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Review: News of the Spanish Revolution: Anti-authoritarian Perspectives on the Events

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a review of

Charlatan Stew, ed., *News of the Spanish Revolution: Anti-authoritarian Perspectives on the Events*. Berkeley & London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2012. Berkeley & London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2012, 88pp. ISBN 978-1-87360-516-5

For better or for worse, it seems no matter that more than 75 years have passed since the outbreak of the Spanish Revolution in 1936. The event has become a part of the anarchist international imagination and a model to follow. But what is the real relevance of this short-lived political experiment? In other words, can we extrapolate the political lessons of the Spanish Revolution to the contemporary Arab Spring, the Greek or Spanish riots and the Occupy movements? For the editors of this pamphlet the answer is 'yes': although the historical junctures in each case are very different, these revolutionary movements past and present all embody an irreconcilable lack of understanding between governments and the masses. Yes-

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terday, as today, 'Struggles for individual liberty and social solidarity, human dignity, egalitarian sociability and social justice continue to be of the greatest relevance to the majority of the world's people' (p.4).

Read in the light of the current social protests, the nine articles in this collection— seven originally published in 1937-38 in *One Big Union Monthly* (a journal of the Industrial Workers of the World), plus two later pieces written on the experiences of participants—reveal that democratic decisions made today and the outcomes of contemporary mass movements will shape the future of humanity. Hence, it is very important to revisit the anti-authoritarian perspectives of the Spanish Revolution and their anarchist heritage.

This compilation argues that historically any collaboration between the working class and the political establishment has always underpinned the interests of capitalism by cajoling the masses with the siren songs of parliamentarism. Taking this axiom into account, the authors point out that in Spain (as everywhere else) socialist governments, for instance, always proclaimed to be part of the working class. However, they always diluted or relegated ad eternum the deep revolutionary reforms that were needed in order to achieve social justice. Accordingly: 'Times without number these "socialist governments" proved to the master class that they are in the best of positions to save capitalism and to safeguard all their interests not only by the use of brutal military and police forces, but also by their moral prestige over the working class acquired by nearly a century of socialist party and trade union connection within the working class' (Joseph Wagner, 1937, p.34).

Indeed, at the time the Spanish Revolution was getting off the ground, the same could be said about Communism. For the anarchist media, Communists were just as reactionary as the Francoist forces, as not only did they try to betray the revolution violently, they also put into motion a dictatorial Stalinist programme. Speaking of this R. Louzon stated: "The Span-

ish Communist Party and its annexes have, therefore, become bourgeois organizations not only in virtue of their program, but also by their social composition... And that is how the Communist Party in its composition soon became not only bourgeois, but above all, fascist bourgeois' (p.44). Such a perspective also shows the extent to which the Anti-Francoist front was split. As Bill Wood mentioned in 1937, speaking about Stalinists in Spain, 'these comrades would rather let Franco have those cities than the CNT-FAI' (p.39).

The final defeat, and defeatism, of the Spanish anarchist leaders of the Republican Government resulted in the CNT falling prey to communist Stalinist agents (p.48). Attempting to prevent 'an anarchist dictatorship', the CNT leaders fell into the hands of the enemy. This entailed many ideological contradictions: militarisation of the working-class militias, collaboration with the State apparatus, the end of land collectivisation, and what is worse, relinquishing the social revolution. Although all these factors contributed to the decline and fall of the Revolution, national and international mass media propaganda also played a key part. While the media described the CNT militant fighters as 'tribal' and 'uncontrollable', Sophia Fagin tried to uncover what seemed like a deliberate ploy of the Stalinists and the liberal journals to discredit the entire Spanish anarchist movement. Despite a proliferation of insults, Fagin reported that those very 'uncontrollable' elements were 'creating a new revolutionary framework which does not make oppression a sine qua non of liberation, and dictatorship a first step to social and economic democracy...' (p.63). If we replaced the 'CNT militant fighters' of this 1938 broadcast with current 'anarchist activists' the result would be surprisingly valid. Looking at how the word 'anarchism' is used by the media today we can see that the term is always associated with vandalism, chaos, violence and, definitively, anarchos (disorder).

Taking all this into consideration, there is at least one key message that this pamphlet would like to drive home to con-

temporary non-academic and academic audiences. This was conveyed by Federico Arcos in 1996 in one of the two later pieces: 'You experienced the war; I experienced the revolution!' (p.81). Those involved in current social struggles need to be alert and aim at working if not directly against parliamentarism, then at least away from it. At the same time, they need to avoid any temptation to lean towards authoritarianism. Furthermore, they need to report from alternative forms of mass media; especially denouncing the false dilemma that mass media seeks to stamp on everyone's soul. To put it differently, there is only one option: capitalism or chaos.

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