Spanish anarchists in the Welsh valleys

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January 25 2011

Just as the Franco-Italian anarchist miner Lawrence Storione imported revolutionary ideas to the Fife area of Scotland, so too did Spanish anarchist and socialist miners and steelworkers to South Wales in similarly little known circumstances.

The Orconero Iron Ore Company in northern Spain had been a subsidy of the Dowlais Iron Company in South Wales since 1873. In 1900 several hundred Spanish workers and their families were brought to Dowlais from northern Spain in what was seen as a way of undercutting wages for Welsh workers. A street was specifically built for them in Dowlais- King Alphonso Street after the then Spanish monarch Alfonso XII and two areas of the town were given over to them. However if the idea was to undercut the Welsh workers, it was a bad plan as most of those who came to South Wales were socialist or anarchist workers who had themselves been victimised for activity in Spain. They joined the local unions straight away. Shortly after, several Spanish families moved to the anthracite mining village of Abercrave in the Swansea Valle to work for a French mining company that had opened up the International Colliery there.

"Abercrave, a quiet little mining village of only a few thousand inhabitants at the top of the Swansea Valley, has now become one of the most cosmopolitan in the district. In addition to the Welsh, English, Scotch and Irish residing in the locality, there has been a strong influx during the past few years of Frenchman, Spaniards, Portuguese, Germans, Belgians &c, and employment has been found for them in the local collieries. The Spaniards form the strongest colony, and it is computed that there are over 200 in all" (quoted in O'Leary). In Abercrave the Spanish settled on Davies Street and Brooklands Terrace, a line of single story two-room cottages. The area became known as Spanish Row or Espaniardos Row.

Among those who came to Wales was the anarchist Melchor Esteban. He had been a steel worker in Bilbao. Anarchist and atheist, he obtained work at the Dowlais Ironworks in 1907 and shortly after moved to the International Colliery at Abercrave. He had brought his family with him including his son Gregorio, born in 1887, who was to later to volunteer for the International Brigades during the Civil War.

The anarchist paper Freedom first mentioned the Spanish communities in Wales in June 1901, as the result of a visit to Dowlais by the Spanish anarchist Tarrida del Marmol and the London Welsh anarchist Sam Mainwaring (they were collaborating on an anarchist paper The General Strike). Mainwaring had conducted the first socialist tour of South Wales in alongside fellow Socialist Leaguer Frank Kitz in 1887 and had set up the South Wales Socialist Society in Landore

in 1892. Through the use of Spanish by del Marmol and of Welsh and English by Mainwaring, they were able to sooth tensions between the different communities. Tensions once more came to the boil in 1913, when feelings emerged among Welsh miners that "trade unionists of good character" had been thrown out of work in favour of "strangers". Within a month the number of Spanish workers was commented on, though with the proviso that most conducted themselves in an exemplary manner and had good relations with native workers. Some of the Spanish, including the children, spoke Welsh and English fluently, and there were numbers of young Spanish workers who prided themselves on raising their cultural level through self-education. Both Melchor Esteban and another anarchist Victoriano Lafuente were active on local lodge committees of the South Wales Miners Federation. None of the Spanish were even known to be behind with their SWMF dues (apparently many of the Spanish boys were good at rugby, some graduating to premier clubs where they had distinguished careers).

Less than a month later there was a meeting of workers from the Abercrave, International and Gwaunyclalwdd collieries, which considered whether it was advisable to employ Spanish, French and German workers. Committees were formed with the aim of approaching management to make sure that no more foreigners would be employed at the three collieries.

In this situation the anarchist Guy Aldred made an appeal to the Welsh miners: "You are workers. So are your foreign comrades of the pick and shovel…Your choice is between revolution and increasing slavery. But you will not ensure your emancipation by fighting your fellow-slaves. It is the system, the principle of profit, the aggression of Mammon which you have to war against . Not your fellow workers". Wil Jon Edwards, a local socialist who shared many of Aldred's views voiced a similar position in the local press but was careful not to mention revolution.

The troubled situation continued into the next year with accusations that the buildings the Spanish, French and Italians occupied were over-crowded, that they lived in 'disgusting conditions'. An anti-foreigner demonstration was organised and plans for a strike that was narrowly averted. There was an incident between a Spanish workers and locals. But all the Spanish workers were in the South Wales Miners Federation and they strenuously denied the charges against them.

Melchor Esteban followed this up with an appeal for international solidarity : "Fellow workers of Abercrave do not besmirch the fair reputation of the Welsh collier for love of freedom and chivalrous readiness to succour the weak and harbour the oppressed"… "Fellow workmen, I think it is despicable of a person, who, not having a just cause against a particular class, tries to fan the flames of racial hatred".

It appears that apart from the standard fear of foreigners among the older Welsh miners, there was also the perceived threat to the closed paternalistic communities in the area. The deacons of the Nonconformist chapels were appalled by people who were Catholics, lapsed Catholics, or even worse militant atheists. They remarked on the smell of garlic, on the love of life among the Spanish community, their drinking, their singing and dancing to accordions on Saturday and Sunday nights. However the Spanish workers gained support among the younger workers who welcomed these happenings. Friendships had developed between the Spanish and some of these young workers. We have already seen that many Spanish became fluent Welsh speakers and this was reciprocated among some of the young workers who were able to conduct conversations in Spanish. There was particular support among workers who were fairly recent arrivals themselves as for example the Irish born father of Dick Beamish, a local socialist activist.

We know from the pages of the Spanish anarchist paper Tierra y Libertad (20th January 1915) that Esteban was ordering copies of the Mexican anarchist paper Regeneracion for sale in Wales, giving an address of Maes fron, Abercrave . We also know that Regeneracion itself (November 1913) recorded donations to its fighting fund from J. Ch. Torres, D. Menbrive and Angela Meliton, all based in Dowlais. (There seems to have been a tradition of anarchists in Dowlais supporting the international anarchist press with the following Dowlais anarchists supporting the Spanish anarchist review Revista Blanca- Francisco Grau, Jesus Lombau, and Santiago Gutierrez (information from Historical Encyclopedia of Spanish Anarchism) and donations to Tierra y Libertad in July 1916 from Modesto Esteban in Abercrave and F. Puerta, T.Sanz, S.Gallo, J.Suarez H. Revilla and "M.G" in Dowlais. We also know from 1915 that in Tierra y Libertad (5th January 1915) what appeared to be several Spanish anarchist affinity groups in Dowlais (Reivindicacion, Pro Prensa, Ni Dogmas Ni Sistemas,) and the Ferrer group in Abercrave were backing a call for an International Peace Congress in El Ferrol in Galicia, Northern Spain. This had been initiated by an anarchist ateneo in that town and duly took place on 29th April. Delegates from the Dowlais groups were present. It was one of the first moves towards uniting anti-war sentiment, taking place before the similar congress at Zimmerwald. It was also the first major collaboration between Portuguese and Spanish libertarians. It was violently broken up by the police. Apart from the anarchist groups there was also a branch of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in Dowlais.

"The more 'advanced' ideas of socialism and particularly syndicalism did not arrive in the upper Swansea Valley with publication of The Miners' Next Step but with the coming of the Spaniards" (p.13 The Fed). The new generation of militant miners that emerged in Abercrave in the 1920s specifically acknowledged that they had developed an advanced class consciousness and an internationalist outlook because of the influence of the Spanish miners.

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A short account of the Spanish miners in South Wales and their relationship — sometimes positive, sometimes strained — with the local mining population.

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