

The CNT and the IWA

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Part 1: The CNT Since Franco

The decision that the CNT took at its eleventh congress (December 2015) to re-found the International Workers Association is the latest act in the process of updating anarcho-syndicalism which began with the resurrection of the CNT in 1977, and which still isn't finished.

After the death of Franco in 1975, Spanish elites initiated a series of measures that would modernize the state apparatus and integrate it into Europe; thanks to this, in 1977 the CNT was able to become legal once again, ending four decades of persecution and illegality. After the initial relief, it didn't take long for problems to surface. It goes without saying that in the forty years that had passed since the defeat of the 1936 Revolution, the world had changed. During this period, the left had experienced (and survived) Stalinism, WW2, decolonization, the welfare state, the cold war, and the disintegration of the Marxist state in its various forms, to give just a few examples. The world in which anarcho-syndicalism had once flourished had disappeared, and the anarcho-syndicalist movement had ceased to exist, while the CNT turned into a working-class Sleeping Beauty, maintaining its appearance despite the passage of time.

Dorian Gray or the Weight Of Glory

At least, that's how it seemed. Everyone who participated enthusiastically in the re-launching of the CNT soon learned that adapting to the enormous social changes which had taken place since 1939 was something like the Odyssey of Ulysses. It didn't take long for an infernal dynamic of polarization to begin between those who wanted to find a way to adapt anarcho-syndicalism to the neoliberal world, and those who didn't want to change anything for fear of ending up as reformists. Naturally, this is a black-and-white vision of the world and there were many more tendencies, but all of them had to face the question of how to adapt to the modern world.

We should recognize that behind this fear of the risks associated with modernization, there was a real danger. The Swedish SAC, the only anarcho-syndicalist union deserving of the name that managed to survive the bloodbath of fascism and WW2, is a perfect example. The SAC wasn't "lucky" enough to have a glorious death fighting against fascism, like the CNT, and it had to face the realities of the post-war world. After initially trying to remain faithful to anarcho-syndicalist principles after the war, the possibility of total marginalization caused a 180 degree change in its strategy, and it ended up integrating itself into the social democratic state model which took root in Sweden.

We should also remember, at this point, that the SAC was able to face this dilemma about its future in a very different situation from the reborn CNT in 1977. Its structures were intact, and it had enough of a membership base that it could still function as a union and not a mere propaganda group. The CNT, on the other hand, was facing a very different situation: fascism had torn its structures up by the roots, creating a generational divide. What's more, the underground situation which the dictatorship had made necessary also made day-to-day anarchist functioning impossible. Large-scale decision making through assemblies – needed to avoid the formation of power cliques – was as impossible as the development of a critical (and rational) mentality, a key task which had been carried out in the anarchist social centers [*ateneos libertarios*].

It didn't take long for the new CNT to feel the results of what was missing. In Marxism, the emphasis on rationalism/scientism gave place to parliamentarism and bureaucratization at first, and later to a complete dehumanization which saw human beings as mere numbers, clearing the

path for the assorted savageries which were carried out under the hammer and sickle during the 20th century. In anarchism, on the other hand, even though rationalism plays a fundamental role, the basic component is a fundamental and staunch defense of the individual against the rest of the abstractions which the human mind generates in its struggle for life. This strongly emotional component, based in the personal perception of justice, is positive in that it makes it impossible to create a repressive apparatus which would impose anarchism or cold-blooded, systematic murder of those who simply think differently. But it can also be negative – from a dogmatic perspective, anarchism can become the best argument for remaining in a ghetto, praising anarchism without trying to use it as a tool for social change, even fighting against those who do try.

Shortly after the CNT was revived it became clear that it was not the Sleeping Beauty of revolutionary mythology, but something closer to Dorian Grey’s cursed reflection. On the one hand, during the long period of exile the CNT had become a shadow of its former self, suffering a large number of internal conflicts and splits; on the other hand, thanks to the 1936 Revolution, the CNT became the only alternative to authoritarianism and the bureaucratization of Marxism with real revolutionary experience. This contradiction between myth and reality was a poisoned legacy which quickly led to disastrous effects in the new CNT that had blossomed during the Transition.¹ Also, most of the new members were young militants, who had recently come to anarcho-sindicalism, attracted by its heroic history and its anti-authoritarian ideology. Unfortunately, they lacked even a basic experience of workplace struggle, and had very little background in anarchist ideas.

The Disaster: Valladolid as an Example

The combination of militancy and a lack of background in anarchist ideas soon brought disastrous results. In Valladolid, where the extreme right was especially active and acted with complete impunity, the local anarchist youth focused on confrontation, which led the fascists to respond by putting a bomb outside the CNT hall.² But while nobody can deny its commitment to confronting fascist violence, the CNT also had to focus on adapting its methods of struggle to a consumer society. This group did not accept attempts at modernization, and the situation escalated rapidly. According to Luis Pasquau, who was in the CNT’s Education Union in Valladolid at that time, the “anarchists” came to the union assemblies when they knew that union strategy would be discussed, and to prevent discussion they put the same pistols that they used to fight fascists on the table. The logical consequence of this situation was the mass exit of education workers from the CNT, which then became a councillist group.³

Finally, as you might guess, the defenders of doctrinal purism took a 180-degree turn, and ended up defending participation in the union elections.⁴ The consequences of this about-face

¹ “La transición” in Spain refers to the period from Franco’s death in 1975 until “democracy” stabilized in the early ‘80’s. Sometimes called “la traición” [the betrayal] as the Socialist and Communist parties agreed to preserve much of the fascist state structure and immunity for those who had run it. This and all other endnotes are from the translator

² Valladolid is sometimes called “Facha-dolid”, referring to a strong tradition of fascists in the city.

³ “Councillist” groups were influenced by the German/Dutch Council Communist tradition. Since the ‘60’s these groups have held that formal unions are brakes on the struggle and that workers should only form temporary committees or strike councils. Needless to say, this is a distortion of the outlook of the original Council Communists.

⁴ Spanish labor law has proportional voting of representatives onto company councils, which are paid for by the company and state subsidies. This was part of the labor law imposed under Franco. The current CNT is almost unique

were disastrous, as the membership numbers show. From 120,000 in September 1977 (Joan Zambrana, *La alternativa libertaria en Cataluña*) to 250,000 in the fall of 1978 (according to Juan Gómez Casas), membership fell to 30,000 in 1979 with the V Congress, during which the first split from the CNT took place. The police provocations (Caso Scala) and the anti-anarchist propaganda campaign which the State and the media carried out only increased the pressure to crush the CNT for refusing to collaborate in the Transition.⁵

Since the issue of union elections threatened to provoke a new rupture in the CNT, the majority which opposed elections agreed at the VI Congress (1983) to put the question off to an extraordinary congress devoted to that issue. This was a mistake that only gave more time to Jose Bondía, the secretary of the CNT at the time, to prepare the CNT's integration into the system. At this point the Socialist Party was struggling in the union field against the CCOO, a union close to the Communist Party, and the deputy prime minister, Alfonso Guerra, was toying with the idea of favoring the CNT and marginalizing the CCOO. In exchange for participating in the union elections, he offered aid from the state for the CNT to recover its enormous historical assets.⁶ We have to remember that, thanks to the crisis in which the organization was laboring, the majority of unions forced the reelection of Bondía as general secretary even though it was against the statutes, a disastrous decision that would cost the organization dearly. (Despite his failure, Bondía was "rewarded" with a post organizing the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Americas. Who says Rome doesn't pay traitors?)⁷

Since there was no agreement about union elections in the V Congress, the defenders of elections took advantage of the time before the extraordinary Congress to participate in union elections in some areas. This happened in Valladolid, where the opponents were a minority, and, to avoid a new rupture and hemorrhaging of members, they agreed to participate as the CNT in the elections at the enormous FASA-Renault factory (the biggest in the world outside of France, which is why the city is sometimes called *Fasadolid*). This could only serve to support the arguments of the defenders of electoral participation, thanks to the good results which were obtained. However, despite this, the majority of the extraordinary Congress voted against electoral participation. The pro-electoral minority announced that they were splitting, they organized a Congress in Valencia where they fused with the remains of the earlier splits, and they refused to stop calling themselves CNT, which made it impossible to access the enormous historical assets of the

among Spanish unions for refusing to participate in these elections or receive subsidies. The CNT's opposition to this setup has many aspects and would require a lot more space to explore, but I'll attempt to summarize their position: real unions are composed of workers acting together directly, they are not "representatives" which are separate from the workers; the union election setup turns unions into exactly that, creating a separate caste of full-time union functionaries through state and corporate subsidies who, like politicians, become unaccountable to the workers who vote for them every four years.

⁵ "Caso Scala" was a club where several CNT members worked, which was bombed. The official story at the time blamed it on internal struggles, but the modern consensus is that it was a police operation.

⁶ After Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War, all of the property of Spain's labor movements fell into the hands of the state. The Socialist Party, the socialist-affiliated UGT union, and the CNT were the main groups affected by this. The Communist Party had been tiny until the war, and the communist-affiliated union (CCOO) did not exist until the 1970s. Discussions over returning historical assets were part of the maneuvering between the Socialists and the Communists during the Transition. The procedure that was set up to return assets had to give equal treatment to all of the organizations which had existed prior to the Civil War.

⁷ Refers to a successful rebellion against the Roman empire that only ended when the leader, Viriatus, was assassinated by his lieutenants. When the assassins asked for their payment, they were told that "Rome doesn't pay traitors." This is a common phrase in Spain and Portugal.

CNT for a long time. The defenders of the split didn't shy away from violence, predictably leading to shameful incidents, such as an early-morning ambush of some members on their way to work (in Palencia, near Valladolid), or the violent attempts in Madrid by the opponents of the split. These confrontations, occasionally violent, marked one of the most shameful moments in the history of the anarchist movement.

In Valladolid, the immense majority went with the split, justifying this in a manifesto which was distributed widely, and the CNT became a mere shadow of what it had been. When, during the collapse of "really existing socialism", this writer decided to leave the CGT (then still calling itself the CNT) and approach the CNT-AIT, it had ceased to exist *de facto*. It had no workplace activity, but it still had a union hall thanks to the stubbornness of three people from my father's generation (of which one was a Marxist with enormous respect for the CNT, another had been forced to flee to France due to an anti-anarchist raid under Franco, and the third had participated in the struggles at FASA during the Transition). There were also a handful of sympathizers, but it would still take time for the wounds of the split to heal.

These three people played a fundamental role in resurrecting the CNT in Valladolid. They had successfully maintained an infrastructure (the union hall was shared with a Flamenco group, as these were the only ones found who paid the rent on time), and even a minimal presence, through spreading propaganda like posters and leaflets. More important than this was their role in transmitting their ideas to a new generation, through many debates on all sorts of topics. In the early 90's, when a fellow worker in construction asked for the union's help during a conflict at their company, the CNT could begin to resurrect itself as a union. It had come full circle.

A decade after the split, most of the members of the still-tiny union in Valladolid had little or no union experience, and we had to begin from square one. Maybe it wasn't quite that bad, thanks to the help and experience of the elders. And our situation wasn't very different from the rest of the CNT, which had lost the immense majority of the generation that had participated in reorganizing after the Transition, and which had to make it through a very difficult period of "wandering in the desert." In Valladolid, the elders were opposed to anything that threatened to reopen the wounds the split, and they trusted the youth (I had keys to the union hall even while I was still a member of the split). This allowed for a slow and gradual growth, which also helped to revive other parts of the region (Palencia, Zamora). Today, the Valladolid CNT is a union with real workplace presence and various industrial branches (metal, construction...), with more than 100 members, and its own union hall. It has been able to host the Regional Committee, the *CNT* newspaper, and even the National Committee (which, it should be said, ended when a corruption scandal resulted in the immediate expulsion of the erstwhile general secretary from Valladolid).

Getting Up to Date After the Split

Overcoming the catastrophic period of the Transition took many forms: some areas, like Puerto Real, were able to avoid disaster, while others such as Valladolid had a real implosion and had to begin from zero, but each area had its own variations. Catalonia, the region most affected by the split, wasn't able to overcome it, and after several crises it was finally de-federated and ended up with almost no members. As in Valladolid, this allowed for a generational change and starting from a clean slate, marked by a slow but constant expansion, as well as overcoming conflicts which stretched back decades.

Another problem that was important to overcome was the delegate voting structure, which had come down from the beginning of the 20th century. The V Congress had attempted to update it by assigning votes to branches as follows:

- From 1–50 dues-paying members 1 vote
- From 51–100 “” 2 votes
- From 101–300 “” 3 votes

... and so on, up to the limit of 8 votes for branches with more than 2,500 dues-paying members [*cotizantes*].⁸ This voting structure was a mistake, as it led to a distortion of reality inside the union: all you needed was 5 dues payers to be recognized as a union with a vote, which was pretty easy to achieve – especially for retirees. This led to “phantom” branches, some of which even had their own hall – a legacy of times past – but not even a hint of workplace activity, and which ended up as the fiefdoms of a few people at most, sometimes even just one.

At the same time, the real union branches practiced – and still practice – the opposite policy, declaring fewer dues payers than they really have in order to have more money for their local organizing; for example, it’s not rare for a local group with 5 or more members to stay as a pre-branch group [*nucleo confederal*], to avoid the burden of per-capita payments and use their money locally.⁹ This situation was possible because of the implosion of the 80’s, in which the local groups were focused on mere survival, and relations with the rest of the organization were basically secondary.

The results were a disproportionate presence for the pseudo-unions when it came to voting, while the real unions were under-represented. Ironically, the lack of any workplace activity from the pseudo-unions enabled their radicalism, turning them into a bloc that was opposed to the real unions, which were trying to adapt themselves to the realities of workplace organizing. It had nothing to do with participating in the union elections, whose defenders have always been a negligible minority. Rather, it was about giving ourselves the tools we needed to support workplace organizing – such as lawyers – or ensuring that the historic archive was well cared for and functioning. On these and many other topics, the discussion was blocked due to fear of creating a caste of professional staff [*liberados*].¹⁰

The CNT’s growth ended up resolving this situation. The X Congress (Cordoba, 2010) finally put an end to this distortion of reality. At this Congress we modified the voting structure, which until then had allowed three branches with 5 members each to carry the same weight as one branch with 200 members. The new system is as follows:

- From 5–10 members 1 vote
- From 11–20 members 2 votes
- From 21–30 members 3 votes

⁸ Unlike the IWW, the CNT does not have central membership records – each branch keeps its own records, and remits payments for the number of dues stamps it sells. This may be a legacy of how often the organization has been declared illegal.

⁹ Because they have high expectations of branches, the CNT also have a formal status for pre-branch groups, called “confederal nuclei”, so that they can be mentored without rushing into administrative work. Apparently they don’t pay as much in per-caps.

¹⁰ The union elections and subsidies for unions lead most Spanish unions to have a bureaucratic caste of full-time officials, called *liberados* because they are “liberated” from work.

... and the same proportion up to 100: from 31–40 members, 4 votes, etc. To avoid an excessive accumulation of power by any one branch, after 100 members the number of additional votes slows down – so, a branch with 91–100 members receives 10 votes, but a branch with 101–150 receives 12 votes. For context, the majority of branches have between 25–75 members. This agreement led to several branches leaving the organization after losing their erstwhile privileged position. This coincided with the end of a period of scandals and de-federations that particularly affected the regions of Catalonia, Galicia, and Levante, in which growth had stalled since the 80's. At the same time, there was a generational change, in which a generation linked to past conflicts disappeared for natural causes.

The beneficiaries of these agreements made themselves visible at the XI Congress (Zaragoza, 2015), which had twice as many participants. This congress introduced a new modification, changing the minimum number of members needed to charter a branch from 5 to 15 for general membership branches [*Sindicatos de Oficios Varios*] and from 25 to 50 for industrial branches. At the same time, at this Congress we revisited our relation with the IWA, proposing its reorganization. But before we can understand the reasons, we have to briefly review the history of the anarcho-syndicalist international.

Part 2: The Crisis in the IWA as Seen From the CNT

Back to the Beginning: From the CNT to the IWA

Historically, the IWA never played a relevant role in the history of the workers movement; the only exception, perhaps, was the Spanish Revolution of 1936, in which the CNT played a key role. After its defeat, the rise of fascism and the second world war brought about the destruction of all of the other sections except one, the Swedish SAC, thanks to Sweden's neutrality during the war. At first, the SAC stayed true to anarcho-syndicalist principles while the Swedish welfare state was under construction. The loss of members, and a fear of ending up totally marginalized, led the organization to embark on a 180 degree change at its 1942 Congress, in the middle of the war. It formed a part of the machinery of the Swedish welfare state, which supported it financially.

The first step was to accept a role in distributing unemployment funds, like the other unions. They created a fund for this purpose, with the generous help of the State, which also generously supported the payments. This collaboration, apparently innocuous, has degenerated to the level where they accept police as members and have created a caste of functionaries. A good example of this is *Arbetaren*, the SAC's organ, with a distribution of 3,500, which until 2010 had no less than 10 editors on a union salary, thanks to state subsidies, and which ended up criticizing some of the SAC's own struggles for being "radical."¹¹ To be fair, we should also mention that at its 2009 Congress the SAC radicalized its strategy, but not all the way: the majority of the organization still voted against a ban on cops.

In 1951, the IWA held its 7th Congress, the first after the start of WW2 (the last had been in 1938). At this congress they denounced the SAC's activities. In 1956, the SAC ceased paying its

¹¹ I met some members of the "radical" section of the SAC around 2007 and this fits with what they said at the same time. They even had a newspaper called *Motarbetaren*, "The un-worker", which was named both as a critique of work and a jab at the paper. More information on the SAC's "radical" wing can be found here. The Twin Cities IWW also hosted a talk from a long-time SAC member in 2013, who confirmed these problems as well as the SAC's trajectory of recovering its radical traditions. This and all other endnotes are by the translator.

contributions to the IWA, and in 1959 decided to leave the IWA after an internal referendum. Thus the IWA lost the last union worthy of the name, and became nothing more than a federation of miniscule propaganda groups scattered across the globe, without even the most basic workplace presence. The hardest years of the Cold War were a period of “wandering in the desert” for the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which also suffered various internal splits in the CNT-in-exile, its largest section by far.

The situation changed completely in the 70’s. The economic crisis and the CNT’s resurrection in 1976 cleared the path for the creation of new anarcho-syndicalist organizations: the German FAU, heir of the FAUD, founded in 1976; the Direct Action Movement in the UK (now Solidarity Federation), created in 1979; in 1983 the re-activated USI, the historical Italian section, organized its first congress; and at the end of the 80’s the French CNT-F had its first successes at building a workplace presence. Unfortunately, in a repetition of the myth of Sisyphus, the new organizations suffered similar problems to the ones that the CNT was just beginning to recover from.

Return to the Workplace, and the Internal Crises of the CNT-F and USI

First came the French CNT, at the start of the 90’s. After successfully starting a branch at COMATEC, a company involved in cleaning the Paris metro, and winning a strike, the CNT-F participated in the union elections in 1991. They did the same in STES, another workplace where they had created a strong branch. The participation in union elections in Paris and its consequences (subsidies, privileges for a caste of functionaries, etc) led to strong tensions in the heart of the organization, which finally split in November of 1992.

The CNT-F split into the CNT-F/Vignoles (Paris), created in a Congress of February 1993 and favoring participation in union elections; and the CNT-F/Burdeos, created in a Congress of 1993, opposed to participation. The division was stark: while Paris had the majority of the members of the old CNT-F, the majority of the branches went over to Burdeos, reproducing France’s structure, with Paris rising high above the rest of the country.

The biggest consequence of the CNT-F’s rupture was a change to the IWA statutes, eliminating the possibility of having two sections in the same country. This was the first change to the statutes since 1922, which says a lot about the organization’s lack of contact with reality for decades. Finally, the XX IWA Congress (Madrid, 1996) decided to expel Vignoles, and Burdeos became the French section. As far as the union elections go, despite assurances from Vignoles that these were exceptional measures, their 2008 Congress decided to make them one of their main tactics for workplace organizing.

Just as the French section had split over questions of organizing strategy, a similar conflict was brewing in Italy. Once again, the context was the beginning of real industrial activity and the need to define a valid strategy for workplace organizing. And once again, as in Spain and then in France, the debate centered around organizing strategy. In the USI’s case, the discussion centered around relations with other Italian rank-and-file unions, especially the COBAS (Rank-and-File Committees).

In the early ’90’s, after it had succeeded in becoming a real union, a conflict developed between its three wings (pure unionist, anarchist, and anarcho-syndicalist). The first conflict was with the anarchist wing, which left the organization in the mid-’90’s after a Congress in Prato Carnico (Udine). After this a conflict between the two remaining groups developed around how to interpret an agreement made in 1993 about collaborating with other rank-and-file unions. In February

of 1995, the majority of participants at a delegate meeting in Bari approved the establishment of “a federative pact with other unions.” The pure unionist sector (centered in Rome) saw this as a green light for fusing with other groups, which would have led to the dissolution of the USI.

When they realized what the pure unionists were planning, the coordinating bodies and the anarcho-syndicalists convoked another delegate meeting, this time in Milan, which reversed the previous agreement. This was the start of an open conflict between the two sections, which chose different paths. The pure unionists of USI-Rome didn’t take long to show signs of authoritarianism, with the same people remaining in coordinating positions, and they didn’t see any problems working with the fascist union HISNAL. Worse still, they refused to stop calling themselves USI-AIT, leading to confusion which they took advantage of to sabotage any strikes from the anarcho-syndicalist side. Italian law requires unions to communicate strikes to the government if they are to be valid – every time the anarcho-syndicalists called a strike, the pure unionists sent a letter to the government calling it off. At the same time, in 1995 the anarcho-syndicalists reunited with the anarchists who had recently left, and this unified group began calling itself USI-Prato Cárnico or just simply USI-AIT.

The conflicts in the CNT-F and the USI reached their high point in 1995–1996, which made the 1996 IWA Congress fundamental to the future of the organization. Both conflicts were resolved internally by the USI-Rome leaving voluntarily, and by recognizing the CNT-F/Burdeos as the French section. Sadly, the Congress took place in a very emotionally charged atmosphere. This marked the future of the IWA, which began a stage marked by conflicts and internal struggles.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentices

The 1996 Congress, which should have been the start of the IWA’s resurrection, ended up as the starting point for a hellish internal dynamic, and the CNT played a key role. The first step had been taken in the 1984 IWA Congress (Madrid), which approved a motion brought by the CNT – which had just suffered its worst-ever split – that prohibited the IWA sections from having any contact with the SAC. This was because SAC had given financial support to the split group (the future CGT).¹² The agreement prohibited any “official” contacts, but permitted “unofficial” contacts, opening a dangerous space for interpretation.

The important thing about this agreement is the mental state which it reflects. After suffering splits in its biggest sections, the IWA ended up trusting nobody, like a wounded animal. Trust, the basis of federalism, was replaced by surveillance over member sections and the threat of punishment whenever it seemed useful. An agreement made in the following Congress (Granada, 2000) extended this logic by prohibiting sections from maintaining contacts with organizations in other countries without the approval of the local section, a logic that was more feudal than federal, and which would have important consequences. One important detail to remember is that this agreement was proposed by the NSF, the Norwegian section, which has no workplace presence.

Another important change that began in the 1996 Congress is that “Friends of the IWA” groups, which until then had only been able to participate in meetings by expressing their opinion, began to submit proposals and participate in voting. These groups, dedicated to propaganda and without any union activity, are tend to more dogmatic postures due to their lack of workplace presence.

¹² I have heard that the SAC at the time offered financial support to both sides, but only the split group accepted it.

They have a similar mentality to their twins, organizations without union activity but which have nevertheless managed to become members of the IWA, as well as the sections which in the past were real unions but which today are mere fossils without any workplace presence.

Since the IWA makes decisions through voting, and each section has one vote, these phantom unions and groups, closer to the past and the history books than to the reality of workplace struggles, dominate the decision making in practice.

After the crises of the USI and the CNT-F, the '90's saw several other truly surrealist events. One of these was the crisis in the WSA, the section in the US, in which a new local section (Minnesota), created in 1999, dedicated itself to expelling the "lifelong" members, changing the name of the organization and, finally, leaving the IWA at the start of 2002, complaining about its "lack of solidarity," disappearing shortly thereafter.¹³ After it left, the old members of the IWA in the US reorganized as the WSA and asked to be recognized as a section, which the IWA Secretariat (in Granada) refused. They were then rejected at the IWA congress in 2004, despite the support of the FAU and the USI.

A similar event happened with the Czech section, admitted in the 1996 Congress. Despite its name (Anarcho-syndicalist Federation – FSA), this section was more of an anarchist federation than an anarcho-syndicalist union, as the USI complained in 2005. The FSA focused on attacking the USI and the FAU, two of the biggest IWA sections, while it lacked even the most basic workplace activity. In its 2004 Congress the FSA changed its name to reflect reality, becoming the Federation of Anarchist Groups, and finally in 2007 it voluntarily left the IWA.

Against the USI and the FAU

After the splits in the CNT-F and the USI, a witch hunt broke out inside the IWA. One of its victims was the USI, thanks to its participation in a union representation body (the RSU – Rappresentazione Sindicale Unitaria). After 2002, this became a chief topic in IWA discussions, and there was a growing clamor to expel the USI in the name of a supposed "orthodoxy." The fact that the Russian and Czech sections were most vocal for expulsion, while having no workplace presence, led the USI in 2005 to denounce the disastrous consequences of accepting anarchist groups as IWA sections. The discussion about the USI's participation in the RSU ended after the Manchester Congress (2006), where the majority accepted that it was in line with the IWA statutes. Around this time, the Czech FSA abandoned the organization and became the anarchist federation that it had always been.

The FAU, which had opposed the separatist and emotional dynamic from the start, quickly became the punching bag. It refused to see the IWA become a mere forum for debate, without any contact with social struggles, and so it confronted the sterile line promoted by groups without any union activity. At the same time, it never ceased to defend its freedom of action as an organization, rejecting the paranoid line that preferred to see reformist conspiracies against the IWA in every corner. It shouldn't come as a shock, then, that the most orthodox sector saw the FAU as its main enemy to beat on.

¹³ There is a large IWW presence in Minnesota, but as far as I know, nobody has ever come across the people behind this. A great example of a "phantom union."

The Spanish section played a shameful role in all of this during José Luis Garcia Rua's mandate as the IWA general secretary (a post which he'd also held for the CNT).¹⁴ It was the CNT which asked for the FAU's expulsion, and due to the CNT's pressure an agreement was reached giving the secretary executive powers to expel the FAU for the slightest infractions. The supposed conspiracies to create "parallel internationals" have all turned out in time to be hallucinations, divorced from reality, but the agreements preventing sections from working with other groups are still hanging like the sword of Damocles.

For its part, the FAU began discussing whether it would even remain in the IWA after the 1996 Congress. However, the two referendums on the subject (in 2001 and 2005) didn't reach the majority that the statutes required. The second and last of these took place after the Granada Congress in 2004, which gave the IWA secretary the right to expel the FAU. Although the majority were in favor of leaving, some well-respected members (in Hamburg) announced that they would leave the FAU if that happened, which ended up tipping the scale to stay.

Beginning of the End, or End of the Beginning?

It's one of those ironies of history that the CNT is now confronting the IWA over the application of the 2004 agreement – which the CNT had proposed – allowing the secretary to expel the FAU. The current secretariat, in the hands of a minuscule and recently created section that is opposed to the FAU, has decided to use the executive power that it never would have had if the IWA had remained true to federalist principles.

Of course, this isn't the only reason – this was just the straw that broke the camel's back. There are others: the Polish secretariat refuses to give access to the bank accounts and email to the sub-secretariat named at the last IWA Congress (in Lisbon), which is in the CNT and has been waiting for over a year; the secretariat allowed groups which had been de-federated from the CNT to participate in that same Congress; and the secretariat is demanding that the CNT pay its contributions (which represent 80% of the IWA's budget) immediately, when it has asked for more time due to having an unexpected bill for 500,000 euros related to an accident.¹⁵

However, the main reason for the radical change in the CNT's posture is the internal change since the Cordoba Congress, which put an end to the power of the pseudo-unions. It was logical for the CNT to propose the same in the IWA, but failure was inevitable due to the power of the pseudo-sections: 30 in Poland, 15 in Serbia, 10 in Slovakia, 5 in Russia... with one vote each, the same as the entire CNT. Recognizing that the IWA as it is currently configured is a failed project, the CNT has launched a project to reorganize it, which was immediately supported by the USI and applauded by the FAU. If the only real section left – SolFed in the UK – decides to support this project, the current IWA would become an empty shell in the hands of the Polish ZSP, centered in Eastern Europe, dedicated to promoting splits, as the current secretary is already doing with the CNT.¹⁶

¹⁴ Garcia Rua is sometimes called "the lion of Granada" for his machinations in defense of "orthodoxy" and his viciousness. His protégés are among the tiny group calling the current CNT "reformist" and which may try to split (with the encouragement of the IWA secretary).

¹⁵ The accident happened at the run-down hall of one of the pseudo-unions, who did not insure it because they were too anarchist. The liability ended up falling on the CNT as a whole. This pseudo-union is now part of the "orthodox" group that calls the current CNT "reformist."

¹⁶ The IWA held a Congress on the weekend after the Bilbao meeting. The press release already speaks of trying to start new groups in Spain, Italy, and Germany, and states that at the next Congress "the CNT-AIT will be represented

by those continuing in its legacy.” [Note: an earlier version of this footnote referred to a vote, but was based on unconfirmed information. This footnote has been edited to reflect that.]

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