

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Spanish Anarchism and Women's Liberation

Temma Kaplan

April 1971

Temma Kaplan
Spanish Anarchism and Women's Liberation
April 1971

Published in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 6, no. 2.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

One of the chief ideological disputes between the Spanish anarchists and communists during the Civil War was the anarchists' insistence that social revolution should not be postponed until the war was won; without the social revolution (by which they meant the defeat of authoritarianism and the transformation of all social and economic relations and institutions to permit maximum individual freedom, self-expression, and spontaneity), the war would be just another changing of the guard, so familiar in Spanish history.

Historically, Spanish anarchists had been concerned with changes in education and marriage relationships as means of social change. They opposed the authoritarian, patriarchal family, arguing that it was based on private property, on the father's ownership of his wife and children.¹ They hoped to end the oppression of Spanish working-class women by ending formal marriage and substituting free alliances of individuals, and to eliminate prostitution by providing training programmes,

¹ Anselmo Lorenzo, *El Proletariado Militante, Origen del Sindicalismo* (Toulouse, 1946), 214-17.

medical facilities, and housing for the former prostitutes.² In towns where the anarchists gained control, even for short periods, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they immediately attempted to abolish legal marriage, among other things.³

Again, in the first year of the Civil War, from July 1936 to the late spring of 1937, anarchists were able to put some of their theoretical ideas into practice. Visitors to anarchist collectives remarked on the efficiency of the communes. What most struck observers was the initial absence of oppressive bureaucracy in cities such as Barcelona, and the sense of community throughout the loyalist sector. There are many accounts of the jubilation which followed the assumption of control by men and women of the factories or of land where they had formerly been employed.⁴ But a social revolution, according to Spanish anarchist theory, also transforms personal and social relationships and engenders 'a certain level of culture, consciousness of power, and capacity for self-government', in all members of the community, including women. Yet, although we might expect it to have been otherwise, the condition and treatment of women in the anarchist areas continued much as it had before the Civil War.⁵

This paper is concerned with anarchist attempts to aid working-class women in the period between the end of the

² H-E. Kaminski, *Ceux de Barcelone* (Paris, 1937), 70.

³ Juan Diaz del Moral, *Historia de las Agitaciones Campesinas Andaluzas* (Madrid, 1967), 205, 224.

⁴ Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (1937); Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943); George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938); Pierre Broué; and Émile Témime, *La Révolution et la Guerre d'Espagne* (Paris, 1961). For an interesting re-interpretation of the anarchists' ideas see Noam Chomsky, 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship', *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York, 1967).

⁵ D.A. de Santillan, *After the Revolution: Economic Reconstruction in Spain Today* (New York, 1937), 95. Kaminski mentions that in industrial collectives he visited women even had separate dining rooms (70).

first world war and the close of the Civil War, years in which the Spanish anarchists assimilated syndicalist ideas, built more effective organizations, and won far-reaching if short-lived victories; it will attempt to show that, in spite of their awareness of the exploitation of women in capitalist society, they did not develop a programme to prevent similar exploitation in revolutionary society. There is no reason to believe that the condition of Spanish women would have been fundamentally changed if the anarchists had won the war. Unwilling to deal with concepts of class or representative institutions, they refused to make special provisions for particular interest groups. This inhibition was a crucial reason why the social reforms achieved by anarchists after 1918 and during the social revolution of 1936–37 did not attempt to transform the lives of Spanish working-class women.

Anarchist women took little or no part in the women's rights movement of the early twenties, which was primarily concerned with the admission of women into the professions.⁶ Except for the Socialist, Margarita Nelkin, who stood aside from the feminist movement as such, no one on the left spoke about the need for special legislation for working women.⁷

The anarchist National Confederation of Labour, the CNT, founded in 1911, had no minimal political programme, but placed its hopes on a general strike that would topple the government and begin a social revolution. Anarchist women at first had no provisional demands, such as those raised later in the war: child-care centres in the factories and the rural communities to care for the children of working mothers; liberalization of the paternity laws and laws governing prostitution, which would make fathers assume some responsibility

⁶ Maria Laffitte, Condesa de Campo Angel, *La Mujer en España: Cien Años de su Historia, 1860–1960* (Madrid 1963), 215.

⁷ Margarita Nelkin's works include *La Condición Social de la Mujer en España* (Barcelona, 1922), and *La Mujer ante las Cortes Constituyentes* (Madrid, 1931).

for their children; and regulation of the needle trades, in which the work was done mainly by women at home.

The greatest advance in laws governing women workers came under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, when the CNT was outlawed. In the late twenties, legislation was passed which required paid maternity leave for pregnant women for six weeks before and after confinement, and provided for one hour release from work each day for a mother to nurse her child. Only this second part of the law was ever enforced. Legislation passed in 1927 prohibited night work for women in factories, workshops, and hospitals between the hours of 9 p.m. and 5 a.m.; but since employers juggled shifts, and the law specifically excluded homework (the sweated trades) and domestic service, the legislation was of negligible value. Even laws passed under the Republic, such as that on compulsory maternity insurance (26 May 1931) and the decree of 1 July 1931 which established the eight-hour day, did little to change the condition of working women, most of whom were engaged in domestic service and homework.⁸ Despite the inadequacies of these laws, anarchist women did not campaign for greater legal protection because, like the men, they were committed to social revolution rather than to political reforms.

The anarcho-syndicalist CNT made no effort to organize the industries in which women workers predominated, such as lace and cigar manufacturing, or the small textile establishments which gave piece work to women who worked in their own homes, usually in execrable health conditions, with bad lighting and ventilation. A 1918 report claimed that of the 2,500 female workers in Barcelona who had typhoid, 1,600 were seamstresses. Among female workers, pulmonary tuberculosis was increasing as a result of bad and unhygienic

⁸ International Labour Office: Studies and Reports, series I, *Women's Work under Labour Law: A Survey of Protective Legislation* (1932), 84–85, 146–7; *The Law and Women's Work* (1934), 167.

tablishment of the Republic and since the outbreak of the Civil War as before.²⁵ But these were exceptions to the general pattern.

Convinced by Popular Front ideology that no real change in their personal lives was possible before victory was won in the war, women anarchists organized themselves to help the war effort and subordinated their own demands to the task of winning the war. Anarchists as a body did not believe that the social and economic revolution had to be postponed until military victory was achieved. In fact, they believed exactly the opposite, which was a major source of their conflict with the Communist Party. Yet women anarchists were convinced that their liberation had to await the end of the war; that, while the authority of the capitalist over his worker, and of the landlord over his tenant could be challenged, that of man over woman could not be attacked until military victory was assured. Most were persuaded or convinced themselves that after the war was over, after the revolution had triumphed, at some time in the future, without a struggle, the lives of Spanish women would be transformed.

²⁵ Ibid., 26 December 1936, 8.

domestic working conditions. The women who worked at home in the sweated trades did not fall under the supervision of even the minimal laws which regulated factory work in Spain.⁹ Women workers were paid lower wages than men and did not receive even the small benefits given to male workers, even when they were the sole support of their families. This did not trouble the anarchist trade unions, many of whose members viewed women as potential strike-breakers, a ready source of cheap labour. Blinded sometimes by anticlericalism, many anarchists were hostile to women workers who were dependent on religious and charitable institutions, which alone provided social services to the poor.

The Republic passed few laws dealing with the problems of women. Issues of special labour protection, the provision of child-care facilities in factories employing women, illegitimate children, prostitution, and sex education were seldom raised in the Cortes. The divorce law was passed by a vote of 260 to 23, with 177 abstentions; the law against prostitution was opposed by the liberals but was passed over their objections on 28 June 1935.¹⁰ While it abolished prostitution, it made no provision for alternative employment for prostitutes, nor did it set up hostels where these women could live and support their children. Ostensibly a law for women, it was really a punitive action against the most abject among them.

The real change in the attitude towards the special needs and role of women came only with the outbreak of the Civil War, with the increasing need for the labour of women in the factories and in agricultural and industrial collectives. After November 1936, when anarchists entered the national Republican Government, after years of standing aloof from political involvement of any kind, the special situation of women be-

⁹ 'Preparación de un proyecto de la ley sobre el trabajo a domicilio', *Instituto de Reformas Sociales: Secciones técnico-administrativas* (Madrid, 1918); Nelkin, *La Mujer ante las Cortes Constituyentes*, 84–85.

¹⁰ Laffitte, 218–20.

came a political issue as a result of the activities of the anarchist Minister of Health and Social Service, Federica Montseny, and of the women's group, *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women). As more and more women entered the labour force, anarchist newspapers, which had previously paid little or no attention to women workers, began devoting special columns to their activities and organizations. They dealt with acts of individual heroism, but also covered the more mundane jobs women were doing in employment ranging from nursing to work in heavy industry.¹¹

In the spring of 1936, *Mujeres Libres*, a women's group in Madrid which had been meeting regularly for some months, began to publish a periodical called *Mujeres Libres*.¹² Led by Lucia Sanchez Saornil, Mercedes Comaposada, and Dr Amparo Poch y Gascon, the group was composed of illiterate as well as college-educated women. They set up a school to teach working-class women to read and do skilled work. The Feminine Culture Group (Centro de Cultura Feminina) of Barcelona, composed of working- and middle-class women, many of whom belonged to anarcho-sindicalist organizations, heard of the Madrid women, affiliated with them, and constituted themselves a branch of *Mujeres Libres*. By the summer of 1938, the organization had grown to be a federation of 30,000 women.¹³ By the end of the war, a small group which had been formed to carry on educational work and to investigate the problems of working women had become a mass organization devoted to the principle of women's right to work, their need to develop skills, and their right to social services.

¹¹ See *Tierra y Libertad*, *Solidaridad Obrera*, *Frente Libertario*, and *CNT* for the period from July 1936 through April 1939; see also the five undated issues of *Mujeres Libres* in the collection of the Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

¹² M. Comaposada, 'Origen y Actividades de la Agrupación "Mujeres Libres"', *Tierra y Libertad*, 27 March 1937, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1938, 4.

the drive to introduce therapeutic medicine and to establish public health services. *Mujeres Libres* ran training courses to educate women who might otherwise become prostitutes. Mercedes Comaposada, editor of *Mujeres Libres*, argued that one of the tasks of the revolution was to change men and women, and that it was impossible for men to transform their lives while they kept a portion of mankind in prostitution. 'As long as any woman is kept as an object and is prevented from developing her personality, prostitution, in fact, continues to exist.'²⁴

Despite these efforts and aspirations, the traditional relationship between men and women was carried over into revolutionary Spain. In the unions and collectives dominated by the CNT, women continued to perform the same work — home-making, baking, and washing — that they had performed before the revolution. A 'Mujeres Libres Column' was organized to wash and iron at the front; neither men nor women raised the issue of sharing unpleasant tasks. No group except the *Mujeres Libres* ever challenged the old division of labour and role assignment. And, except by example, even *Mujeres Libres* never asserted that the creativity, underdeveloped talents, and leadership abilities of women might be useful to the revolution.

The question remains why the anarchists did not pay more attention to the special needs of women. The CNT found many men who were illiterate and untrained, and tried to educate them and elevate them to positions of responsibility; yet they seldom did the same for women. One answer is that the women themselves failed to confront the issue of the authoritarianism of their own husbands and fathers, to make it a subject of debate. *Mujeres Libres* trained women and tried to integrate them into the social services, but did not challenge the idea of masculine supremacy and authority in all fields. Occasionally, in an anarchist paper, an angry letter or article might appear which argued that women were essentially as oppressed since the es-

²⁴ *Tierra y Libertad*, 2 January 1937, 8.

a similar law enacted in the autonomous region of Catalonia, authorizing legal abortions in hospitals, clinics, and sanatoria established for this specific purpose. Therapeutic, eugenic, and ethical reasons were all acceptable as grounds for abortion, provided that the woman herself authorized the operation, that it took place not more than three months following conception, and that no woman could have more than one abortion a year.²¹ Montseny was also interested in the dissemination of birth-control information, a concern shared by *Mujeres Libres*, which gave instruction in birth control to the women with whom they worked.²²

Both the *Mujeres Libres* and Federica Montseny took up strong positions on the question of prostitution and on the government's policy towards its existence and control. Many reformers wanted prostitution abolished, as it had been in 1935, with severe penalties against prostitutes who continued to practise their profession. Others favoured legalization and regulation of prostitution so that steps could be taken to prevent the spread of venereal disease. Montseny, who viewed the issue as an integral part of social welfare and public health, believed that it could not be ended by decree: 'Prostitution presents a problem of moral, economic, and social character which cannot be resolved juridically. Prostitution will be abolished when sexual relations are liberalized; when Christian and bourgeois morality is transformed; when women have professions and social opportunities to secure their livelihood and that of their children; when society is established in such a way that no one remains at the margin; when society can be organized to secure life and rights for all human beings.'²³

Montseny established refuges open to all women, including prostitutes and unwed mothers in need of treatment, as part of

²¹ *Solidaridad Obrera* (Barcelona), 21 April 1937, 2.

²² *Tierra y Libertad*, 24 December 1938, 3.

²³ Federica Montseny, *Mi experiencia en el Ministerio de Sanidad y Asistencia Social*, 1937, 27.

For the women of *Mujeres Libres*, the Civil War became synonymous with the struggle of women's liberation from menial jobs, from ignorance, from exploitation at work, and from unjust treatment by fathers and husbands. They believed that the rights they had won as a result of wartime labour shortages could be maintained and extended only through continued social revolution. Furthermore, they argued that to complete the social revolution, women had to be freed from oppression by men as well as by capitalists. According to an article published in *Mujeres Libres*, written by Emma Goldman, the American anarchist, 'It is certain that there can be no real emancipation while one individual continues to dominate another or while one class oppresses another. Still less possible is the emancipation of the human race while one sex dominates the other.'¹⁴

Under the direction of Lucia Sanchez Saornil, an activist in anarchist causes, the *Mujeres Libres* group developed as a national federation with local, regional, and national committees. At their national conference, held in Valencia in August 1937, it was announced that there were already forty-three branches in Catalonia, twenty in Aragon, twenty-five in Guadalajara, fifteen in the Levant, and others in Castile and Andalucia.¹⁵ Although nominally directed by Lucia Sanchez in Madrid, *Mujeres Libres* was a federal, decentralized organization which entered into local alliances with other anarchist groups. At the beginning of the Civil War it was the best organized women's group on the left, but it was not the only women's organization in Spain. Catholic leagues organized women agricultural and industrial workers, and both the Carlists and the Falange had important women's unions. Women on the right played active roles in the Civil War as nurses, laundresses, and as cooks

¹⁴ *Mujeres Libres*, 21 semanas después de la guerra [c. 12 December 1936], 8.

¹⁵ *Tierra y Libertad*, 21 May 1938, 4.

at the front.¹⁶ Communist and socialist women also took jobs in the factories, on farms, in hospitals, or in the civil service.¹⁷ On both sides women served in the armies and militias.

Mujeres Libres was unique in that it was also concerned with the personal, ethical, and economic emancipation of Spanish women as well as with their wartime services. Many women who had been interested in the organization and its publications as means of developing their own consciousness began to organize for the war effort. Women who had not worked outside their homes before went to work in the factories and on the collectives. Wherever work was to be done, *Mujeres Libres* set up divisions to accomplish the job. In Madrid, the organization had transport, sanitation, manufacturing, metallurgical, and public service divisions, in addition to mobile brigades which went wherever there was a job to be done. In Barcelona they set up communal kitchens in all districts, organized the collection of food and of medical supplies for nurses and midwives. *Mujeres Libres* took a major step forward in March 1937, when the Barcelona and Madrid branches started a trade union for the 15,000 women working in food services and in public transport.¹⁸ One of its most important and revolutionary achievements was the establishment of child-care centres in the factories and on the agricultural collectives. Although some people in Spain may have seen these as a threat to the nuclear family, anarchists had no such fears, for they had long viewed legal marriage and the nuclear family as pernicious institutions. While they accepted the notion of group child care, especially in wartime, no men were employed in the nurseries, not even those too old or too young to fight or to work in the factories.

¹⁶ Victorino Félix, *Jovenes Campesinas de Acción Católica y Social* (Madrid, 1933), 28–34; 'Sección Feminina de Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Jons, 1936', *Agenda*, 1940, 18.

¹⁷ *Mundo Obrero*, October 1936, 4–5; Margarita Nelkin, 'Para una campaña', *Mundo Obrero*, 15 January 1937, I; *El Socialista*, 18 March 1927, 2.

¹⁸ Comaposada, 8.

In Spain, as in other nations at war, women were drawn into new professions and trades simply because there was a shortage of manpower. Women of all political affiliations acquired new vocations, and this was especially true of those who were trained in the *Mujeres Libres*' technical and professional schools. Special technical schools for women were established even in remote rural areas. More important numerically were the women who were persuaded to work in the garment factories which had been collectivized and converted to production of uniforms and clothing for the men at the front.

On the land, too, women found new occupations. Dr Amparo Poch y Gascon, one of the founders of *Mujeres Libres*, travelled to various women's agricultural brigades to teach advanced first aid and to train more women as midwives. Information about activities in rural areas is sparse, but we do know that in Ciudad Real, the members of *Mujeres Libres* virtually organized the Herencia agricultural collective and started elementary schools for adults and children. In their technical and professional schools they trained women in the most advanced practices of viticulture and stock breeding.¹⁹ They believed that the skills which they taught would provide women with the means for their own social liberation as well as help the war effort. They hoped to change men's attitudes to women and to persuade them that, in order to fight authoritarianism, they had to examine their own authority over their wives and daughters.²⁰

Federica Montseny, daughter of a famous anarchist family, was interested in many of the issues raised by *Mujeres Libres*. As Minister of Health and Social Service, she drafted an abortion law, argued in favour of birth-control instruction, and fought for the reform of the laws governing prostitution. Her first act in office was to legalize abortion. This was followed by

¹⁹ *Tierra y Libertad*, 19 February 1938, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 May 1938, 4; 30 July 1938, 4.