two working unions, the CNTs in Spain and France. The rest are actually best seen as propaganda groups. It is also from these propaganda groups — due to that lack of practical experience of the realities that a union works under — that the most confusing attacks against the SAC come. It is quite clear that we need each other — the IWA, the CNT and the SAC!

Invitations Delivered

I delivered an invitation to both the IWA and the CNT, to come and visit Sweden and the SAC to have the opportunity to find out who we really are. Likewise, members of the SAC should visit the CNT, travel around in the country and form our own opinions instead of listening just to what others say. We should also begin working towards the goal of improving our contacts with the IWA (including forgiving the mistakes that have been made on both sides). In the long run — and when the time is right — my personal opinion is that the SAC should seek to be reinstated in the IWA. In times such as these, when the supposed “truly existing socialism” has fallen, we anti-authoritarian socialists make up the only active alternative left! The internationalization of

capital must be met with international organization and mobilization. An undogmatic and federal IWA is a good form for the necessary cooperation. Let us hope that the SAC once again can take place where we belong: as part of a world-wide, anti-authoritarian, revolutionary workers movement.

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